

# Wesley Clair Mitchell and the “Illiberal Reformers”: A Documentary Note

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A graver source of trouble is that at times pretty much all of us get into an emotional mess and behave intolerantly. Perennial injustices to Indians and Negroes, local outbursts against Chinese and Japanese, Mormons and Catholics, anarchists and communists, trade unions and railroads, the teaching of evolution and the practice of vivisection, blotch our record with sad regularity.  
—Wesley Clair Mitchell, “National Unity and Individual Liberties” (1942)

1. Wesley Clair Mitchell is one of those figures who hardly need an introduction. According to Alfred W. Coats (1992: 393; see also Biddle 1996), he can be considered “the most influential American professional economist of the interwar period,” and even Joseph A. Schumpeter, a man not prodigal with praise, addressed him in 1941 as “America’s first economist.”<sup>1</sup> Mitchell’s name is usually associated with the development of a specific approach to the study of business cycles, the founding of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in 1920, and the establishment and promotion of institutionalism as a vital force in American interwar economics. Yet to think of Mitchell as an economist only of the 1920s and beyond is to miss an important dimension of his work. Indeed,

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1. Schumpeter to Mitchell; August 31, 1941; quoted in Fiorito 2000: 308–9.

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little attention has been paid to Mitchell's pre-World War I contributions and, more significantly, to whether and what extent his methodological and philosophical views retained some distinguishing influence from the so-called Progressive Era—the period stretching from the latter decades of the nineteenth century into the early 1920s. Mitchell, in fact, was only slightly younger than some leading American progressives such as Henry R. Seager, Jacob Hollander, and John R. Commons, and a relevant portion of his contributions were published before the public launch of institutionalism in 1918.<sup>2</sup> In what follows we attempt to fill, at least partially, this historiographic gap, offering a brief discussion of Mitchell's views in relation to one of the most contentious tenets of Progressive Era social thought, namely, eugenics and biological determinism. In other words, we will inquire whether Mitchell as a reformer ever expressed concern over the biological quality of individuals and whether he did somehow share the Progressive Era faith in eugenics as an instrument for improving American society's health, welfare, and morals. This is an aspect of Mitchell's thought that has received scant attention in the literature and that projects him into the current debate on progressivism. The writing of this note was in fact prompted by the recent publication of Thomas C. Leonard's *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (2016). In this highly acclaimed book, the author has offered a new opportunity to reexamine the actual motivations lying behind the progressives' "crusade to dismantle laissez-faire, remaking American economic life with a newly created instrument of reform, the administrative state" (ix). Yet in Leonard's account, Mitchell hardly figures at all. It is to Leonard's contribution and his treatment of Mitchell that we now briefly turn our attention. The rest of the note will be devoted to a scrutiny of Mitchell's views on eugenics, race, and the biological quality of individuals.

2. Thomas Leonard deliberately employs the term "illiberal" in two distinct connections. First, he explains, Progressive Era reformers were illiberal because virtually all of them promoted a form of pseudoscientific racialism based on their acceptance of three related concepts that he places at the core of the eugenic program: "the primacy of heredity, human hierarchy rather than human equality, and the necessarily illiberal idea that human heredity must be socially controlled" (2016: 109). Here Leonard

2. In this connection, it should be noted that Mitchell's first major publication was an article titled "The Quantity Theory of the Value of Money," which appeared in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1896.

has done an excellent job in documenting in detail the eugenic commitments of these influential figures and how these beliefs played a decisive role in their discussion of subjects as diverse as immigration restriction, the treatment of the mentally and physically defective, minimum wage legislation, and labor standards reform. Second, these reformers were illiberal because they all embraced a form of collectivism based on the belief that the good of society was more important than the rights of the individual. From the beginning, Leonard argues, the Progressives saw themselves as rivals of nineteenth-century liberalism, not simply in the sphere of economics (replacing *laissez-faire* with a more regulated economy) but also in the arena of individual liberties and rights. The advances of the late nineteenth century had led many reformers and intellectuals to believe that educated experts could make better decisions than the uninformed could make for themselves. Progressives aimed at social, economic, and “biological” engineering on a vast scale and, as social engineers, they saw themselves as an elite uniquely capable of transcending politics and objectively identifying the public good. Here Leonard (2016: 18–19) points out the inherent intellectual tension within a movement that, on the one hand, aimed (at least in appearance) at expanding and promoting democracy but, on the other, wanted to govern more through expert elites isolated from direct political accountability.<sup>3</sup>

Mitchell enters Leonard’s narrative only incidentally and with just two passing mentions. First, Leonard (2016: 48–49) refers to Mitchell, who also served as director of the Price Division of the War Industries Board from 1917 to 1919, as an exemplar of those economists who had “profitably seized the professional opportunity presented by the demands of war and reconstruction,” expanding their new public role as expert advisors and policymakers; second, Leonard (2016: 56) enlists Mitchell among the supporters of the planned efficiency of the large vertically integrated trusts against the inefficiency of uncoordinated market competition. In his magnum opus *Business Cycles* (1913), Leonard explains, Mitchell joined the majority of the profession in holding the view that the new industrial

3. Other authors have challenged the democratic credentials of Progressive Era reformism. According to Peter Levine (2000: 18–19), for instance, many among the progressives were guided by the idea that “the public good could not emerge from a democratic process that included everyone, because too many people lacked virtue and knowledge.” David Danbom (1987: 240) has instead pointed out the antidemocratic element inherent in what he calls “scientific progressivism.” Instead of the Christian principles that “fueled the initial thrust” of the movement, scientific progressives had “faith in the experts rather than the goodness of average citizens.” In this view, social reform did not emerge out of collective deliberation, but it was manufactured and imposed from above.

conglomerates were efficient precisely because they benefitted from the direction of expert management, while eliminating the waste of market “transactions.” Leonard (2016: 56) summarizes Mitchell’s formulation as “economic waste was not business made; it was market made.”<sup>4</sup>

There is nothing to quarrel about with what Leonard writes regarding Mitchell here. Mitchell was a man of his times and, in many respects, he maintained the Progressive Era unconditioned faith in expert social science and social control throughout his more mature institutionalist years. Evidence in this connection abounds. “In the long run,” Mitchell wrote in 1914, “the practical benefits of science can be secured more quickly following the natural growth of knowledge than in following the natural growth of popular issues” (quoted in Lagemann 1992: 54). Mitchell left little doubt as to his belief in the practical applicability of social knowledge when he compared scientific progress in economics to scientific progress in medicine: “Just as science affords the chief means of improving the practice of medicine, so science affords the chief means of improving the practice of social regulation” (54). Ultimately, Mitchell insisted that the social sciences should emulate their natural counterparts in their careful and painstaking work of observation and systematic analysis (Biddle 1998; Rutherford 2011). Even experiments, a typical hard science technique, would profitably fall into the realm of social inquiry: “social experimentation, based on clearly thought out hypotheses and accompanied by careful recordkeeping, is one of the essential processes in increasing social knowledge and gaining social control” (1923a: 18).

Mitchell’s commitment to science and “social control,” however, by no means implies that he was driven by the same illiberal and “antidemocratic” bent Leonard describes in his book. There are crucial differences between Mitchell and the progressives in the way they conceived the role of the social reformer. For the bulk of the progressives, science defined—and in turn was defined by—the moral qualities of its actors, especially when engaged in social reform. Accordingly, Progressive Era reformers often saw their mission in idealist and sometimes grandiose terms. To quote from the quintessential progressive economist, Edwin R. A. Seligman, “The scholar must possess priestly qualities and fulfill priestly functions, including political activity . . . he should get people to feel their true needs and acquaint them with the means of their satisfaction” (quoted in

4. Mitchell (1927: 172) held to this view also in his interwar works: “Coordination within an enterprise is characterized by economy of effort, coordination among independent enterprises by waste.”

Fink 1997: 14). Mitchell firmly rejected such a paternalistic view from his early writings. It is not a coincidence that he attacked the *Historismus* (historicism) of the German economists who had inspired so many of the progressives, precisely for the ideal of the social scientist it implied. "The 'socio-ethical' element in the work of many German economists," he wrote (1916: 159n73), "does not seem to me to be economic theory, or to have a scientific character. . . . For these writers are concerned to inculcate their own ideals of social welfare, and to show by what specific changes they may be approximated more closely." In the end, Mitchell wrote, "They exercise the functions of preachers and statesmen rather than the functions of investigators."<sup>5</sup>

Mitchell's faith rested on science as a method for producing knowledge rather than on the scientist as an individual who, by virtue of his learning (but also other acquired advantages), is supposed to know better than others. This leads to the fundamental difference between Mitchell and the progressives as portrayed by Leonard. Mitchell never held that science should replace politics as the basis for government. The application of social knowledge for Mitchell was a problem of (and for) democracy. Science, in fact, cannot define "social welfare . . . in such a way as to make it a satisfactory working criterion of what ought to be done" (1931: 107). Only democracy can foster a discussion that clarifies and validates the nature of preexisting interests and goals.<sup>6</sup> Although society needs scientific expertise in social and economic matters, it did not necessarily follow that experts should become the decision makers. Scientists should gather information and disseminate it to the society at large but never take a position. "In a democratic country," Mitchell (1936: 465) insisted, "national planners would have to serve as an agency for accomplishing what the majority desired." But by providing policymakers a list of possible courses of action and forecasting the possible social consequences of each, "they

5. Especially in his later writings, Mitchell (1939: 604) was adamant in asserting that even individuals animated by the most authentic "scientific spirit" could have interests and biases of their own: "Scientific research . . . is one among many social activities carried on by the peoples of our culture. Like all such processes, it is carried on by men who learn in childhood languages ill-suited to close thinking; by men who wish to eat, to make love, to win approval as well as to know; by men who are reared in an environment of emotional likes and dislikes; by men who become so absorbed in their technical tasks that they have little energy to criticize the non-scientific parts of their own make-up."

6. "Unless public opinion really believes that it is worthwhile to think carefully about social problems, no planning organization worthy of the name could last long in a democracy" (Mitchell 1936: 465).

could contribute much toward making social valuations more rational.” He adhered to this position so strongly that he forged the mission of the NBER upon it. As he put it in 1922, “Our bureau is seeking to raise the discussion of public questions. We believe that social programs of whatever sort should rest whenever possible on objective knowledge of fact and not on subjective impressions. By putting this faith into practice we are making a contribution to the working methods of *intelligent democracy*” (quoted in L. S. Mitchell 1953: 355–56; emphasis added).

The faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action (if proper conditions are provided), and the related notion of experts as nonpartisan enablers of democracy and public deliberation, is what kept Mitchell’s vision of social science from being technocratic and illiberal. Where Leonard’s progressives positioned citizens as spectators to a decision-making process performed by experts capable of transcending democracy, Mitchell contended that the formation of public opinion was dependent upon participatory communication, “on grounds of enlightened common sense” (1931: 107), by citizens themselves. In the words of Arthur Burns (1952: 49), Mitchell saw the scientist’s proper role as a reformer as the “mobilization of a democratic society’s intelligence.”<sup>7</sup>

3. While Leonard finds some affinity between Mitchell and the progressives in their common enthusiasm for technical expertise, he says nothing about Mitchell’s views on eugenics, Leonard’s other crucial illiberal ingredient of Progressive Era reform impetus. Here the story becomes more controversial. Mitchell, in fact, never discussed eugenics in a systematic fashion in his published works, and even his scattered treatment of topics like birth control and population theory require a good deal of interpretative effort. On the other hand, archival evidence does provide some substantial insight into Mitchell’s view on these matters, and it will be employed in what follows.

7. It should be noted that Mitchell’s position is similar that of his friend and former teacher John Dewey, who had challenged the idea of a democracy administered efficiently and benevolently by technocratic elites. According to Dewey (1927: 288), “No government by experts in which the masses do not have a chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few. And the enlightenment must proceed in ways which force the administrative specialists to take account of their needs. The world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses. The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public.” In a later contribution, Mitchell quoted with approval a passage from Dewey (1939: 148; quoted in Mitchell 1939: 607) that said “the future of democracy is allied with spread of the scientific attitude.”

A good starting point for our discussion is Mitchell’s 1914 lengthy survey titled “Human Behavior and Economics: A Survey of Recent Literature” published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. This essay marks Mitchell’s shift toward behaviorism and his concomitant distancing from the nature side of the debate over human nature (Asso and Fiorito 2004).<sup>8</sup> It consisted of a critical examination of an assorted group of authors, including Maurice Parmelee, Edward Thorndike, Graham Wallas, Thorstein Veblen, Werner Sombart, Walter Lippmann, and William Walling in order to show how economics could benefit from current psychological research. It is Mitchell’s discussion of Wallas that concerns us here. Mitchell questioned Wallas’s attempt to reduce the various kinds of consciousness and behavior to the single structural term “disposition.” More specifically, Mitchell was left unsatisfied by Wallas’s distinction between simple dispositions—“like the senses, memory, fatigue, etc.”—and complex dispositions—such as “instinct and intelligence” (Wallas 1914: 53, quoted in Mitchell 1914: 13). Mitchell was particularly critical of Wallas’s claim to have used the term disposition so as to exclude any element acquired through experience and social intercourse. In this regard, Mitchell rhetorically asked:

Now this proposal, at least when made with reference to the complex dispositions seems to me to involve a serious error. How can patriotism, or ambition, which Mr. Wallas [1914: 32] cites as among “the facts of human nature which are of the greatest importance to the social psychologist” be regarded as dispositions free from acquired elements? Indeed, can any complex disposition exist wholly of unlearned elements? (Mitchell 1914: 14)

Wallas decided to reply to his American colleague in a letter he sent on January 4, 1915. Wallas defended his use of the term “disposition” but fully agreed with Mitchell on the necessity of distinguishing more clearly between original and acquired elements in human conduct. In a friendly fashion, Wallas continued confessing to Mitchell the sense of discomfort that the outbreak of the war had impressed upon him: “Perhaps if ever the time comes to appeal for a peace on ‘European’ lines I shall feel invigorated by the sense that I shall be doing something. Meanwhile one has to hope and strive to avert the possibility of a victory over Western Europe of

8. Mitchell (1914: 15) cautioned his colleagues: “Everyone who does not emphasize the fact that the human nature of each generation of men is determined chiefly by its nurture at the hands of the preceding generation misses the most potent single factor in social psychology.”

Prussia in her present temper.”<sup>9</sup> In the closing passage, and this is what interests us here, Wallas dropped a passing (yet significant) comment on the demographic consequences of the conflict on the European countries. “If the war lasts several years more,” he wrote, “the problem of re-peopling Europe, where nearly all the best of the breeding women and few of the best of the breeding men will be left alive, will cause a sharp conflict between the eugenists and the Christians.”

Mitchell’s reply to Wallas, dated February 3, 1915, was also couched in friendly terms. Mitchell avoided any further remark on Wallas’s work and shared his concerns about the international scenario which the world conflict had created. As to Wallas’s comments on eugenics, he replied:

What you say about the possibility of a conflict between the eugenists and the Christians in the future suggests one of the brightest spots in the dismal outlook. I do not know how you feel about the matter, but personally I hope that the war may result at least in breaking down many of the old taboos which have hampered efforts to make social institutions serve the purposes of living men. I should hail it as a fine result if England suddenly made up her mind to replenish her wasted population from the best breeding stock that she has left, quite without reference to traditional ideas concerning the family as an institution, and with a single eye to the welfare of the mothers and the children.<sup>10</sup>

Although Mitchell here left unexplained what he was actually proposing, this remark is reminiscent of his criticism of the family as a spending unit he had advanced in his famous essay “The Backward Art of Spending Money” (1912). On the other hand, Mitchell’s wish that England could “replenish her wasted population from the best breeding stock that she has left” places him within the eugenic camp. It is in fact a clear indication that he was reasoning in terms of the biological *quality* of population and along some kind of hereditarian thought.<sup>11</sup> What is also remarkable here is that

9. Graham Wallas to Wesley C. Mitchell, January 4, 1915, quoted in Fiorito and Foresti 2008: 6–8.

10. Wesley C. Mitchell to Graham Wallas, February 3, 1915, quoted in Fiorito and Foresti 2008: 8–9.

11. Jeff Biddle has offered a different reading for this passage. He points out that Mitchell did not say that England could or should replace its lost population “from the best breeding stock.” Instead, he is simply saying that if this is what England decides to do, he hopes that the way this policy is pursued has certain consequences, such as the establishment of new practices that promote more efficiently the welfare of mothers and children. According to this interpretation, “Mitchell is clearly signaling his belief that the environment is the important factor in shaping well-being, and the aspect of the situation that reformers should be focusing on.” Personal communication, July 13, 2018.

Mitchell found no contradiction in criticizing Wallas for his overemphasis on the biological side of human nature and, at the same time, in agreeing with him on the dysgenic effects of the war. Mitchell and Wallas were by no means alone in expressing this concern. Just a few months later, on July 15, 1915, Irving Fisher sent out a far more extreme cry of alarm to the nation from the pages of the *New York Times* (“Empty Cradles Worst War Horror” 1915). According to Fisher, “If war would weed out only the criminal, the vicious, the feeble-minded, the insane, the habitual paupers, and others of the defective classes, it might lay claim . . . to the beneficent virtues sometimes ascribed to it.” But, Fisher lamented, the truth is that its effects are diametrically opposite: “It eliminates the young men, who should be the fathers of the next generation—men medically selected as the largest, strongest, most alert, and best endowed in every way.”<sup>12</sup>

4. Mitchell’s correspondence also allows us to shed new light on his views on immigration policy, a then topical field for eugenic arguments. Although Mitchell had worked for the Immigration commission in 1908 (Burns 1952: 21), he did not participate in the heated debate triggered by the publication of the commission’s findings and recommendations. In 1911, in what has been considered Mitchell’s most explicit statement on the subject, he acknowledged that “the immigrants as a class are physically fit and morally enterprising; and employers have taken advantage of their presence in the labor market to develop a system of intense specialization which enables them to utilize a large number of untrained men in work which elsewhere would be performed by skilled hands” (Mitchell 1911: 163).

This passage has been reported as evidence of Mitchell’s overall pro-immigration stance (Clermont-Legros 2006). There are, however, two problems with this interpretation. First, Mitchell was commenting upon a recently published report on working conditions in America (*Cost of Living in American Towns* 1911), and the passage quoted above reflected the report’s point of view rather than Mitchell’s.<sup>13</sup> Second, our archival findings reveal quite a different story.

12. Vernon Kellogg, an entomologist at Stanford University and a leading American eugenicist, and his Stanford colleague David Star Jordan, director of the World Peace foundation and of the International School, made similar claims. See Kühl 2013.

13. “Certain special characteristics of the unskilled labour supply itself demand notice, especially the fact that, owing partly to the comparatively modern character of urban development in the United States, and partly to the large influx of labour that is physically sound and morally enterprising, the proportion of deteriorated labour unfit for employment is relatively small” (*Cost of Living in American Towns* 1911: xvi).

On May 3, 1923, Sydney A. Reeve—consulting engineer and amateur economist—wrote Mitchell to inquire about his views on the effects of immigration on wages. Reeve’s attention had been caught by Mitchell’s claim, reported by the *New York Times* (“Fears Boom Tends to Lack of Caution,” 1923), that “the restrictions upon immigration make it probable that the prices of labor will rise relatively high.” Timing is very important here because this happened after the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and on the eve of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924—two acts which put an end to the long era of open immigration, imposed eugenically motivated racial quotas upon immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and ended immigration from Japan (Leonard 2016). Reeve, who considered the recent immigration laws as “among the more mischievous statutes upon the books,” asked Mitchell to exert “the influence of the National Bureau of Economic Research towards the correction of the public misapprehensions in this field.” He then illustrated his own position:

Organized labor forms its opinion concerning the economic effect of immigration from the assumption that all which enters the country, with each immigrant, is a trunk and a pair of hands. No cognizance whatever is taken of the fact that with these always arrive an additional mouth to be fed, a back to be clothed and a pair of feet to be shod. In other words, each additional immigrant increases the consuming and hiring power of the community, exactly as much as it increases the laboring-power. Other things being equal, all questions of wages (in so far as they are influenced by supply and demand), or volume of unemployment, are absolutely independent of the volume of population—of its increase or its decrease, whether by birth, death, immigration, war, etc.<sup>14</sup>

In the final analysis, Reeve stated, “there is absolutely no evidence of any influence of population upon either unemployment or wages. These have remained about the same throughout the widest fluctuations in population—varied by other factors, but not by population, immigration, etc.” Mitchell’s prompt reply to Reeve also deserves to be reproduced at length:

Of course it is true, as you point out, that every immigrant who comes into the country is a consumer as well as a producer. But I do not think it is true that the wage-earners already in this country will necessarily gain just as much from the coming of a large number of immigrants having a low standard of living as they will lose from competition in

14. Sydney A. Reeve to Wesley C. Mitchell, May 3, 1923. Wesley Clair Mitchell Papers.

the labor market. You say, quite properly, “other things being equal.” My objection is that the other things are in fact far from equal. As I see things, the economic effect of immigration depends largely upon the economic fitness of the immigrants. Presumably we should as a nation gain by adding to the number of our skilled artisans from foreign countries. On the other hand, it seems to me that economically as well as socially the masses of our population would have their condition made harder by the coming of tens of thousands of Chinese coolies, or even Southern Europeans.<sup>15</sup>

Mitchell’s rebuttal of Reeve’s position echoes the arguments advanced by many Progressive Era opponents of immigration. Mitchell questioned the “economic fitness of the immigrants,” and considered their “low standard of living” as a threat to American workers. This appears to be of a piece with the progressives’ contention that workers with lower standards of living are disposed to accept lower wages, so that the lowest standard of living determines the prevalent wage and work conditions in each industry (Leonard 2016).<sup>16</sup> It is true that Mitchell might have reasoned in mere quantitative terms, that is, by just implying that unrestrained immigration would lead to an oversupply in the lower segments of the labor market. He, nonetheless, introduced a crucial qualitative distinction, singling out specific nationalities as more harmful, namely, Southern Europeans and Chinese—exactly those groups which the restrictionists of the earlier decades had blamed for undercutting American workers. Whether the lower living standards of these groups are biologically or environmentally determined is left unexplained, although we are inclined to think that Mitchell leaned toward the second hypothesis.

The tone of Mitchell’s reply is in fact in sharp contrast with the position he held as a scholar. Mitchell always phrased his arguments in neutral statistical terms and he never revealed any racial attitude toward immigrants. If anything, his public efforts disclose a quite opposite stance. As a member of the Social Science Research Council’s (SSRC) Committee on Human Migration he contributed to distance the SSRC’s approach to immigration studies from that of the more racially and eugenically oriented National

15. Wesley C. Mitchell to Sydney A. Reeve, May 5, 1923. Wesley Clair Mitchell Papers.

16. In this way, many Progressive Era economists held, “unworthy” individuals would undercut their more deserving betters. According to Thomas Nixon Carver (1904: 171), to cite a significant example, “laborers of a lower standard will displace those of a higher standard . . . leaving the field ultimately in the possession of the low standard, as surely as cheap money will drive out dear money, or as sheep will drive cattle off the western ranges.”

Research Committee (NRC).<sup>17</sup> Mitchell's neutral stance was also reflected in the NBER's activity. In his *Migration and Business Cycles* (1926)—a study commissioned in 1924 by the NRC for the NBER—Harry Jerome found immigration to be an “aggravating factor” in employment fluctuations. Yet, neither Jerome nor Mitchell in his foreword drew any policy conclusion from the empirical evidence presented in the volume.<sup>18</sup> A similar nonpartisan position can be found in the two NBER monographs on international migrations which appeared in 1929 and 1931.<sup>19</sup> Even Walter F. Willcox, who authored the chapter on “Immigration into the United States,” did not show any trace of animosity toward immigration—quite the contrary, and this is certainly surprising considering the fact that Willcox was a well-known racist and a supporter of eugenics (Aldrich 1979; Leonard 2016). Although Willcox (1931b: 93–103) refrained from taking a position on immigration policy, he empirically demolished many of the then current objections to unrestricted immigration and seriously challenged Francis Amasa Walker's famous “race suicide” theory.

5. So far our discussion has been based almost exclusively on archival evidence. It is now time to turn our attention to Mitchell's published writings to find any significant trace of eugenic arguments. In his 1914 survey, Mitchell had assumed a somewhat intermediate position: “Since we have come to discredit the inheritance of acquired characteristics,” he wrote (1914: 6), “the possibility of reforming human nature turns largely on

17. Some historical background is necessary here. In 1924, the SSRC had established the Committee on the Scientific Aspects of Human Migration, to work with the NRC's Committee on Scientific Problems of Human Migration, established in 1922. The relationship between the SSRC and NRC shortly turned out to be conflicting, not least because of the divergent concerns with the problems of racial composition and categorization among participants such as Franz Boas, Harry Laughlin, and Charles B. Davenport. In the words of Edmund Ramsden (2002: 873), the result was “an uneasy division of labour whereby the SSRC took control of social, psychological and economic study of population, and the NRC, the biological.”

18. The impartial tone of Jerome's conclusions attracted the criticism of Henry Pratt Fairchild (1927: 526), then a leading opponent of immigration and a eugenicist: “Mr. Jerome does, indeed, state his conclusion . . . that, instead of being a mitigating factor in industrial depressions, immigration tends to make the crises more acute by fostering a feverish and uncontrolled expansion of business in boom times. But he does not give this, which is by far the most practical application of his study, the inclusive consideration that it merits.”

19. The first volume was a collection of statistics on migration within and between European, Asian, and North and South American countries coordinated by Imre Ferenczi of the International Labour Office in Geneva and Walter F. Willcox of the NBER (Ferenczi and Willcox 1929). The second volume consisted of a compilation of analyses of country case studies edited by Willcox (1931a).

what part of the nature is inherited and hence presumably unchangeable, and what part is formed by experience and hence presumably capable of modifications.” Social institutions deserved priority, but he did not deny a role to inherited biological traits. This view surfaces again in 1923, when Mitchell favorably reviewed Alexander M. Carr-Saunders’s *The Population Problem* (1922) for the *Birth Control Review*. In his book, Carr-Saunders had admitted the possibility that biological factors may alter culture. For instance, he wrote (449), “a considerable amount of evidence . . . seems to indicate . . . that the adoption of the Protestant religion by the Nordic type was influenced by certain innate characters attaching to this type—self-assertiveness and love of independence.” On the other hand, and this is what attracted Mitchell’s attention, Carr-Saunders found a way to neatly distance himself from the more eugenically oriented population theorists of the time. In his view, individuals have different “germinal constitutions” (and he did advocate positive eugenics for improving the physical quality of a population), but more importantly, social groups have different “traditions” and these are far more crucial in explaining social change. As he put it in a passage which Mitchell quoted with approval:

Those who base upon germinal change their hopes for the physical condition of the human race in the future are building upon sound foundations. On the other hand, those who think that germinal change in mental characters will effect the evolution of society and mould the course of history are upon the whole mistaken. The course of history is in the main dependent upon changes in tradition which are for the most part independent of germinal change. (Carr-Saunders 1922: 482, quoted in Mitchell 1923b: 48).

Mitchell’s favorable reception of Carr-Saunders’s qualified environmentalism is important since it appears to be consistent with the views he held in his subsequent writings. Mitchell turned again his attention to population issues in 1929—in his “Review” chapter for the NBER report on *Recent Economic Changes in the United States*. There is a curious episode in this connection. Shortly after the publication of the report, Allyn Young wrote Mitchell:

What I didn’t like in your recent National Bureau of Economic Research chapter was the miscegenation of a philosophy of history, of a type which I don’t like and which I think it is wrong (but which I can’t prove to be wrong—no one can) with what seems to me to be strictly scientific analysis of a high order. I don’t like your eugenics, I don’t like your

“Industrial Revolution,” and I don’t like your “cumulative change,” but I like your figures!<sup>20</sup>

Young’s reference to Mitchell’s eugenics is at the very least perplexing. No trace of eugenic reasoning can be found in Mitchell’s chapter, nor in the entire NBER report. Mitchell argued that the rise in living standards over the last decade had been the consequence of families having fewer children, so that reproduction was “traded” for consumption. A larger population, Mitchell (1929: 886) acknowledged, would have implied a larger national product, but “since birthrate restriction seems to be voluntary” he concluded that “Americans are preferring to raise the economic level of average life rather than to maximize national wealth.” Mitchell’s focus here was on quantity, not quality, of population.

Of a completely different tenor was the discussion of population contained in Mitchell’s unsigned introduction to *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (1933), which included an entire section titled “Problems of Biological Heritage.”<sup>21</sup> There Mitchell struggled through many pages with the issue of “quality of population,” alternating passages of a distinct eugenic flavor with statements of an opposite character. According to Mitchell (1933: xxiii), of the two ways of improving the inherited qualities of a people, mutation and eugenic breeding, the first must be discarded for lack of adequate knowledge, while the second “offers possibilities.” He acknowledged the existence of obstacles to “the practical possibilities of improving a people by conscious selection,” but he nonetheless recognized eugenics as a potential instrument of social planning:

The lack of knowledge concerning heredity and the composition of the chromosomes of prospective parents is undoubtedly an obstacle, but breeders of livestock have accomplished results without this information. The obstacles lie rather in obtaining the necessary control, in the lack of agreement as to which combination of traits is desirable, and in the difficulty in mating of combining sentimental and spiritual values with biological values. The problem is one of research from which in time higher eugenic ideals may emerge.

20. Allyn A. Young to Wesley C. Mitchell; February 27, 1929. Wesley Clair Mitchell Papers.

21. Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1953: 356) attributed the unsigned introduction to Mitchell. President Herbert Hoover launched the *Recent Social Trends* project in December 1929. This project was a follow-up to the just completed *Recent Economic Changes* project which had been assigned to the NBER. Hoover appointed a committee, chaired by Mitchell, to commission scholarship in various areas of the social sciences, which would together paint a composite portrait of US society.

Mitchell also considered the “more immediately urgent . . . need of preventing individuals with undesired inheritable traits from having offspring.” Such a policy could be enforced in the more marked cases of feeble-mindedness, which he estimated to afflict fewer than 100,000 persons held in institutions. But, he asked, “for the large numbers outside of institutions, variously estimated in the millions, who is to decide?” (xxiii). Here is where Mitchell clearly parted company with the more extreme eugenicists:

The abilities of individuals shade down from competency to idiocy, and it is not at all certain that all low grades of mentality are caused by heredity. So with the other objectionable types, the insane and criminals, it is not known that the factors producing them are inherited. Men often commit criminal acts because of social conditions. Crime fluctuates with the business cycle. In a similar manner, certain types of social experience conduce to insanity. For example, there was a higher percentage of rejections because of mental disorder among men drafted for the United States Army from cities than from rural areas. A few states have passed laws providing for the sterilization of certain inmates of state institutions by an operation reported to be otherwise harmless. (xxiii)

Yet, in a subsequent passage, Mitchell (1933: lv) equivocated: “the practice of eugenics may lessen the number of indigents.”<sup>22</sup>

Mitchell’s treatment of immigration follows the same pattern of a eugenic claim immediately followed by an amending counterargument. On the one hand, Mitchell praised “the present immigration policy of the United States” for it not only regulates the quantity of immigrants but is “selective as to quality” (xxiv). Designed to favor certain groups of nationalities, “it encourages the Nordic racial types of northwestern Europe and restricts the Mediterranean and Alpine types of southern and southeastern Europe.” On the other hand, Mitchell immediately stated, “the question of

22. Among those who contributed to the *Recent Social Trends* report, Mitchell was not alone in his advocacy of eugenics. In their chapter, “The Population of the Nation,” Warren S. Thompson and Pascal K. Whelpton (1933: 56) argued that the differential birthrate among the social classes had resulted in “some deterioration in the biological soundness of the national stock.” Their position on this matter was simply that “as soon as any agreement can be reached about the method by which ‘undesirables’ can be selected from the population, they should be prevented from propagating.” According to the Chicago sociologist William Ogburn (1933: 150), who authored the chapter titled “Invention and Discovery,” “the possibility of raising the racial average by propagation from the better stocks is attractive and has undoubtedly a future.” The political scientist Charles E. Merriam (1933: 1540), Ogburn’s colleague at Chicago and author of the chapter titled “Government and Society,” saw eugenics as one of those “feasible” forms of social control that are “far reaching in their implications for the social and political order.”

racial selection is confused by doubt as to which of the so-called racial traits are inherited.” In what appears a full retreat from his previous assertion, Mitchell wrote:

Crime and sickness, for instance, are frequently a matter of environment. Many personality traits peculiar to certain peoples are also acquired in the early home environment. The assimilation of immigrants may result in the loss of distinguishing personality traits, unless there is some marked physical characteristic to brand the individual and so to encourage prejudice and psychological isolation. The persistence of these distinguishing traits is encouraged by social segregation, separate languages, family life, and religions, whereas the schools tend to modify them. They persist more stubbornly among non-white immigrants than among the various racial types of European origin.

On this basis, Mitchell questioned whether “the present basis of selection according to racial types is a more desirable policy than selection within a race according to the merits and defects of individuals.” However, he conceded, “to a certain extent our immigration laws take into account individual qualifications, for example by excluding aliens with records of crime or insanity.”<sup>23</sup>

Our last piece of evidence is a testimony Mitchell gave in 1934 in support of Margaret Sanger’s campaign for a more democratic spread of birth control information among US social classes.<sup>24</sup> Mitchell had already shown an interest in birth control issues in 1927 when he wrote William Beveridge in connection with his recent essay “The Fall of Fertility among European Races” (1925): “It is a fundamental piece of work, upon which

23. One referee has pointed out that Mitchell’s swinging between eugenic and noneugenic arguments could have been the consequence of the fact that he was introducing a collection of essays written by others, some of which made eugenic arguments, and that he had to relate to the content of these chapters. This is certainly a possibility that cannot be excluded. In this connection, however, Patrick D. Reagan (1999: 77), has argued that Mitchell’s introduction to *Recent Social Trends* was “deceptively” titled “Review of Findings”—in the sense that Mitchell’s appraisal of the volumes’ content was heavily filtered by his ideal of social science. Similarly, Karl (1969) has documented how Mitchell’s initial draft of the introduction received a scathing review by Ogburn, director of research of the *Recent Social Trends* project, who found it too reflective of Mitchell’s own ideas on science and planning. Mitchell did make some revisions, and this helped to clear the “editorial smoke,” but the key methodological sections of the published version of the introduction retained the same style and content of the initial draft.

24. Our archival research has uncovered no correspondence between Mitchell and Sanger. The two had certainly met in 1927 when Mitchell, together with John Whitridge Williams, represented the United States at the World Population Conference held in Geneva. Sanger also attended the conference (Sanger 1931).

you deserve the warmest congratulations.”<sup>25</sup> Beveridge (24) had dismissed biological explanations as “antiquated,” holding that “the revolutionary fall of human fertility in Europe since 1880 is due mainly, if not wholly, to deliberate prevention.” Specifically, he saw the spread of birth control as connected to the sweeping process of modernization (including secularization) and the concomitant rise of urban lifestyles. As to the eugenics consequences of the uneven distribution of birth control methods, Beveridge cautiously refrained from any consideration of “the possible effects of differential fertility in increasing the less fit at the expense of the more fit.” It is instead to the “danger” of differential fertility that Mitchell turned his attention in his testimony:

I do not see that a declining rate of population growth need threaten the economic interests of agriculture, industry, or labor. If the demand for consumers’ goods grows at a retarded rate in the future, the number of farmer, manufacturer, and wage earners should likewise grow at a retarded rate. But there is a danger that legal obstacles to the democratic spread of birth-control information may confine the lower growth in number mainly to the relatively well-to-do classes. Farmers and wage earners surely will have troubles if they continue to increase at the present rate while the growth of the present population declines. (United States Congress 1934: 63)

Mitchell here clearly disavows any concern with population quantity (slow growth), but does seem worried that one class, those without ready information about and access to birth control, will grow faster than another class—that is, the educated and well-to-do who, the law notwithstanding, do have information and access to birth control. Mitchell could have just been concerned with fairness (equal treatment between classes), or that the poorer class will suffer from a lack of contraception. Why then invoke the danger of the “lower” classes’ higher growth rate? Plausibly, and this is our reading, Mitchell was implying that, due to lack of social mobility rather than to any inherited characteristics, the sons of farmers and wage earners were doomed to inherit the occupations of their fathers, causing a congestion in the market for unskilled occupations in the face of a declining demand for their output.

On the other hand, Mitchell’s reference to differential fertility may allow for eugenically oriented explanations—especially if one considers

25. Wesley C. Mitchell to William Beveridge, March 11, 1927. Wesley Clair Mitchell Papers.

that Sanger herself saw birth control as an extension of eugenics and feared that those segments of society that should reproduce at a lower rate were the group most likely to be excluded from contraception.<sup>26</sup> Other contemporaries, such as Fisher or Charles H. Cooley, expressed similar concern that birth control would be dysgenic, unless the law could insure that the “inferior” classes had access to it (Leonard 2016). To argue that Mitchell shared these views on his single 1934 statement reproduced above would fail to do justice to him. The fact remains, nonetheless, that the previous year Mitchell (1933: xxiii–xxiv) did refer to birth control as a “powerful device for implementing policies of selection,” and lamented that “the birth rate, itself a selective agent, is much higher among the groups with a low income than among those with a higher income.” Although he found the “association between large incomes and desirable hereditary traits . . . not [to] be very marked,” he would not go as far as to deny it. To this it should be added, and this is an aspect which has been neglected in the literature, that Mitchell’s name appears in the list of members of the American Eugenics Society (AES) for the year 1930—but it is possible, if not probable, that his membership may have started earlier and been renewed during the following years.<sup>27</sup> Mitchell was in good company since the list included, among others, Thomas Nixon Carver, Frank A. Fetter, Irving Fisher, Franklin H. Giddings, Edward A. Ross, Henry S. Seager, Edwin R. A. Seligman, and Walter F. Wilcox—all figures with an honorable Progressive Era pedigree.

6. It is now time to draw some conclusions. Let us state our main contention plainly: Mitchell had never been a partisan of biological determinism. In his published writings he revealed no trace of racial animosity and his behavioristic creed led him to assert on several occasions that cultural transmissions mattered more than heredity for social progress. Mitchell’s anti-racialist stance became manifest in 1938 when he was among the first to endorse and sign Franz Boas’s famous “Scientists’ Manifesto” to protest

26. As Sanger put it in her private correspondence: “I will agree with you that birth control in the past has been dysgenic, but since we can give contraceptive instruction to those who most need it,—the unskilled, the diseased, and the very poor, this will offset its dysgenic trend.” Margaret Sanger to Clinton Franklin Chance, May 9, 1930; quoted in Katz 2003: 173.

27. Information regarding AES membership for the years that concern us here is scant and fragmentary. A first list of members as of 1925 is deposited in the American Philosophical Library in Philadelphia; another list of members of the Advisory Council appeared in the February 1929 issue of *Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment*; a third list of members as of 1930 is in the Margaret Sanger papers, Library of Congress, Container 62–63, Reel 41, “American Eugenics Society Feb. 1928–May 1936.” Mitchell’s name appears only in Sanger’s list so the beginning of his membership must be dated between 1925 and 1930.

“against all false and unscientific doctrines,” such as “the racial nonsense of the Nazis” (quoted in Barkan 1992: 337).<sup>28</sup> Mitchell acknowledged the possibility that the biological or inherited characteristics of the population might be a factor affecting social well-being, but he consistently expressed skepticism about the arguments of the eugenicists who were his contemporaries, and the possibility or advisability of grounding social policy in eugenic considerations. Still, one can find in Mitchell’s writings occasional apparent concessions to the arguments of the eugenicists. His concerns appear to be more connected to the physical rather than mental, let alone moral, aspects of population quality, although it is also true that some of Mitchell’s statements may be prone to different interpretations. Ultimately, Mitchell was an institutionalist with Progressive Era roots. As an institutionalist he was free from the paternalistic and antidemocratic bent of the progressives described by Leonard and was ready to accept the new faith in the plasticity of human nature that sustained interwar reformism. At the same time, as someone who had been exposed to the Progressive Era cultural milieu, he could not completely divorce himself from the earlier decades’ preoccupations with the biological quality of individuals.

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28. Wesley Clair Mitchell to Franz Boas, June 30, 1938, Franz Boas Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

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