Chapter V
Racial Theory

"In what sense is it correct to say that all men are created equal?"
J.R. Commons, "Review Question" in the Chautauquan, Sept. 1903, p. 43

Race thinking was highly popular between 1890 and 1920. During these years, in both England and America, a flood of genetic research was published by biologists, physicians and sociologists. The theory of natural selection had greatly stimulated interest in heredity. Physical and social scientists, intrigued by the idea of the transmission of parental variations were trying to discover the scope of hereditary traits. Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin, began the eugenics movement with the publication of Hereditary Genius in 1869. In 1877 Richard Dugdale published a study of The Jukes, a community paupers, epileptics and criminals. Dugdale gave credit to environmental factors but concluded that disease, pauperism and immorality are largely controlled by heredity. Alexander Johnson did another study of The Jukes, and Commons used Johnson's work in his sociology classes at Indiana. Upon discovering a community of Jukes near Indianapolis, Commons attempted his own study using

students as investigators. The project fell through, however, when two students, in an attempt to get fast results, represented themselves as the police. 2

Although Galton's first works appeared between 1870 and 1890 (Hereditary Genius, 1869; Inquiries into Human Faculty, 1883; and National Intelligence, 1889), it was not until after the turn of the century that the movement began to gain popularity. 3

Interest in the problems of heredity and race were intimately connected with the upsurge of nationalism and imperialism in the decade of the nineties. 3 After defeating Spain in a nearly bloodless war in 1898, America acquired her first vertiges of empire. Commons expressed the mood of the nation when he wrote:

...a new patriotism is aroused and a new mutual confidence in fellow Americans... Manilla Bay, The Oregon's trip, Cervera's destruction mark the victory of honest guns, honest armor-plate, honest powder... 4

This mood of great optimism did little to dampen the concern for our open immigration policy. In 1897 Congress passed a bill restricting immigration but President Cleveland vetoed the bill just before leaving office.

The great sentiment for immigration restriction and nativist sentiment in general was based on the romantic nationalism of the period.

2. John Commons, Myself, pp. 54-5.
In the 1890's nativist intellectuals had barely begun to think of European races as a biological threat or to associate national survival with racial purity.  

In fact, the greatest weakness of race thinkers before the twentieth century was the lack of a general scientific theory from which to argue the prepotency of heredity in human affairs. Between 1900 and 1915, however, American intellectuals, both conservative and progressive, began to clothe an amorphous chauvinism in scientific language. Although the process had started much earlier, it reached its peak between 1910 and 1914. During this period, according to one tabulation, the general magazines carried more articles on eugenics than on the three questions of slums, tenements, and living standards, combined.

The stress on environmental responsibility for heredity traits in Darwinian theory; the Christian love for the meek; the lack of class divisions and a feudal past in America made it extremely difficult to accept hereditary factors as primary causes of social conditions. Thus, the acceptance of scientific race theory presented formidable obstacles, especially to reform-minded intellectuals.

The eugenics movement was generally a conservative movement. It tacitly accepted the identification of the "fit" with the upper classes and the "unfit" with the lower

classes and tended to reinforce the idea that change must be a slow evolutionary process.

Nevertheless, Commons applied his race theories to support his reform philosophy. Responding to the popular belief that put the responsibility for poverty, crime and immorality on the individual, Commons began, in the 1890's to emphasize the social and environmental influence in the formation of human character. He was claiming that society bears the major responsibility for these "social evils".

Commons worked out his race theories,

...to clarify in the public mind the causes of delinquency and dependency. As long as these evils can be charged to heredity the public is blind to the share that springs from social injustice.

In effect Commons was attempting to counter the dramatic claims some biologists and conservative social scientists were making for heredity.

Many progressives, to be sure, (including Commons), were troubled by the increasing magnitude of immigration. They saw the threat foreign immigrants presented to organized labor and the general living standard of the worker. Furthermore, a strain of elitism was especially prominent among the social Progressives, who saw the immigrants, and poor in general, as obstacles to reform.

7. Richard Hofstadter; Social Darwinism, p. 163.
8. See chapter I, p. 35 above.
The sociologist, Edward A. Ross, one of the most nativistic of the social Progressives, and a close colleague of Commons, defined democracy as government by talent, not by the "narrow, short-sighted, muddle-headed...average man."\(^{10}\)

Despite this, the general progressive sentiment weighed against nativism (at least before 1910).

In addition to its self-assurance, the movement as a whole radiated the equalitarian idealism that Ross and Commons thought unrealistic...progressives drew from the hopeful atmosphere of the early twentieth century a larger confidence in the capacity of ordinary people to set things aright if given the means to do so. Believing ardently in the people, they sometimes included the immigrants in that category. \(^{11}\)

On the one extreme were the intellectual progressives like Commons, Ross and E. A. Seigman who had studied under German intellectuals and absorbed their chauvinistic teachings. In the middle were the progressive-populists like Frank Walsh and Robert LaFollette, who had such a strong faith in the people they were even willing to accept the immigrants. At the other extreme, there were a few Social settlement workers who recognized that the immigrant had something of great worth to impart to American culture.

With the exception of a very small group of social settlement workers, then,

The progressives of the early twentieth century were unafraid, but in general they were also indifferent and aloof. Like the rest of their generation, they

\(^{10}\) John Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, p. 117.
\(^{11}\) Ibid.
felt little enmity toward the immigrants but little identification with them either. A social and ideological gulf yawned between the well-established groups afire with visions of change and the uprooted folk who had already experienced more change than they could comprehend. The progressives seldom understood the strangers as fellow men with special problems of adjustment. They could be tolerant enough; they could often accept the old ideal of America's cosmopolitan nationality. But they could not believe that the newcomers might be significantly influencing American culture; at least they could not think so and retain their equanimity. Most native-born progressives in the early years of the century viewed the immigrant as a passive entity, malleable and still to be molded under the influences of American society. 12

The eugenics movement, although predominantly conservative, struck several responsive chords in men like Commons. Its emphasis on unalterable human inequalities could be modified to confirm progressive elitism and was the perfect excuse to disenfranchise the "worst" elements in society. Progressives were constantly frustrated by workers and the poor who refused to vote for reform.

Commons often blamed the failure of reform, especially in the cities, on the wide franchise. He pointed to efficient reform minded municipal governments in European cities and concluded that the limited franchise in these cities was primarily responsible. With only slight modification, the principles of eugenics could be used to demand "educational tests" that would create a franchise much more in line with progressive views.

12. Ibid. p. 119.
Furthermore, it offered a scientific validation of the germ theory of history and again, could be easily modified to conform to environmental theories. Finally, the eugenicist dedication to a positive program of "race improvement" through education and state action had a thoroughly progressive ring to it.

Thus, the eugenics movement could be used by progressives to justify any number of reform proposals. Commons used them primarily to fight for immigration restriction. Instead of simply arguing that immigration of southern and eastern Europeans increased class conflicts and threatened labor organizations -- arguments which had only marginal appeal -- Commons argued that immigration was at heart a biological question. Certain races were simply biologically unfit for democracy and could, if admitted in unlimited numbers, undermine the very foundations of our democracy.

Putting race-thinking on scientific rather than romantic premises, satisfied some very deep psychological needs such as vindicating the hereditarian assumptions of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, and allowing racist thought to be discussed openly in reputable circles. Despite this, however, it was all but impossible to elaborate a satisfying theory.

In their scientific capacity, the eugenicists - like their master Galton - studied individual traits and reached conclusions on individual differences. When they generalized the effects of individual immigrants into those of whole
ethnic groups, their science deserted them and their phrases became darkly equivocal. 13

One of the key problems was distinguishing between European peoples. It was impossible to develop any theory unless one could distinguish real racial differences between western, southern and eastern Europeans. William Z. Ripley, a brilliant young economist at Columbia University supplied the answer in The Races of Europe. This massive scholarly volume, published in 1899, became the very backbone of Commons' race theory. 14

Ripley examined the populations of Europe, pointing out the ways in which physiological traits seemed to reflect geographical and social conditions. This was cold comfort to pure racists, but to Commons, who believed in Lamarckian theory, it was only logical. But of far more significance, the book organized into an impressive synthesis a tripartate classification of white men which European ethnologists had recently developed. Europe was not simply the land of Aryans. Europe was divided into three distinct races: a northern race, called Teutonic; a central race, called Alpine; and a southern race, called Mediterranean. Here was all that Commons needed to distinguish between the old and the new immigrations. By showing that only the Teutons had the necessary moral and mental requirements to develop and sustain a democracy, Commons presented the threat of open

14. Commons acknowledges his debt to Ripley in the bibliography of "Race and Democracy", The Chautauquan, September, 1903, p. 42.
immigration in dramatic light. On the other hand, he still did not have to accept the completely racist argument that aliens could not be assimilated at all. Ripley argued in 1908, from the experiments of Hugo De Vries demonstrating that hybridization sometimes causes latent traits to be reasserted, that the crossing of inferior with superior races would be disastrous for the superior race. The Teutons, according to Ripley, who had evolved into a higher state of human existence could be dragged down by mixing with lower races. This strictly biological answer was rejected by Commons. Obviously, Commons, who had a great deal of respect for Samuel Gompers and W.E.B. Du Bois, could not accept a purely biological answer. Besides, a strictly biological approach denied his entire reform philosophy. Commons own answer allowed him to accept immigrants from anywhere as long as they passed certain educational and professional standards. Of course all this meant was that his racism was a class prejudice rather than a biological prejudice. Commons would only allow professionals to enter the U.S. and only allow the literate to vote. Commons' prejudices, as will be seen upon close examination, radiate from his protestant middle class dogma.

Although somewhat unclear as to the exact influence of heredity and environmental factors, Commons believed generally that natural environmental factors determine the "original endowment of the race", while social conditions can create secondary hereditary traits. The "original endowment" is the result of geography.

The line between superior and inferior as distinguished from advanced and backward races appears to be the line between the temperate and tropical zones... 16

The temperate zones have produced the qualities of self-reliance, self-control, cooperation and will power which have created modern civilization. But in the tropics, these qualities are less essential, for nature lavishes food and shelter is unnecessary.

...there [the tropics] ignorance, superstition, physical prowess, and sexual passion have an equal chance with intelligence, foresight, thrift, and self-control... 17

Nevertheless, a superior race can be found in a primitive, medieval or modern civilization.

The Teutonic race until five hundred years after Christ were primitive in their civilization, yet they had the mental capacities which made them, like Arminius, able to comprehend and absorb the highest Roman civilization. They passed through the medieval period and then came into the modern period of advanced civilizations, yet during these two thousand years their mental capacities, the original endowment of race, have scarcely improved. It is civilization, not race evolution that has transformed the primitive warrior into the philosopher, scientist, artisan, and businessman. Could their babies have been taken from the woods two thousand years ago and transplanted to the homes and schools of modern America,

17. Ibid. p. 213.
they could have covered in one generation the progress of twenty centuries. Other races, like the Scotch and the Irish, made the transition from primitive institutions to modern industrial habits within a single century. 18

For the Aryan race then, social conditions determine development.

Social conditions can also determine hereditary traits. Although Lamarckian evolutionary theory had been discredited by August Weismann's work in biology in the early 1890's, Commons persisted in using Lamarckian principles to back up his theories. 19 He believed that the longer a social condition persisted, the more tenacious is the quality produced. For example, Jews in Eastern Europe were forbidden to own farm land and thus developed a "racial distaste for agriculture."

The Jews also developed a racial predilection for individualism, but these traits are not imbedded in their character irrevocably. After a few generations in America, Jews began joining trade unions -- contrary to their individualistic personalities. In other cases, as with the American Indian, the democratic industrial environment is so foreign that it can have little effect. In such cases, there is little hope for assimilation and the problem facing society is how to "displace" these "baser elements". 20

18. Ibid. pp. 211-212.
21. John Commons, Social Reform and the Church, p. 73.
There are two groups of "baser elements" that Commons dealt with -- individual degenerates born in the native population and inferior races. Before 1901, he dealt primarily with the former, after 1901 with the latter.

Human degenerates are those not in harmony with the social environment. The social environment has replaced the physical environment in determining man's survival. If an animal is born unable to cope with the physical environment, it is destined to die. The animal in this case does no harm to the species. However, in the human community a degenerate may survive and harm the community, as well as perpetuate his peculiar form of degeneracy. The congenital or biological degenerate is uneducable and should be separated from the rest of the community. Commons estimated the total number of degenerates as $5\frac{1}{2}\%$ of the population.

### Estimated Total of Defectives Per Million Population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census estimate (1890)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insane</td>
<td>1,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feebleminded</td>
<td>1,526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf and Dumb</td>
<td>659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blind</td>
<td>805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners</td>
<td>1,315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile delinquents</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almshouse paupers</td>
<td>1,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,405</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Outdoor Criminals (five times the number of inmates)  
7,760

Tramps (McCook, 1895, New Haven Conference of Charities and Correction, 85,768)  
1,308

Drunkards (Crothers, 1893, Chicago Conference, 1,200,000 equal to about 10 percent of voting population)  
19,000

Prostitutes (Weighted average of Levasseur's estimate for rural (600) and urban (11,000 to 17,200) France, in La Population Francaise, Vol. 11, p. 434)  
5,000

Outdoor Paupers (Weighted average of report at Nashville Conference, 1894...)  
15,000

59,473

This estimate would make the maximum number of all degenerates 5.54% of the population. From these must be deducted those who are not congenital. 22

Commons went on in this article to estimate that 80% of the criminals, prostitutes, outdoor paupers, tramps and 50% of the drunkards are not congenital defectives. This leaves 17,558 or 1.75% of the population as congenital defectives. These 1.75% should be separated from the remainder of the population, although Commons never adequately explained how one could tell a congenital from a social degenerate, nor does he explain how he arrived at the percentages of defectives who are congenital. 23 Nevertheless, neither congenital or social degenerates should be allowed to vote.

22. John Commons, "Natural Selection, Social Selection and Heredity", pp. 93-4. The figures above are given exactly as Commons cited them. There is no further elaboration of sources in the article.

23. Ibid.
After 1901, Commons concentrated on the problems of immigration. While preparing his report for the U.S. Industrial Commission, he began studying Francis A. Walker's theory that immigration discourages reproduction among the older stock. Walker was president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and one of the outstanding economists of his day. In the early 1890's, he began arguing that the new influx of immigrants were totally unassimilable. They represented "the very lowest stage of degradation". Walker was the first to tackle the two outstanding theories of the day--survival of the fittest and the notion of migration as a selective process bringing to America the most energetic and enterprising Europeans. Walker turned these theories around, declaring that natural selection was working in reverse. Steamship companies, cheap rates and advertising campaigns were causing the unfit to migrate.

The new immigrants, he declared in phrases that rang down through the restriction debates of the next three decades, 'are beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence...They have none of the ideas and aptitudes which...belong to those who are descended from the tribes that met under the oak trees of old Germany to make laws and choose chieftains.'

Walker was superintendent of the census for 1870 and 1880. Using the statistics from the census, Walker, in 1891, began arguing that the rate of population growth in America was declining and this decline coincided with

the influx of inferior immigrants. Walker showed that this decline was largely among the native population and that immigration was responsible. Forced to compete with cheap foreign labor, Americans were reducing the size of their families rather than lowering their standards of living. Thus, Walker concluded, the foreign-born were replacing the native stock. In view of the new influx from southern and eastern Europe, he was sure the process would accelerate. 26

In 1901, Edward A. Ross coined the phrase "race suicide". In an address before the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Ross applied Walker's thesis to Asiatic immigration. He discussed how the dangers of unchecked Asiatic immigration might lead to the extinction of the American people.

When a higher race quietly eliminates itself rather than endure the competition of a lower one, said Ross, it is committing suicide. 27

Ross was referring only to Asiatic immigration, Commons extended the theory to include southern Europeans.

The competition of races is the competition of standards of living. The reason the Chinaman or the Italian can save three days wages is because wages have been previously fixed by the greater necessities of more advanced races. But competition has no respect for superior races. The race with lowest necessities displaces others. 28

27. Ibid. p. 147.
The race problem, as Commons saw it, was "the most fundamental of our social problems..." It touched upon the very foundations of American government. Commons believed democracy -- government by the people -- required certain moral characteristics. Democracy means the equal opportunity to participate in the making and enforcing of laws and it is therefore imperative that all should be capable of such participation. Races who through any moral or mental defect, are unable to assert themselves beside other races and participate with an equal voice in determining the laws and conditions which govern all are deprived of democracy just as though they were excluded by the constitution. When an entire race is excluded from participation in conducting the government,

we recognize at once that democracy as a practical institution has...broken down, and that, under the forms of democracy, there has developed a class or race oligarchy. 30

Commons divided the problem into two fundamentally different aspects. First, there was the problem of amalgamation -- the mixture of blood which unites a race into a common stock. Amalgamation is the process of centuries and is beyond the scope of government action. Second, is the problem of assimilation which is the union of minds and wills which enable a people to think and act together. Assimilation is the process of individual

29. John Commons, Races and Immigrants, p. 200.
training and can be promoted by organized efforts and laws.

The American Indian, the Black and the Malay race were beyond the reach of assimilation. For these races, amalgamation was the only door of entry and Commons was even unsure of this path. As a consequence, these races must not be allowed equal participation in the democratic process.

It is now more than thirty years since these opportunities and educational advantages were given to the Negro, not only on equal terms but actually on terms of preference over whites, and the fearful collapse of the experiment is recognized even by its partisans as something that was inevitable in the nature of the race at that stage of its development. 31

Commons believed that America might eventually develop a caste system such as exists in India where the light skinned Brahman rules over the dark skinned Sudra. In any event, he defended the disfranchisement of the Negro.

The suffrage must be earned, and not merely conferred. 32

The great lesson learned from reconstruction was that we must begin all over again. This time we must begin at the bottom by educating the Negro for the ballot, instead of beginning at the top by giving him the ballot before he knows how to use it. 33

Democracy must be based upon intelligence, manliness and cooperation. In order to instill these qualities in a race just emerging from slavery, Commons virtually advocated reenslaving them. Intelligence is knowledge of

31. Ibid. p. 34.
33. Ibid. p. 226.
the forces of nature and ingenuity enough to use them for human service. The Negro is generally acknowledged to be lacking in "the mechanical idea". In Africa, Commons argued, he hardly knows the simplest mechanical principles, such as the lever. In America, the brightest of Negroes were trained during slavery by their masters in the handicrafts. Since emancipation the young generation has not learned the mechanical trades to the same extent as their slave parents.

The foundation of intelligence for the modern workingman is his understanding of mechanics. Not until he learns... to handle the forces of nature can the workingman rise to positions of responsibility and independence... Intelligence in mechanics makes way for intelligence in economics and politics... 34

The second requirement for democracy is independence and manliness. These are moral qualities based upon will power and steadfastness in pursuit of a worthy object.

However much we disparage the qualities of greed and selfishness which the rush for wealth has made obnoxious, we must acknowledge that the solid basis of the virtues is thrift. 35

Commons continues that the improvidence of the Negro is notorious.

His neglect of his horse, his mule, his machinery, his eagerness to spend his earnings on finery, chickens and garden stuff when he might easily grow them on his own patch of ground, these and many other incidents of improvidence explain the constant dependence of the Negro upon his employer and his creditor. 36

Cooperation, the third requirement for citizenship
is also lacking in the Negro. Commons believed that the Negro was incapable of cooperation because he was jealous and distrustful of his fellow Blacks. He could only rally together under the banner of "a leader whom he could not dispose of." 37

Despite the fact that the Negro lacks the basic characteristics preparatory to political rights, Commons believed blanket disfranchisement wrong.

Many individuals have already acquired them (the three basic characteristics). To exclude such individuals from the suffrage is to shut the door of hope to all. An honest education test, honestly enforced on both whites and blacks, is the simplest rough-and-ready method for measuring the progress of individuals in these qualities of citizenship. 38

Those who are not yet prepared for citizenship are also not prepared to survive in our industrial society. The Negro could not possibly have found a place in American society had he come as a free man,

...and today at the present time contract labor and peonage with the crime of "running away" are recognized in varying degrees by the laws of southern states. 39

Manual and technical intelligence is the basis for all progress. Commons recommends the peonage system for the Philippines also.

The second aspect of the race problem is the assimilation of European immigrants. Commons was one of the

37. Ibid., p. 229.
38. Ibid., p. 230.
first to elaborate on the difference between the "new" (southern and eastern European) and the "old" (western European) immigration. Between 1882 and 1902 the source of immigration had turned dramatically to the east.

A line drawn across the continent of Europe from northeast to southwest separating the Scandinavian Peninsula, the British Isles, Germany and France from Russia, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, separates countries of representative institutions and popular government from absolute monarchies; it separates lands where education is universal from lands where illiteracy predominates; it separates manufacturing countries, progressive agriculture and skilled labor from primitive hand industries, backward agriculture and unskilled labor; it separates an educated, thrifty peasantry from a peasantry scarcely a single generation removed from serfdom; it separates Teutonic races from Latin, Slav, Semitic and Mongolian races. When the sources of American immigration are shifted from the western countries so nearly allied to our own to eastern countries so remote in the main attributes of civilization, the change is one that should challenge the attention of every citizen. 40

Not only is the new immigration far more alien than the old, the old immigration was absorbed by the native population with large tracts of free land on which the enterprising immigrant might settle. The new immigration is being absorbed into an already diluted population with free land no longer available.

Besides introducing masses of people with extremely low standards of living and little education into the labor market, the influx of immigration retards industrialization,

40. John Commons, "Immigration During the Nineteenth Century", The Chautauquan, December, 1903, p. 326.
Machinery requires capital in advance of production but labor requires only the payment of daily wages. Consequently, in the haste to accumulate profits the immigrant is more desirable than machinery. But excessive profits secured this way, bring a reaction and a period of business depression which checks the production of wealth. The development of American Industry is marked by extreme vacillations of prosperity and depression. Production increases with prosperity, but wages remain low—especially with the added competition of immigrants. This means an enormous increase in profits and production of commodities. But wage earners are the chief consumers. If their wages do not rise in proportion to prices and profits, they cannot purchase as large a proportion of the country's products as they did before this period of prosperity began. "Overproduction" is mainly "underconsumption" of wage-earners. Immigration intensifies this cycle of booms and depressions. Further, immigration tends to increase considerably during periods of prosperity which further brings down wages and worsens the downward trend.

Obviously, the only answer to these problems was the drastic restriction of all immigration. Commons advocated the exclusion of European immigration on the same basis as Asiatic immigration. Whereas all European immigrants were free to enter the U.S. with certain exceptions

which were specified by law, all Chinese were excluded except for those specifically allowed admission by law. Commons would allow only the educated and professional classes to emigrate. The method of exclusion was typical of Commons' ideas on the execution of laws. Use man's innate selfish motives to control him. Congress had enacted a law in 1898 requiring the steamship companies to return all immigrants debarred from entry due to loathsome and contagious diseases. In 1903, Congress stiffened the law, not only requiring the companies to carry them back but fining them $100 for every alien debarred on that account.

The principle should be extended to all cases excluded by law, and the fine should be $500. Then every agent of the steamship companies in the remotest hamlets of Europe would be an immigration inspector. 42

Commons' racial theories reflect one of the deepest problems of the German trained intellectual reformer, that is his difficulty in forging an alliance with the farmer-labor populists. The influence of the "gentle reformers" of the Northeast is most apparent in these theories. Commons' suspicion of the populistic democracy that had become so popular since the Jacksonian period, his concern with the inferior races that were descending upon our "delicate fabric" and his condemnation of the sixteenth amendment, all reflect his rejection

42. John Commons, Races and Immigrants, p. 238.
of the 19th century faith in the equality of man. In the end his race theories seem an elaborate justification for the need to uphold middle class values and the importance of the intellectual in maintaining those values.