

**“SURVIVAL VALUE AND A ROBUST, PRACTICAL, JOYLESS INDIVIDUALISM”:
THOMAS NIXON CARVER, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND EUGENICS**

LUCA FIORITO AND COSMA ORSI¹

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide a compressive assessment of Thomas Nixon Carver’s thought - from his early formative years in the 1880s to his post WWII career as a journalist and pamphleteer. The main (albeit not exclusive) focus of this paper will be on the theoretical and philosophical coordinates of Carver’s “new liberalism” - his own definition - and how this broad vision was intrinsically connected with an explicit hierarchical and eugenic approach to human nature. Just as important, what follows is also an attempt to increase our general understanding of the extent in which eugenic considerations permeated the realm of political economy during the first decades of the last century and how, in some specific cases as that of Carver, this influence persisted after the end of the Progressive Era.

KEY WORDS: T, N. CARVER, PROGRESSIVE ERA, EUGENICS

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¹ Correspondence may be addressed to: luca.fiorito.1967@gmail.com. We acknowledge permission of the UCLA Library of Special Collections to publish material from the Thomas Nixon Carver Papers.

But then later by chance I came to read the autobiography of Thomas Nixon Carver, who taught at Harvard through much of the period Fisher taught at Yale. And I had to admit there was a rawness reflected in it that would be hard to match in Britain, or for that matter in Europe. (Samuelson 1967, 36)

1. INTRODUCTION

The obituary columns of the July 8, 1961 *New York Times* solemnly announced the death, at the age of ninety-six, of Dr. Thomas Nixon Carver, “a retired Professor of Political Economy at Harvard, where he had taught for thirty-two years” (Thomas Carver, Teacher, Author 1961, 33). After a short biographical sketch, the anonymous obituarist informed his readers that Carver was among the university professors chosen in April 1936 to form a Republican “Brain Trust” - a response to the original Democratic group, created with the intent “to analyze the New Deal, expose its fallacies, and furnish material for Republican Campaign orators” (33). Known officially as the Research Division of the Republican National Committee, the G.O.P. “brain trust” included several thematic divisions, and Carver was appointed to head the political economy section. The *New York Times* tribute to Carver ended somewhat laconically:

Dr. Carver produced for the new “brain trust” a book entitled “What Must We Do to Save Our Economic System?” As reported in newspapers of the period the book contained some extreme views. “Limitation of marriage to those who can afford to buy and maintain an automobile,” “sterilization of the palpably unfit,” and “exclusion of all immigrants in order to reduce the labor supply” were among its proposals (33).²

Quite surprisingly, such “extreme views” have passed almost entirely unremarked in the accounts of Carver’s life and career that are to be found in the literature. The biographical entries on Carver in the *New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* (Coats 1987) and in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Taylor 1968) contain no mention of his involvement with the Republican “brain trust,” let alone of his support for eugenic practices and harsh immigration restriction. Even Joseph Dorfman’s encyclopedic enterprise, *The Economic Mind on American Civilization*, which yet include two sections on Carver, offers nothing more than a mere description of him as a “sociological economist” who “subscribed to the Malthusian doctrine of population in his concern between man’s desire to procreate and his ability to satisfy expanding wants” (Dorfman 1959, 247-248).

This historiographic negligence appears even more surprising if one considers that the “extreme views” Carver presented in the mid-1930s were to a large extent a mere reiteration of those he had consistently and persistently held during his entire academic career. Eugenic ideas did inform the very foundations of Carver’s political economy - both in its theoretical and policy aspects - and to the eyes of his contemporaries this represented one of the distinguishing marks of his work. In this connection, let it suffice to say that shortly after Carver’s *Essays in Social Justice* (1915a) appeared in print, the *Journal of Heredity* hailed the volume as “a very important step in the coordination of the various sciences which make up applied eugenics” (Economics and Eugenics 1917, 120). Only recently, Carver’s social and economic philosophy has received adequate consideration thanks to Sandra Peart and David Levy, who have ably discussed Carver’s attempt to inject “racial” or “biological” elements into explanations of economic outcomes (Peart and Levy 2013; see also Levy, Peart, and Albert 2012). Carver, however, enters Levy and Peart’s narrative only indirectly. Their primary intent is in fact to document Friedrich von Hayek’s opposition to biological determinism and Carver’s contribution is mostly examined with that goal in view and with a focus on the 1930s and 1940s. The present paper is in many respects an attempt to complement Peart and Levy’s efforts. This will be done by offering a more compressive assessment of Carver’s thought - from his early formative years in the 1880s to his post WWII career as a journalist and pamphleteer. Here a disclaimer becomes necessary: this is not

² The pamphlet “*What Must We Do to Save Our Economic System?*” had actually been published in 1935 and re-issued in a new edition the following year after Carver’s appointment to the Republican brain trust. See section 3.3 below.

intended to be a complete account of Carver's contribution to economics and social science in general. Carver was a prolific writer - he authored eighteen books - and, in addition to economic theory (strictly conceived), his interests included agricultural economics, sociology, and religion. The main (albeit not exclusive) focus of this paper will be on the theoretical and philosophical coordinates of Carver's "new liberalism" - his own definition - and how this broad vision was intrinsically connected with an explicit hierarchical and eugenic approach to human nature. Just as important, what follows is also an attempt to increase our general understanding of the extent in which eugenic considerations permeated the realm of political economy during the first decades of the last century and how, in some specific cases as that of Carver, this influence persisted after the end of the Progressive Era.

2. CARVER IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Carver was born in 1865, and he was thus a contemporary of the generation of Progressives that included, among others, figures like John R. Commons, Frank A. Fetter, William Ripley, John B. Andrews, and Henry Seager.³ Albeit certainly a Progressive Era economist, it should be made clear from the outset that Carver cannot be directly associated with any variant of Progressive thought. His analysis of competition reveals in fact a general faith in the market as a selective mechanism that clearly distanced him from the apostles of Progressivism. This distance was reflected in Carver's firm (but qualified) opposition to the then prevailing emphasis on the legitimacy of state interference into the economic and social sphere. As he put it (Carver 1915a, 13), "most of the movements masquerading under the name 'progressive' are designed to popularize government rather than to rationalize its acts or make them more just." This has led interpreters to describe Carver as a "dyed-in-the-wool conservative" (Cottrell 2000, 20), or to argue that his position accurately epitomizes the anti-Progressive view "that the market was the province of freedom, and the government the province of coercion" (Fried 1998, 31). The portrayal of Carver as a staunch laissez-faire apologist, however, should not be pushed too far. Carver was a man of his times, and in terms of policy his views embraced many of the standard Progressive proposals of the period. More importantly - and this is what concerns us here - Carver and the Progressives did not only share the same reform agenda but also the same intellectual prejudices that informed that very agenda. Exactly like the bulk of Progressive reformers of the time, Carver made systematic use of biologically deterministic arguments to explain the root causes of economic problems.

2.1 CARVER AS A DARWINIAN REFORMER

Our starting point is Carver's commitment to Darwinism and his related notion of social justice. In the opening chapter of his *Essays in Social Justice*, Carver made it crystal clear that his intent was to extend Darwinian evolution into the social domain. Carver saw the Darwinian factors of variation, selection, transmission, and adaptation as operating in societies much as they do in living organisms:

Since Darwin, the world is committed to the idea that progress takes place mainly, if not exclusively, by the process of variation and selection. Whether the variations be small and numerous or occasional and extreme may be open to question. But without variation of one kind or another there can be no selection, and without variation and selection there is no progress. This, in the opinion of the writer, is as true of moral, social, or economic progress as of biological progress. It is a universal principle applying to every phase of progress (Carver 1915a, 18).

Crucial to this view was the idea that aggregates of human beings are engaged in a struggle for existence. Any social unit must provide for satisfying certain basic needs, which are conceived to be inherent in the very organic nature of its individual members, through scarce resources available in the environment. For Carver, "the ultimate basis of all social conflict is found in economic scarcity of one form or another" (35). Out of this struggle for existence - combined with the presence of variation

³ Thomas Nixon Carver was born on 25 March 1865 in Kirkville, Iowa, to Quaker parents. After receiving undergraduate education at Iowa Wesleyan College and the University of Southern California (AB, 1891), he attended Johns Hopkins before earning a PhD from Cornell in 1894. After a joint appointment in economics and sociology at Oberlin College, Carver came to Harvard in 1900 as a professor of political economy.

among individuals and groups - Carver forged his notion of social justice. "Survival value," the capacity to adapt to the surrounding material universe, becomes the essential normative principle in the organization of a social group: "Any class of actions which help in this process of adjustment ought to create in us the sensation of approval whether they do or not, and any class of actions which hinder in this process ought to create the sensation of disapproval whether they do or not." This, for Carver, is "the function of the moral sentiments and they are abortive when they fail in that function" (24). In this connection, religion made not exception and like any other system of moral precepts it has to be appraised in the light of its contribution to the struggle for existence. Ultimately, as Carver put it in a volume emblematically titled *The Religion Worth Having* (1912a, 85), "the laws of natural selection are identical with the laws of divine approval; and [...] the process of exterminating the unfit or the unadapted is only the manifestation of divine disapproval" (1912a, 85).

The following step was to elevate economic competition as the "highest" among selective mechanisms: "In no other form of conflict does success depend so much upon production or service and so little upon destruction or deception" (1915a, 93). Again, "under economic competition men succeed only by means of instruments of production, and in proportion to the service they do" (104). Although Carver was adamant in establishing a fundamental link between economic efficiency and fitness, he explicitly rejected the notion of survival of the fittest in the "ultra-Darwinian sense" (163). In the absence of some form of "social control," he warned, survival would depend "simply upon the ability to survive" and not upon "fitness in any sense implying worth, merit, or usefulness" (163). Whereas, with his insisted praise of competition, Carver had distanced himself from the bulk of his contemporaries, with his plea for social control he gets close to the Progressive path. Social control is necessary to ban all forms of parasitical and predatory competition that - albeit they may contribute to individual survival - result in a waste of energy for the social whole. In Carver's own words: "Government and government alone prevents competition from lapsing into the brutal struggle for existence, where self-interest leads [...] to destructive as well as to productive activity on the part of the individual" (108).⁴ To put it differently, actual serviceability cannot be defined merely in terms of fitness and survival value. As a Darwinian reformer - rather than a strict social Darwinist- Carver predicated survival value on the basis of a precise normative standard of progress.⁵ Only when this standard is rigidly enforced by a public authority:

those individuals who are most useful to their fellows stand the best chance of survival, and those who are least useful or most harmful are selected for extermination-through poverty in the one case, and through criminal punishment in the other. This differs from artificial selection as practiced by the breeder in that it leaves the individual free, within certain prescribed limits, to shift for himself and survive if he can. It leaves him to demonstrate his own fitness for survival. Within these prescribed limits it works automatically like natural selection. It differs from natural selection in that, by virtue of these prescribed limits, a standard of fitness is set up. Under these conditions the term "survival of the fittest" means something more than the mere ability to survive; it means the ability to survive by means of useful powers and qualities (164).

Significantly, this is where Carver parted company with the "old" liberalism of the classics. "In the early days of the Liberalistic movement" - he wrote - "the artificial checks and hindrances upon useful enterprise, the legal discriminations and monopolies set up by most governments, seemed the greater evil." As a consequence, "the early apostles of liberalism were led to emphasize the need of freer opportunity for enterprise rather than that of closer restriction upon harmful methods. It remains for the apostles of the new liberalism to emphasize both needs equally" (165). Just as

⁴ In the following passage, however, Carver immediately added: "Let it not be understood, however, that merely because government supervision and control are necessary to the maintenance of the competitive system as distinguished from the unmitigated struggle for existence, that all government interference is, therefore, justifiable. Speaking broadly, it would not be so very unsafe to say that government interference is almost as frequently harmful as beneficial. It is only when it is wisely planned that it can be justified. To be wisely planned is, essentially, to distinguish accurately between economic and uneconomic activities, and to suppress the latter efficiently" (109-110).

⁵ On the distinction between social Darwinists and Darwinian reformers see the excellent discussion in Leonard 2005.

importantly, whereas Adam Smith, the leading apostle of the old liberalism, advocated natural liberty as a means to individual and general happiness, Carver conceived human freedom as a moral teaching, rigidly subordinate to the future interests of the nation. He made this point emphatically in his 1917 Presidential Address to the American Economic Association:

The feebleness and shortsightedness of the intellect is here supplemented by the generous sentiment of nationality. It is through this sentiment that we are led, "as by an invisible hand," to safeguard the interests of that vast majority which never votes for the excellent reason that it is not born yet. Without this sentiment we should each of us join in the query, What has posterity ever done for me that I should do anything for posterity? Self-interest, even when widened so as to include one's own immediate flesh and blood, will not lead us to safeguard the interests of that vast unborn majority. The sentiment of nationality, the love of country, pride in its growth and prosperity, the desire to see it grow and hold an honorable place among the nations of the earth, these are the salvation of those voiceless generations whose prosperity and happiness for centuries to come depend upon what we do here and now (1917, 15-16).

Self-interest alone-even when liberated from predation or deviance-cannot provide a normative foundation for human conduct. It is only when combined with the "generous sentiment of nationality" that it can develop and promote those individual virtues that are instrumental to the building and strengthening of a nation. Although much of Carver's discussion in this connection may appear to be "an elaboration of the obvious" - as one reviewer observed (Ball 1915, 384) - it still deserves our attention. Carver's account of virtues, in fact, retains to a remarkable degree the highest ideals of the American Protestant tradition, clearly revealing his willingness to uphold such an ideal of character even in modern industrial societies.

Among these virtues, industry, or dedication to "productive" efforts, deserves the highest praise. Carver contrasted two fundamental and antagonistic attitudes towards work, the "work-bench" and the "pig-trough" philosophy (278). By the former, Carver referred to that philosophy of life "which regards the world as an opportunity for work, or for the active joy of productive achievement." This is a case of "objective" and "disinterested" devotion to worldly tasks-something akin to Veblen's instinct of workmanship-where "wealth is regarded as tools to be used in further production or usefulness" rather than "as means of self-gratification."⁶ By pig-trough philosophy, instead, he meant that attitude "which regards the world as an opportunity for consumption, for the passive pleasures of absorbing the good things which the world supplies." In open contrast to those productivity activities that redound to the cohesiveness of the nation, Carver saw this form of individualist hedonism as a socially destructive force. As he further explained, "if one's purpose in life is to get as much out of it as possible, rather than to put as much in it as possible, the manners and the morals of the pig-trough prevail. It is only under this attitude toward life that destructive conflict prevails" (279).

Closely related, is Carver's encouragement of thrift. In his view, an individual's consumption represents a mere detraction from the gross total wealth created by his work. As he put it in his classic harsh prose: "The man who produces nothing but consumes lavishly has a negative net value to the country as a whole, that is the country is better off when he dies than when he lives" (174). The act of saving, thus, represents a net addition to the "value of a man," as well as the only way to expand a nation's productive power. Carver distinguished between hoarding and saving-but he drew no theoretical consequence from this distinction-and identified saving with the purchase of producers' goods. "When I decide to buy producers' goods rather than consumers' goods" - he asserted - "I direct, to the extent of my purchase, the productive energy of the community toward the making of producers' goods rather than toward the making of consumers' goods." As a result, "the community is thereafter better supplied with producers' goods, that is, tools, then it would otherwise have been" (223). At a more theoretical level, Carver (1893a; 1904) associated the disutility of saving with the

⁶ Carver reviewed Veblen's *Theory of Business Enterprise* in 1905. In that occasion he expressed some form of appreciation for Veblen's dichotomy between pecuniary and industrial types of employment: "The author's contention that the large business man is primarily an acquirer, and only incidentally a producer of wealth, is undoubtedly correct" (1905, 143).

classical notion of “abstinence,” arguing that the rate of interest is determined jointly by a falling marginal productivity of capital schedule and a rising marginal abstinence schedule.⁷

Still in connection to those traits that are beneficial to the nation, Carver drew attention to the economic significance of the family as the fundamental social unit. In his typical dichotomous style, he juxtaposed the principle of “family-building” to what is described (perhaps not too elegantly) as the “spawning” process. In the “family-building” process individuals are able to transcend the immediate gratification of the sexual instinct and in so doing, to place a check on reproduction, while in the spawning, “children are begotten without any sense of responsibility on the part of parents, the spawn being left to the tender mercies of an impersonal state” (310). The nation in which the “family-building” type represents the majority has an advantage over that where the “spawners” prevail-and this, in strictly Darwinian terms, represents a contradiction. But, Carver lamented, “the marvelous prosperity of the western world [...] has enabled the spawning class to flourish and increase in numbers” (313), leading to overcrowding and congestion in the lowest segment of the labor market. These Malthusian concerns, as we will argue below, play a central role in Carver’s discussion of wage determination.

Within this broad philosophical framework - an insisted apology of “nationalistic” virtues pervaded by a Darwinian spirit of reform - Carver developed a concrete policy agenda. As already noted, this included some measures advocated by Progressives, such as regulation of monopoly prices, increased taxation of land values, and graduate inheritance taxes. Interestingly, in dealing with the so-called “trust problem,” Carver was aligned with most radical fringe of Progressives, going so far as to propose, in some specific cases, the dissolution of those conglomerates that do not derive their market power from superior efficiency (121). What concerns us here, however, is Carver’s discussion of labor problems. This is, in fact, the field where his commitments to eugenics and to a hierarchical ontology of human nature acquire the highest relevance, and where the convergences between him and the Progressives become more evident.

2.2 LABOR PROBLEMS

In a series of contributions, Thomas C. Leonard (2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2009) has offered a fresh opportunity to reexamine the actual motivations behind much of the Progressive-era reform impetus. Leonard’s work indicates and documents the decisive role played by eugenic considerations in the arguments made for such labor policies as minimum wages and restrictions on immigration. Economists of the time, Leonard argues, understood exactly that binding minimum wages would cause unemployment. “However” - he continues - “[they] also believed that the job loss induced by minimum wages was a social benefit, as it performed the eugenic service of ridding the labor force of the unemployable” (Leonard 2005b, 212-213). By “unemployables” it was meant those inferior workers-often identified by racial criteria - who earned less than an adequate standard of living and pushed down the wages of their more productive (Anglo-Saxon) competitors. In a similar vein, eugenics provided a “scientific” veneer for policies intended to limit immigration. Progressive Era economists, to quote again from Leonard (2005b, 219), “justified race based immigration restriction as a remedy for ‘race suicide,’ a Progressive Era term for the process by which racially superior stock (‘natives’) is outbred by a more prolific, but racially inferior stock (immigrants). The notion that high immigration correlated with low native fertility became a mantra within Progressive-era discussions on the socially and economically deleterious effects of immigration.

In this connection, Carver made no exception. On matters of labor and immigration policies, Carver and the Progressives shared the same views and, more crucially, the same conviction that those reforms were inextricably bound up with issues of eugenics and race betterment. Carver’s nativist stance appears evident from an early article published in the *American Journal of Politics*, a liberal periodical of the time, when he was still a student at Cornell (Carver 1893b). There, he indulged in the then recurrent portrait of most immigrants - especially those from Eastern and Southern Europe - as low skilled, ignorant, criminals, unable to properly and successfully assimilate, and morally ill-fitted for American culture. For the young

⁷ Carver also showed that abstinence is related to, but not coincident to, the rate of time preference. Carver’s interest theory was discussed by Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk (1906), and even caught John M. Keynes’ (1936, 176) critical attention.

Carver, immigration was the ultimate cause of the current labor unrest, since it had exacerbated the tensions between employers and laborers and between laborers themselves:

The habits of life of many of our immigrants, especially of the lower classes, are utterly at variance with the American standards of decency. When our manufacturing establishments are largely filled with such men as these, it is perfectly clear how there could arise a distinct barrier between the laboring classes and their employers. It becomes still clearer when we take into consideration the natural antipathy that exists between men of different nationalities, and more especially between men of different races. The native-born workmen who are forced by circumstances to work in the same occupation with these immigrants, are forced to share their degradation—just as white laborers in the South, whose circumstance force them to the same work as negroes, are compelled to share the social degradation of the negro (80-81).

As Carver settled at Harvard, his fervent nativist campaign soon made its way into the leading national newspapers. In 1915, for instance, the Washington Post quoted Carver's cry that America was gradually allowing its original "native stock" to be submerged by "triumphant immigrants" and the "force of their greater virility as revealed in their much higher birth rates" (Native American Race is Dying Out 1915, 11).⁸ In his academic writings, however, Carver adopted a far more cautious rhetorical style, presenting his arguments cloaked in a mantle of respectable science. As he stated in the pages of his *Essays in Social Justice*, "It will be observed that nothing has been said in the above statement, about race, religion, eugenics, or anything of the kind. The reasons for favoring the restriction of immigration are purely economic" (1915, 274a). In order to understand those "purely economic" reasons it is necessary to start from Carver's commitment to marginalism and his analysis of wages.

Carver stated his position quite plainly. The "true" theory of wages, he affirmed (1894, 396), is to be found in "a combination of the 'marginal productivity,' or the 'no rent increment,' theory of Professor Clark and the 'standard of living,' or 'cost of production,' theory of the classical English economists"⁹ Wages are thus fixed by the interaction of a falling marginal productivity of labor schedule *à la* Clark with a rising "standard of living" schedule. At that time, Carver was not alone in postulating the direct influence of the standard of living in wage determination (Leonard 2003a). Differently from the bulk of his Progressive contemporaries, however, Carver did not interpret the standard of living as a synonym for "reservation wage"—so that workers with lower standards of living are willing to accept lower wages. For Carver, the standard of living represented "the number of other wants whose satisfaction the individual considers of more importance than that of the procreative instinct." In other words, "the individual who places very few wants before that instinct has a very low standard of living, and he who places many wants before that one has a high standard" (1904, 171). With this definition, Carver could reestablish the classical correspondence between the long-run supply price of labor (as of any other commodity) and its cost of reproduction.¹⁰ This allowed him to affirm that: a) "A rise in the standard of living of laborers tends to reduce the amount of labor that will be supplied at any given rate of wages by diminishing the birth-rate, just as a rise in the cost of production of another commodity will reduce the amount of that commodity that will be supplied at any given price;" and b) "With a given standard of living, a rise in the rate of wages will result in a higher birth-rate and a larger supply of labor, just as, with a given cost of production, a rise in price of another commodity will result in a larger production of that commodity" (1894, 393- 394).

Carver's theory of wages was not a mere theoretical exercise. It allowed him to hold that the main cause of poverty in America was the congestion in the lower segments of the labor market caused by a continuous flow of unskilled immigrants with lower standards of life. Not only will

⁸ Rather than blaming the high birth rates among immigrants, it should be noted, Carver was more inclined to point the finger at the privileged white native-born woman, "[who] is not in a hurry to marry, and when she does marry there is little incentive to bear children" (Native American Race is Dying Out 1915, 11).

⁹ Carver had been a student of Clark at Johns Hopkins, where he also studied under Richard T. Ely and Sidney Sherwood (1949, 95-98). On Frank Taussig's invitation, Carver reviewed Clark's *Distribution of Wealth* for the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (Carver 1901).

¹⁰ This correspondence holds, Carver warned, "so long as we limit the discussion to the general class of unskilled laborers" (1894, 393).

unregulated immigration “keep competition more intense among laborers,” but it will also “give a relatively low marginal productivity to a typical immigrant, particularly in the lower grades of labor” (1911, 204; 1915a, 369). Predicating on the growing fear of race suicide, then, Carver further elaborated:

where the average standard of living is high, numbers will not increase beyond the point which will enable the laboring population to live up to its standard, unless the immigration of laborers of a lower standard from some other community should set in, in which case the laborers of a lower standard will displace those of a higher standard, causing the latter to migrate or stop multiplying, 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. (1904, 171)¹¹

Such a battle of the standards would also have social consequences. In Carver’s view, if the nation finds itself invaded by a flood of immigrants “belonging to races or nationalities which do not fuse with the rest of the population by free intermarriage,” three possible scenarios may emerge: a) “Geographical separation of races;” b) “Social separation of races, i.e., in the formation of classes or castes, one race or the other becoming subordinate;” c) “Continual race antagonism, frequently breaking out into race war” (1911, 206; 1915a, 370). Significantly, Carver did not contemplate the possibility of “assimilation” for the immigrant through education and exposure to American conditions, neither he expressed the hope that such a process could eventually take place in the future.¹²

All this led Carver to support of “those methods of protecting the higher standard of living against the competition of the lower, namely, the restriction of immigration and the minimum wage law” (1912b, 22). Carver seemed to have no doubts on the eugenic virtues of a binding minimum wage. In the first place, he explained “it is apparent that such a policy would tend to weed out the less competent members of the community so that, in the course of time, there would be none left whose services were not worth at least the minimum wage.” In the second place, he continued, “it can scarcely be doubted that after that was accomplished, the community would be vastly superior to the present one, for it would be peopled by a superior class of individuals, and the general quality of the population would not be deteriorated by the human dregs who now form the so-called submerged element” (1915a, 140). But how to deal with those “human dregs” which would be so expelled from the labor market? Again, Carver seems to be quite confident on the measures to be adopted: “Enforced colonization, the multiplication of almshouses, or a liberal administration of chloroform would be necessary to dispose of a considerable number of our population” (139). Although in subsequent passages, Carver saw to mitigate these intemperate remarks, proposing, at least for some groups, public assistance and “vocational” training (264), he still felt compelled to add: “It is easy to imagine the fine scorn with which some one will object to estimating the worth of a man in dollars and cents. But theologico-metaphysical disquisitions upon the supreme worth of a human being are entirely beside the present point” (139).

Tightly connected to the establishment of a minimum wage, was Carver’s proposal for limiting immigration. Carver suggested a plan of restriction that would admit only those foreign-born laborers who “could present contracts, signed by responsible employers, guaranteeing employment at two dollars a day for at least a year” (372). This would stop the influx of “cheap laborers whose influence is to depress the wages of unskilled labor,” and would also eventually “make two dollars a day the actual

¹¹ Differently from some of his Progressive colleagues, Carver was careful enough to specify that “not every people with a low standard of living has high competing power.” As he further explained: “The Mexican peons have as cheap a standard of living as the Chinese coolies, and yet they do not compete successfully even with Americans, who have a higher standard of living. In other words, there must be coupled with a cheap standard of living considerable industrial efficiency” (1921, 609).

¹² In his discussion, Carver referred to John R. Commons’ classic *Races and Immigrants in America* (1907). Differently from Carver, however, Commons distinguished between amalgamation (creation of a common racial stock though intermarriage) and assimilation (a “union of minds and wills” enabling community life). For Commons “To be great a nation need not to be of one blood, it must be of one mind” (1907, 27). For a discussion of Commons’ attitude towards immigration see Fiorito and Orsi (forthcoming).

minimum wage without the difficulty of enforcing a minimum wage law" (372-373).¹³ But this was not all, since, as Carver sagaciously put it, "immigration from heaven produces very much the same results as immigration from Europe" (261). In this regard, Carver reiterated that two dollars a day were the minimum salary necessary to support a family, and he went so far to propose legal prohibition to marriage for all citizens (native and foreign-born) who could not reach an annual income of six hundred dollars: "If no man would marry until he had a good job with' two dollars a day, the result would be so to retard the marriage rate and the birth rate among unskilled laborers and so to thin out the ranks of unskilled labor that, barring immigration, in about one generation every man could find a job that would pay him at least two dollars a day" (262).

Before concluding this section, a few words should be spent on the reception of Carver's theory of wages and his related views on immigration. After all, Carver was recognized as one of the leading theorists of his time (Carlson 1968; Mason and Lamont 1982), and it should not be surprise that his ideas were widely discussed within academia. In general terms, Carver's treatment of wages left his colleagues unconvinced. Herbert J. Davenport (1908, 518) conceded that both marginal productivity and standards of living are factors that influence the level of wages. But, he objected, the "ways" and the "times" in which these two factors exercise their influence are completely different and logically irreconcilable. Carver's explanation of wages is an inadmissible "mixture of long-time and short-time influences"- on the one hand, the marginal productivity of labor, a static category, on the other, the standard of living, which affects wages only by its influence on the birth rate, i.e., the supply of labor over generations.¹⁴ Frank Taussig, instead, addressed the issue empirically, asking whether long-run movements of wages and population could provide supporting evidence for Carver's theory of wages. "It seems to me very doubtful whether we can answer this question in the affirmative," was Taussig's reply. For the Harvard economist, "surveying the modern era of the last century, we find, on the whole, in all the civilized countries, a slow but steady rise in the rate of wages, and with it a slow decline in the birth rate." The causal nexus seems to run from wages to standards of living, and not vice versa. "If there be a standard of living," he speculated, "it is a shifting standard, and one that influences the supply of labor not in such a way as to keep wages at a given level, but such as to enable a steady advance in wages to be maintained" (1910, 155-156). Carl Kelsey from the University of Pennsylvania, and Isaac A. Hurwich, a then renowned paladin of immigrants' rights, raised similar criticisms at an American Economic Association round table centering on a paper by Carver on wages and immigration (Population and Immigration 1911). But it belongs to John K. Tawles, a labor expert from the Bureau of Industrial Statistics who was also among the participants to that round table, the most telling comment. Ultimately, he candidly affirmed, Carver's position should not be appraised through the lenses of economic theory:

As regards our attitude on the immigration question, I venture the suggestion that in our deciding moments our action will be determined not so much by economic considerations as by our answer to the question: Do we want to develop an American race? [...] Is the development and maintenance of an American people, an American race, a matter of vital concern to us? (245)

"Many sane and sage men" - Tawles concluded - "think it is high time we were concerning ourselves with the breed of our people" (245).

¹³ As this measure would turn up to be "politically impossible" under present contract law, Carver proposed a literacy test. Carver recognized that literacy is not *per se* an invariable test of "character" - but he still believed that "if all literate immigrants are arranged in one group, and all illiterates in another, the average of the literates would be better than that of the illiterates. Excluding illiterates would therefore improve the average quality of our immigrants" (1915, 273).

¹⁴ In addition, Davenport pointed out, whenever "the very increase in supply itself implies and necessitates a change in the volume of demand, the demand-and-supply formula, entirely accurate for consumption goods, becomes, for production goods, entirely misleading unless used in a very different sense" (1908, 519). Davenport (1904) was also the author of a rather unsympathetic review of Carver's *Distribution of Wealth* for the *Journal of Political Economy*.

3. THE INTERWAR YEARS

Carver remained particularly active in the interwar years. From 1919 to 1935, in addition to several articles in leading academic journals, he published eight books, which included *The Principles of Economics* (1919), *The Principles of National Economy* (1921), and *The Present Economic Revolution in the United States* (1925). Again, our attention here will be mostly confined to Carver's philosophical coordinates. In general terms, we can affirm that Carver guided his economics into the interwar years without any substantial change in the overall position he had developed in the *Distribution of Wealth* and in the *Essays in Social Justice*. This is significant, because in the passage from the end of Progressivism to the immediate post World War I years, American social science underwent a deep transformation in its methodological and epistemological basis.¹⁵ The first signs of this change, Dorothy Ross (1993, 99) notes, had already made their appearance in the early 1910s:

Around 1912 [...] a distinctly new voice appeared in the social science literature, and it swelled to a powerful chorus after World War I. Social scientists began to call for a more objective version of empirical and social intervention. The new program was more quantitative and behavioristic and urged that social science eschew ethical judgments altogether in favor of more explicit methodology and objective examination of facts.

In economics such a "scientific" impulse was particularly far-reaching and was alimeted by that more self-conscious wing of institutionalists, who emphasized the scientific content of their "new economics" as opposed to the metaphysical character of received theory. In one occasion, Carver (1918) decided to intervene to the heated methodological debates of the time with a direct rejoinder to the institutionalist campaign for a "behavioristic" economics. He was subsequently made the object of direct attacks both by institutionalists and (ironically) by more "neoclassically" inclined economists. This, together with Carver's activities after his retirement from Harvard in 1932, will be discussed in the sections below.

3.1 NEITHER NEOCLASSICAL NOR INSTITUTIONALIST

The scientific impulse in social research that characterized the late 1910s and the pivotal decade of the 1920s was accompanied by an equally important development. At the same time the social sciences were demanding the adoption of more rigorous methodologies modeled after the image of their natural counterparts, they also began to separate themselves from biology and philosophy, seeking an acknowledgment of their worth as independent disciplines. It is the emancipation from biology that mainly concerns us here. Specifically, in order to raise both interest levels and funds for their efforts, social scientists had to contend "with the tension inherent in proving that their sciences were founded on 'provable' concepts different from those of biology; yet at the same time they were as scientific as biology" (Gillette 2007, 114; see also Cravens 1978). This would not be possible if they relied on biological and strictly hereditarian explanations for human behavior. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that many economists of the time-most of them from the institutionalist camp-turned their attention to the newly launched movement of behaviorism in psychology. With its emphasis on demarcating science (observed behavior) from metaphysics (mental states) and on the empirical testing of behavioral laws, behaviorism seemed to provide a powerful analytical and rhetorical weapon against the perceived narrowness of traditional hedonism (Asso and Fiorito 2004). As importantly, the new approach was a clear threat for the scientific reputation of eugenics. By establishing a deterministic correlation between the individual's objective situation (the conditioning) and the empirical observation of the corresponding behavior, behaviorists could maintain that environmental stimuli were the sole cause of differences in human behavior. "Nurture," rather than nature, was responsible for the evolution of the individual behavioral traits. As John B. Watson (1925, 82), the founder of behaviorism, put it in an oft-quoted passage: "Give me a dozen healthy infants and I'll guarantee to take anyone at random and train him to become any kind of

¹⁵ See Leonard (2012) for an excellent analysis of this transition.

specialist I might select - doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.”¹⁶

Carver’s response to the rising behaviorist tide in economics appeared as an essay published in the 1918 *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. There, he announced: “A new kind of an economic man has been, or is in process of being, constructed by what is known as the behavioristic school of economists” (1918, 195). In Carver’s opinion, the enthusiastic supporters of this new “behavioristic man” seem to have incurred into (at least) two fundamental errors. First, in their exclusive interpretations of human behavior in terms of induced responses to stimuli, they have failed to give adequate consideration to deliberate rational action. In Carver’s typical style: “If the so-called economic man of the classical school [...] was too much of a calculating machine, so is the ‘behavioristic man’ of this recent school too much of an impulsive, unreasoning, ‘eternal feminine’ sort of a man” (196). Second, the behaviorist mechanical formula of stimulus and response fail to provide any normative standard of evaluation for human conduct:

The question is not simply what are men actually like, but what kind of men fit best into the cosmos. What are the earmarks of a “good” man, that is, of a man who adds strength to the community or the nation? [...] It is not enough that we study the variations of human institutions, habits, morals, etc. We also want to know what institutions, habits, and moral systems work well. What kind of a nation or social organization fits in the cosmos and grows strong under the conditions of the universe. Similarly, as to individual motives, it is not simply a question as to what motives actually govern human behavior, though it is important that we know that. It is of equal importance that we know what motives or combinations of motives work well. If we permit ourselves to use the word “ought,” we want to know what motives ought to dominate. (196-197)

Ultimately, Carver held, the main problem with behaviorism is that it assumes uniformity of response to determinate stimuli - it does not allow for variation in human traits and inclinations. But, he objected: “There is variability here as elsewhere. Individuals are not all exactly alike. Some are governed more largely than others by a given group of motives, others by a different group. This gives the variability which is the opportunity for selection” (197).

Carver’s almost obsessive concern about the “quality” of population emerged again three years later, in his controversial *Principles of National Economy* (1921). As he put it, in what may be considered an attack to the then rampant institutionalism, “However wisely the economic activities of the people may be controlled by government, morals, and religion, and however sound and rational their economic institutions may be, much will depend upon the quality of the people themselves” (1921, 123). In professing support for both either sides of the nature-nurture controversy, Carver explained that “it is more important for the present generation to give attention to the problem of its own training than to the problem of its own heredity.” Inborn traits cannot be changed and “the only thing to do is to make the most of its inheritance and see that it gets the best possible training.” But if we look at the welfare of future generations, then, eugenic consideration become far more crucial:

If the most capable men and women of this and succeeding generations marry and have larger families than the less capable, and if the least capable, the feeble-minded, and the defective are prevented from reproducing their kind, we may expect a gradual improvement, generation after generation, in the native and inherited quality of the stock. If, on the other hand, many of the most capable do not marry at all, and if the others marry late and have small families, whereas the less capable have larger families, while the feeble-minded and defective multiply most rapidly of all, we must expect a gradual deterioration in the stock, generation after generation.” (139)

¹⁶ In another salient passage, Watson wrote: “Certainly black parents will bear black children if the line is pure (except possibly once in a million years or so when a sport or ‘mutant’ is born which theoretically may be white, yellow or red). Certainly the yellow skinned Chinese parents will bear a yellow skinned offspring. Certainly Caucasian parents will bear white children. But these differences are relatively slight. They are due among other things to differences in the amount and kind of pigments in the skin. I defy anyone to take these infants at birth, study their behavior, and mark off differences in behavior that will characterize white from black and white or black from yellow. There will be differences in behavior but the burden of proof is upon the individual be he biologist or eugenicist who claims that these racial differences are greater than the individual differences” (Watson 1925, 75).

Nothing is said about these aspects in Robert Lee Hale's (1923) celebrated and highly critical review of Carver's *Principles of National Economy*. Hale, a leading institutionalist from Columbia, placed Carver among the "upholders of laissez-faire," and held that in his whole schema individuals are exposed "to but little coercion at the hands of the government and to none at all at the hands of other individuals or groups" (471). Hale's review is a seminal contribution to law and economics and needs not to be discussed here in detail.¹⁷ Curiously enough, however, Hale remained silent on - or simply failed to note - the strident contradiction between his own depiction of Carver and the latter's advocacy of a legislative program for the "redistribution of human talent," which included such fiercely coercive measures as the establishment of a minimum income for allowing marriages and compulsory "elimination of defectives" (1921, 766).

Further criticisms came from more traditionally oriented figures of the time. The occasion was prompted by another American Economic Association round table discussing Carver's plea for "A Balanced Industrial System" (1920). There, Carver, along the lines of his previous work, proposed a set of measures to reduce the oversupply of unskilled labor. The first step was for the government to "decree" higher wages - but he does not discuss how and how much. Then, the labor supply should be reduced accordingly, 1) by admitting only as many immigrants who could be hired at the new wages level; 2) by permitting only as many native-born laborers to work as could be hired at the new wages level, "encouraging the surplus to emigrate, to go to the almshouse, or to go to school to learn a new trade in which wages are better"; 3) by increasing the other factors of production, mainly capital, needed to "balance up" the oversupply of unskilled labor (72). Carver laid great stress on the role played by an "effective system of popular education." Under this schema, he stated, its chief function would become that of "redistributing our population occupationally by training men to avoid the overcrowded and to seek the under-crowded occupations" (77).

Virtually all participants to the round table expressed their vivid skepticism about the practical viability of Carver's reform program (A Balanced Industrial System 1920). The sharpest comment came from Harry Gunnison Brown, a former student of Irving Fisher at Yale and a *protégé* of Davenport at Missouri. Brown's contention was that Carver's plan, "would violate the principle of vested rights," i.e., would be a means of "changing the rules of the game while the game is in progress," and as such "can not consistently be supported either by conservative economists in general or by most of the writers of economic textbooks in particular" (83). To make his point, Brown offered the example of a man, born in poverty, who trained himself to be an electrical engineer. Lured by the prospects of large rewards in the profession, he was willing to make the necessary efforts and sacrifices. However, increased competition would prevent him from obtaining in the future the income upon which he had confidently relied. This is exactly what would happen under Carver's schema, which proposed that "young men who would otherwise have been clerks, artisans, or unskilled laborers shall be trained for his kind of work at public expense, shall be made his competitors, shall reduce the amount that he can earn through all the remainder of his life." Is this not, Brown asked, "changing the rules of the game while the game is in progress?" (83-84). Charles E. Pearsons from Boston University, instead, found Carver's plan far too optimistic. Even conceding that education could always overcome the limits imposed by biological capacity, a point on which Pearsons was still doubtful, "we are yet faced with the difficulties inherent in social inheritance." Family and social conditions - rather than schooling - are in fact the main determinants of a child's achievements: "If the home and surroundings are stimulating in all good things, the result is very good. If their influence is narrowing, deadening to ambition, repressive to good impulses, lacking in educative effect, the result will correspond." Certainly, the educational system needs to adjust constantly to prepare students for the rapidly changing world and "we go all the way with Professor Carver in believing that all gains are to the good." But, Pearsons concluded, "we can only expect progress to be slow and results incomplete" (87-88).

Whereas these critics focused on relatively marginal aspects of Carver, Frank H. Knight struck directly at the very philosophical heart of his system. In this case the occasion was prompted by Carver's publication, in 1924, of *The Economy of Human Energy*. In this volume, primarily intended for

¹⁷ For a full discussion of Hale's criticism of Carver see Samuels (1984).

a general audience, Carver proposed his views wrapped in an even more explicit biological jargon. “[H]uman beings” - he asserted - “act unconsciously, driven by their own nature, precisely as they would act consciously if they were convinced by unanswerable logic that the most valuable thing in the world was human energy or human life, and the most profitable thing in the world was to transform the largest possible sum of solar energy into human energy” (1924, 12). This general principle even led Carver to describe Jesus Christ as a “real individualist” and to paraphrase his famous promise, “I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly” into the following: “I am come in order that the maximum quantity of solar energy might be transformed into human energy,” or, “I am come that the statistician’s theory of progress might be realized, namely, that as many people as possible might live, and that they might live as well as possible” (274). Such an overt (and almost grotesque) attempt to merge, into the single principle of “maximization” of human energy, the economic, ethical, and even spiritual aspects of human life could not escape Knight’s attention. Knight - who reviewed Carver’s book for the *Journal of Social Forces*¹⁸—wrote in his typical trenchant style:

The economic interpretation of life is followed out to its final implications with an unswerving consistency, which however, is not “relentless” or “inexorable” so much as naive and bland in its tone. But the author is in dead earnest about it, even at points where one has to reread to be sure that he is not ironical. Rarely is there evidence of a suspicion - perhaps never of a recognition - that there is anything in heaven or earth that is not comprehended in classical political economy at its “worst,” or about which anything intelligent can be said except that it has or has not “survival value” [...]. Even survival “value” is of course a misnomer, for the same “logic” which reduces religion and esthetics to economics will inevitably reduce economics to physiology, physiology to chemistry, chemistry to physics, and physics to the geometry of space-time. And space-time is “an original intuition of mind”; and what is mind? (1925, 777)

Moreover, the statement that individuals deliberately strive to maximize human energy is consistently taken by Carver in a normative sense, i.e., to mean that this is the way in which they ought to behave. But, Knight observed, “as no two of the statements are equivalent and no one of them approximately true, the argument becomes a tissue of inconsistencies and grotesque conclusions” (777). Ultimately, Carver’s philosophy is a “marriage of classical political economy and old New England Puritanism” (777). However, Knight concluded, “Even Jesus would certainly laugh (as we are not told that he ever did, though on one occasion he wept) if he could read the final chapter, in which his teachings are soberly and very logically identified with the competitive organization of society and the productivity theory of distribution” (778).

3.2 AFTER HARVARD: THE ESSENTIAL FACTORS OF SOCIAL EVOLUTION

In 1932 Carver retired from Harvard and moved to Los Angeles where he continued to be involved in academia. He served as visiting professor at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1934-35 and again in 1938-39; he held a similar position at Occidental College in 1939-40 (Carver 1949, 236). In 1935, at the age of seventy, Carver published a comprehensive sociological treatise entitled *The Essential Factors of Social Evolution*, which he described as a “condensation of a mass of notes, quotations, citations, comments, and observations” accumulated during the last four decades of his life (1935a, vii). With respect to his previous works, the volume contained both element of continuity and discontinuity. On the one hand, in line with what he had written in 1915, Carver reasserted that “the problem of social evolution is much concerned with survival value as is the problem of biological evolution” (83). The two are, in fact, “synthesized by their common concern to group survival,” while, in turn, group survival is largely a question of “economizing human energy” (84). On the other hand, and this is the main element of novelty, the book reveals a much more explicit commitment to eugenics and hereditarianism.¹⁹ After dismissing Lamarckism on the ground that the

¹⁸ A previous, article-length, version of Knight’s review of Carver had been rejected for publication in the *Journal of Political Economy* (Nordquist and Emmett 2011, xxxvi).

¹⁹ In 1925 Carver was appointed in the Advisory Board of the American Eugenics Society, a position he held until 1935. During those years, Carver published two brief essays (1929; 1931) in *Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment*, the official monthly journal of the association.

“effects of use and disuse have not yet been convincingly shown to be inherited” (213), Carver went on to affirm that treating hereditary defective individuals would confer no benefit on their offspring. Eugenic control of reproduction was the only way to improve heredity: “If human beings desire to be physically fit for life, children must be produced by parents that are fit” (228). This raises the question of what is the most efficient test to determine a man’s fitness. Carver seems to have no doubts: “The only test now in actual operation is that of market value or price. It is admittedly crude and inaccurate, but is there any other standard which could be depended upon to produce less crude and inaccurate results?” (409). Accordingly, and losing the caution he had shown in the past, he now exposed the beneficial effects of binding minimum wages in overt eugenic jargon:

Such laws as the minimum wage law, if rigidly endorsed, have some such eugenic effect. Rigid enforcement of such a law would make it illegal for any one to be employed at less than, say, four dollars a day. As a general rule, though with many exception, men will not marry, or women will not marry them, unless they have some kind of remunerative employment. A minimum wage law would exclude from employment, and therefore from marriage, most of those unable to earn the minimum wage. The general effect of such a law would be to prevent many of the less fit from marrying. (414)

For those “unemployables” who would lose their job, Carver was willing to invoke the intervention of a new kind of philanthropy, compatible with his eugenic creed. “Properly understood and administered, philanthropy” - he explained - “is merely a means by which those who, from the standpoint of race improvements, are unfit to survive may be enabled to pass out of existence with the least possible suffering” (426). Such a harshening in rhetorical style surfaces again in connection to the discussion of the deleterious effects of an oversupply of “skilled” with respect to “unskilled” labor. The whole discussion reveals a strong hereditarian perspective that is only latent in Carver’s previous writings:

A community which has more ditch diggers than it can use in combination with its limited supply of competent engineers will always be in a bad way. Any process of multiplication which will increase the proportion of engineers to ditch diggers would be a eugenic program. Any process which would increase the proportion of ditch diggers would have to be called dysgenic. (431)

“The question becomes” - he continued - “are we likely to get as large a proportion of competent engineers from the progeny of ditch diggers as from the progeny of engineers?” (432). Carver answered in the negative.²⁰ He was disposed to recognize that “the combination of traits which go to make up what we have called productivity is an exceedingly complex one, more complex, probably, than the combination which goes to make an athlete, or even a fighter” (433). Nevertheless, he firmly believed that statistical prediction of the heritability of certain inborn traits was “within wide limits” possible. The problem was thus essentially one of differential birth rates. Drawing directly from Francis Galton, Carver saw the combination of low fertility among the wealthy and more gifted classes and high fertility among the poor and unskilled as a serious threat to racial fitness. “The dysgenic effects of such a differential birth rate may be for a short time, partly overcome by the superiority of schools and educational facilities,” he admitted, but “if the capacity of the great mass of the people to be educated is declining, then no matter how rapidly the schools may be improved, eventually they will reach a very definite limit beyond which they cannot train successive generations” (435-436).

In the treatment of the race question, Carver’s emphasis on the hereditary transmission of “defective” characteristics becomes even more evident.²¹ “The eugenic or dysgenic effects of race

²⁰ In this connection, Carver had written a few years earlier: “Of course, even from genuinely poor stock, we may expect once in a while an extreme variation, - probably it could be called a mutation. Some of these extreme variations may be highly desirable from the standpoint of nation building. However, we must base all social policies upon averages and not upon individual exceptions” (1929, 7).

²¹ In his Progressive Era writings, Carver had never dealt with racial issues nor he had, differently from many of his contemporaries, drawn upon the racialist literature of the period in his discussions of immigration. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that Carver was the main responsible for the hiring at Harvard in 1901 of William Z. Ripley (Carver 1949, 137-141). Ripley, a leading railway economist, was also the author of the most influential racial taxonomy of the Progressive Era, *The Races of Europe* (1899).

mixing are still under investigation,” he wrote, and it is possible that, at some future date, “it may be found that certain race mixtures produce desirable crosses and others not.” However, he continued, “until we can determine with some degree of certainty by scientific experimentation or observation just what race mixtures are favorable and what are unfavorable [...], the safer policy seems to be to maintain racial purity” (444-445).²² Carver was cautious enough to state that “it is probably safer not to assume that one race is, in any absolute sense, superior to another.” This, he immediately clarified, does not imply that all racial groups show the same ability to adapt to a certain environment. “It is quite conceivable that one race would show superior adaptability while another race would show superior adaptability to another environment” (452). The inherent racialism of Carver’s position is revealed by his ambiguous blending of physical and social adaptability:

[A]daptation to a social environment is quite as necessary as adaptation to a physical environment. It is at least conceivable that a race which has developed its own civilization and created its own social environment, - its mores, standards, and behavior patterns, - may have developed a certain degree of adaptation to that social environment. It is also conceivable that members of a race which has been transplanted to a new social environment which was created by a different race, may have some difficulty in adjusting themselves to it. The problem of moral adaptation is quite as difficult as that of physical adaptation. (453)

Assimilation -limited on the physical side by climatic adaptability- involved also some form of race-specific capacity to absorb social culture. In Carver’s words, “This may explain every known fact regarding the difficulty which the Negro, the Indian, or the Malay has in adjusting himself to the white man’s civilization” (453).

3.3 AFTER HARVARD: WHAT MUST WE DO TO SAVE OUR ECONOMIC SYSTEM?²³

Carver’s activities in Los Angeles were not limited to academia. In the autumn of 1934, he was invited to deliver a series of talks to business and community leaders at the Los Angeles University Club on the subject *What Can Be Done With Our Present Economic System?* (Carver 1949, 240; Eow 2007, 121). These lectures turned up to be so popular that two more series had to be scheduled. In the wake of this success, the following year a group of private sponsors arranged to publish the talks, which appeared in print as a pamphlet under the title *What Must We Do to Save Our Economic System?* (1935). As Carver recounts in his autobiography, “It was never advertised nor its sale pushed, but there were 16 different printings, of 1,000 copies each” (1949, 240). The pamphlet was intended as a “plan of action” and consisted to a large extent in a mere reiteration of Carver’s main proposals to alleviate poverty. “The existence of a great mass of poverty makes our system vulnerable to the attacks of its enemies,” he wrote (1935b, 48). The American economic system-in its idealized version-was described as “economic voluntarism,” i.e., a system characterized by “freedom from violence, freedom to work together by voluntary agreement, freedom to own, to buy and sell, and to enjoy what one has produced or purchased” (3). Carver was careful enough to affirm that economic voluntarism “it is not the system of *laissez faire*” and, as he had done in 1915, he insisted on the necessity of government interference “to protect production against predation” (8). But in the field of population planning where the contrast between *laissez faire* and voluntarism becomes more evident:

²² Carver approved Zionism as an ideological basis for establishing permanent territorial separation between Jews and Christians. This would have the positive effect of reducing both dysgenic intermarriage and anti-Semitism. He also singled out Jewish endogamy as the principal cause for the widespread hostility towards Jews: “The persecution is traceable to the determination of the orthodox Jews not to amalgamate with the Gentile population. They realized that nothing could prevent such amalgamation except the studied cultivation of a dislike of non-Jews. Nothing except dislike, and a cultivated dislike as that, could prevent young Jews and Gentiles from falling inn love and marrying. The cultivation of a positive dislike was very naturally reciprocated, with the result that, in a country where the Jews were numerous enough to make an impression on the public mind and yet not numerous enough to be strong, they were persecuted and subject to pogroms” (447-448). As pointed out by Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman this represents a “remarkable instance of blaming the victim for his condition.” (Vidich and Lyman 1985, 81)

²³ This section is indebted to Peart and Levy (2013).

In all this welter of discussion of economic planning, scarcely a word has been uttered by any planner on the important subject of population planning. Yet the population problem is fundamental, and the most dangerous form of laissez faire is that which leaves the quantity and quality of our population to blind biological forces which are cruder and more dangerous than the so-called blind economic forces. Such a let-alone policy would leave our population to be recruited from those regions where the standard of living is lowest and from the least intelligent strata of every population, our own included. (65)

Writing in 1935, twelve years after the Omnibus Immigration Act had established quota systems that encourage immigration from Northern and Western but Europe virtually cut off admission of immigrants from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe, Carver lamented that United States had now “left wide open the doors for immigrants from the Western Hemisphere and the Philippines.” His proposal was to further limit immigration, establishing quotas also for “Filipinos, Mexican peons, and West Indian Negroes” (66). Another threat was the “hungry hordes from the East.” In this connection, Carver looked with favor at the nationalistic regimes in Europe which were getting ready to fight against the eventual invasion from communist Russia: “Possibly Mussolini and Hitler are more far seeing than the rest of us and are preparing to stand together at another field of Chalons as the ancestors of their people did in A.D 451” (70).²⁴

In the pamphlet, Carver discussed in some detail public education, prohibition to marry for those who could not “afford an automobile” (62), and extension of the knowledge of birth control to the “poorer classes” (70), as means to reduce congestion in the lower segments of the workforce. More extreme measures were also contemplated. In line with the harsher style Carver had shown in his *Essential Factors of Social Evolution*, he went so far as to propose segregation or sterilization of the “palpably unfit” (80). As he put it in a crucial passage:

Another is to segregate or sterilize the congenital defectives. This is one of the few rational things which have come out of Hitlerism. Another may be that Hitler is preparing his people to stand at Armageddon as the first line of defense against the inevitable Bolshevik invasion. (71)

Carver actively promoted his pamphlet, sending copies to colleagues, politicians, journalists, and business leaders throughout the nation. As we learn from Carver’s private correspondence, many were the commendations he received from notable figures of the time. Nobel Laureate Robert A. Millikan from the California Institute of Technology found the pamphlet “a peculiarly sane and sound analysis of our present situation,”²⁵ while, Paul Palmer, editor of the conservative *American Mercury*, told Carver that “What Must We do to Save Our Economic System is far and away the most able paper I have read on the present problem. I think your ideas are unassailable.”²⁶ Harvard historian Albert Bushnell Hart, instead, commented on an excerpt from the pamphlet that was published as an article in the *Nation’s Business*, the monthly magazine of the US Chamber of Commerce (Carver 1935c). Hart, Carver’s personal friend and former colleague, wrote him: “I am delighted to see that you observe what seems to me a terrific danger of being inundated by thousands of Chinese coolies. I have been urging for thirty years that the difficulty with Chinese and Japanese immigration is that, if allowed, there would have been an Asiatic mulatto group which, like the Negroid group, can be traced by vision [to a] quarter or an eighth of the original blood.” Hart agreed with the proposal to extend the quota system to Mexico and the Philippines but expressed skepticism about the practicability of Carver’s “sterilization idea.” Hart approached the whole question in strict racial terms: “For one thing, it tends to establish a distinction between a mulatto or an Asiatic who looks white, and his brother who looks dark. Likewise, there are evident practical difficulties in the way of the remedy that you propose,

²⁴ The problem was once again one of differential birth rate: “So long as people who lack intelligence continue to spawn others who lack intelligence we shall have more of such people than we can possibly employ at good wages” (66).

²⁵ Robert A. Millikan to Thomas N. Carver. July 26, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

²⁶ Paul Palmer to Thomas N. Carver. December 30, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

inasmuch as an almost white and an almost black may be own brothers.”²⁷ Other commentators focused on the proposed restrictions on marriage. Even Carver’s reference to Hitler was warmly welcomed, as testified by Reverend Marshall Russell Reed’s letter:

The report strikes me as most reasonable. The ever present question confronts us: How can we make the reasonable procedure effective and retain our freedom? If man would wait until they could support a family to marry it would be a good thing for our economic order, but free man do not always wait. We may have to have some kind of a Hitler who believing in these reasonable principles may enforce them in order to preserve “economic voluntarism” for the people. “Meanwhile”,-the general dissemination of such knowledge will help to counteract the dangerous doctrines being declared in so many places now.²⁸

Carver’s correspondence with Herbert Hoover is particularly interesting.²⁹ Hoover must have expressed some form of appreciation for the pamphlet since Carver wrote him on: “I am glad that you liked my report [...]. It seems to me that unless this or something like it is widely circulated and read, we are headed for disaster.” Carver continued explaining the reasons that had led him to express his views for a popular audience:

There are two tasks before us. The first is to convince the leaders of thought and action that, in order to avoid revolution, they must adopt a constructive program for the elimination of mass poverty. The second is to convince the masses that they have more to hope for in the way of economic security abundance under our system than under any other. My report is an attempt to perform the first of these tasks. Until it is performed, it is useless to attempt the second.³⁰

Hoover replied shortly, simply asking for fifty more copies of the report.³¹ But is Carver’s subsequent response that mostly concerns us. There, in view of the forthcoming presidential elections, Carver made clear his political stance with respect to the ideas presented in the pamphlet:

In our recent conversation at the Baltimore I may have given you a wrong impression on one point. I said that the plan outlined in my report on “What Must We do to Save Our Economic System?” should not at the present time be connected in the public mind with any political party. I should perhaps have emphasized this words “at the present time.” More than I did. I was fully aware that the report harmonizes with what I understand to be the position of the Republican party. Naturally, I hope that not only the Republican party but other organizations, political and non-political, would come out for some such program as I have outlined. At the present time, however, I think the report should stand wholly on its merits. There are, as you know, a great many leading Democrats whose expressed opinions seem to be very much the same as yours and mine on the subject treated in this report. It seems to me highly desirable that many of these should either endorse this report or express similar views. If, however, this report should be in their minds connected with the Republican party, it might cause them to shy off.³²

²⁷ Albert Bushnell Hart to Thomas Nixon Carver: March 23, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 4.

²⁸ Marshall Russell Reed to Thomas N. Carver: July 8, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

²⁹ Carver and Hoover had first met in 1929, when the President had invited him and wife for dinner at the White House. As Carver reports in his autobiography, “He saw clearly that the immigration of cheap labor from low standard countries was the chief threat to the American standard of living” (1949, 254). That Hoover held Carver’s ideas in high consideration was made clear in a 1935 letter from Virgil G. Iden to Carver: “Mr. Hoover elaborated very interestingly on the philosophy of industrial cooperation and education, but when I asked him if he would put some of his thoughts in writing he replied that you had reviewed them very largely in your works.” Virgil G. Iden to Thomas N. Carver: July 11, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

³⁰ Thomas N. Carver to Herbert Hoover: July 11, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

³¹ Herbert Hoover to Thomas N. Carver: July 13, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

³² Thomas N. Carver to Herbert Hoover: September 4, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

Hoover's response was again telegraphic, yet significant: "The plan is not adapted to purposes of popular politics; so there need be no fear in that direction."³³ In spite of these words, Carver's political neutrality was not doomed to last long. According to Carver's own reconstruction: "Late in February, 1936, I received a long distance call from Washington, asking me to join the staff of the Republican National Committee" (1949, 241). Carver accepted the offer with no reservation and so became a member of what shortly came to be known as the Republican Brain Trust. This was a research group coordinated by Olin Glenn Saxon from Yale Law School, and consisting of seven university professors, each heading a thematic division. Carver was appointed responsible for the Political Economy section and was assisted by Vernon Orval Watts, a former student of Carver then professor of economics at Antioch College.³⁴ "This is a research staff"-as Henry P. Fletcher, chairman of the Republican National Committee, announced-"not a group of politically ambitious college professors with pre-conceived ideas, who look forward to getting on the federal payroll in the hope they can reform the universe" (G.O.P. Forms Professional "Brain Trust" 1935, 1).

It is not clear whether Sax and the other G.O.P. brain trusters deliberately decided to adopt Carver's report on *What Must We Do to Save Our Economic System?* as campaign material to support Alf Landon, the Republican nominee, in his desperate race against Roosevelt, or whether it was Carver who used the Republican flag to promote his ideas at the National level. No evidence in either direction could be found. The fact remains that, shortly after Carver's Washington appointment, his views became identified with those of the Republican Brain Trust. This brought the report to the attention of the national press and, given its tone and explicit references to Hitlerism, it is little surprise that the condemnation was virtually unanimous. The *New York Post* treated Carver's proposals like breaking news, with a front-page headline: "G.O.P. Brain Trust Offers Fascist Program for the U.S." -to which it was added, as a subtitle, "Persons Unable to Afford an Automobile Not Allowed to Merry" (Allen 1935, 1). For the *Chicago Defender*, which referred to Carver as the "leading luminary of the newly organized Republican brain trust," the pamphlet represented "a danger signal of the growth of spurious Nazi race purity theories in this country" (Want Sterilization for Race "Purity" 1936, 19). The most incisive commentary, however, is to be found in a Baltimore Sun article titled "New High in Brains":

One must conclude that Brain Trustee Carver does not seem just the man to assist the Republican party in liberating us from regimentation. It is bad enough to be forced to submit to the intrusions of income tax auditors, crop control snoopers and so on, but if bureaucrats are to tell us that we may not marry unless we can afford an automobile along with a wife, then the situation, will be parlous, indeed. In view of the fact that most of these half-baked "population planning" ideas lie at the basis of Hitler's racial philosophy [...] Knowing the Republican leadership, we freely predict that the political geniuses will be more shocked by the anti-tariff record of Brain Trusters Tucker, Bradford and Carpenter than by Dr. Carver's extraordinary program for "population planning." Sterilization of the whole population and abolition of marriage altogether would seem less heinous in G. O. P. circles than objections to the Smoot-Hawley tariff. (New High in Brains, 1936, 14: quoted in Peart and Levy 2013, 42)

Carver's views soon became a source of political embarrassment and "the Republican brain trust was quietly but firmly set aside" (Galbraith 1987, 196).

4. A CODA

The fuss made by "What Must We Do to Save Our Economic System?" did not discourage Carver who, in the late 1930s, became more and more involved in the activities of the Los Angeles

³³ Herbert Hoover to Thomas N. Carver: September 7, 1935. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box 1, Folder 1.

³⁴ In addition to Carver and Sax, who served as chairman, the group included: Charles J. Bullock, professor emeritus of economics, Harvard University (Taxes and Government Finance); Asher Hobson, head of the department of agricultural economics, University of Wisconsin (Agriculture); Rufus S. Tucker, Brookings Institute and the Twentieth Century Fund (Statistics); Frederick A. Bradford, professor of economics, Lehigh University (Banking and Currency); Niles W. Carpenter, professor of sociology, University of Buffalo (Social Security and Labor).

Chamber of Commerce. There, Carver formed a team with Leonard Read, the future founder the Foundation for Economic Education (1946), and William Mullendore, a former assistant to Hoover and vice president of Southern California Edison. After his appointment as general manager of the Chamber in 1939, Read asked Carver and Mullendore to join the board of directors, an invitation they both accepted, and hired Watt as full time economist. As Carver emphatically recollects: "Through the influence of Messrs. Mullendore, Read, Watts, and myself, the L. A. C. of C. became the spearhead of an active crusade for the return to the principle of freedom of enterprise [...]. If I had something to do with starting Mullendore, Read, and Watts, it may turn out to be the most important work of my life" (1949, 241).³⁵ In 1945 Carver published two pamphlets - *How Can There Be Full Employment After the War?* (1945a) and *The Economics of Freedom* (1945b) - in *The Economic Sentinel*, a publication intended to make the lectures sponsored by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce available nationally. At this point it is almost needless to say that both pamphlets contained no single grain of novelty. Suffice it to say that the one on unemployment shows no reference to Keynes or Keynesian literature and in many sections is just a mere verbatim repetition of the 1935 report. It would not deserve our attention were it not for the fact that here, writing after the Holocaust, Carver found the way to drop another approving reference to the eugenic practices of Hitlerism:

It is sensible and humane to avoid bringing into the world congenital defectives and to discourage them from inflicting the curse of a burdensome life upon future generations of their own kind. In one respect, Hitler was more rational than most contemporary government "planners." He agreed with them that government should guarantee jobs or a livelihood to everyone. However, he saw, as they did not, that in order to make good on this guarantee, government must take over the corresponding responsibility for parenthood and decide who might or might not be born. His policy of sterilizing defectives is a logical part of a governmental policy of social security and "planned" economy (1945a, 51-52).³⁶

In 1954, just prior to turn ninety, Carver began a new career as a columnist for the Los Angeles Times. His weekly pieces dealt with many pressing issues of the time but also represented an occasion to reiterate over and over his social and eugenic views. A quick glance at some of their titles - "The Family Builders and the Spawners" (1956); "Immigrant Control" (1957); "Survival Values" (1958); "Prosperity Requires a Moral Discipline" (1960)-emblematically reveal how, until the very last days of his life, Carver held with powerful (almost obsessive) consistency to the limited set of convictions he had developed in his Progressive years. In this regard, it is difficult not to agree with A. Lawrence Lowell, who served as president at Harvard from 1909 to 1933 and knew Carver personally, who once remarked of him: "he sees things clearly but through a very small keyhole" (quoted in Parker 2005, 45).³⁷

³⁵ Read also managed to have Carver's *Religion Worth Having* republished in a revised edition in 1940. The previous year, in a letter addressed to asking support for the reprint to "friends and admirers of Thomas Nixon Carver," Read had written: " 'The Religion Worth Having' is Carver at his best-as stimulating as a cold shower, profoundly wise but crystal-clear with a homely elegance unmatched in modern writing." Leonard Read to Friends and admirers of Thomas Nixon Carver: October 21, 1939. Thomas Nixon Carver Papers, Library of Special Collections, UCLA, Box1, Folder 7.

³⁶ In his anti-immigration frenzy, Carver also wrote: "This flood [of immigrants] has been held back since 1930 by an order, issued by President Hoover, instructing American consular offices to refuse visas to prospective immigrants to prospective immigrants who might displace native workers" (1945a). Carver is referring to the executive order, issued by Hoover on September 8, 1930, instructing consular officers to refuse to issue visas if they believed "that the applicant may probably be a public charge at any time, even during a considerable period subsequent to his arrival." The Hoover "public charge" clause was still in place when thousands of Jews began to seek escape from Nazi Germany in 1933. See the discussion in Breitman and Kraut 1987.

³⁷ Ironically, Lowell himself was not a champion of open-mindedness. In 1922 he publicly supported a quota system limiting Jewish enrollment at Harvard College. See the discussion in Karabel 2005.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In his unsympathetic review of Carver's *Essays in Social Justice*, Alvin S. Jonson (1915, 347) described the foundations of Carver philosophy in terms of "survival value and a robust, practical, joyless individualism." Johnson's characterization, sharp as it is, is accurate and misleading at the same time. It is accurate in the sense that Carver, like many of his Progressive era contemporaries, placed "survival value" at the center of his own conception of social evolution. In Carver's view, competition takes place primarily in the sphere of production and the connection he established between economic efficiency and ability to survive was interpreted as imposing a rigid normative standard on individual conduct. "That moral code which works best, which fits the people who follow it to survive by making them strong and efficient is per se the best moral code" (1915b, xi). This conviction was founded on a hierarchical ontology of human nature, a "fact" that had two important consequences for the achievement of social efficiency. First, an efficient social organization needs individuals equipped with those "moral" virtues that prove to have higher survival value, such as, thrift, devotion to "productive" work, and a "high" standard of living. Here it is where Carver's philosophy becomes "joyless" and where the influence of what Paul Samuelson (1967, 36) once called "New England Congregational Evangelicism" becomes more evident.³⁸ Second, an efficient social organization requires individuals who are biologically fit. This explains Carver's support of minimum wage legislation as a eugenic measure and his fierce opposition to immigration. In his early writings Carver was cautious enough not to identify the biologically fit with the "virtuous" individuals, but from late 1920s his views became increasingly hereditarian and racially deterministic. Carver's commitment to eugenics, however, makes Johnson's depiction of him as an "individualist" at the very least dubious.³⁹ Our paper has shown how Carver forged his social philosophy during the second half of the Progressive era. Although he neatly distanced himself from the bulk of Progressives, he shared with them the early twentieth-century belief that the "good of society" was more important than the "rights of the individual" (Menand 2001, 441). This appears evident in Carver's contention that "If we could get over the absurd notion that everyone has an inalienable right to multiply, and could adopt the reasonable idea that the right to merry should be achieved by doing well something that the group wants done, we should have made a start" (1935a, 456). For Carver economics was and remained the "science of national prosperity" (1917; 1945b) -rather than of individual rational choice -and social progress necessarily implied what James Kloppenberg (1986, 311) has aptly defined a process of "national purification." This task had to be accomplished by the government and would include purification of the market from predatory activities, as well as purification of the nation from undesirable immigrants and inferior heredity. What is extraordinary of Carver, is how tenaciously he continued to hold to these views throughout his entire life, imperturbable to the criticisms he received and indifferent to the interwar intellectual developments. It was this form of obsessive consistency that led him in 1935 to express appreciation for the eugenic practices of Hitlerism -an appreciation reiterated in 1945 after the horrors of the Holocaust. This paper has documented how Carver's views received support from some public figures of the period, including Hoover, but it has also shown how the press unanimously condemned them. One of the commentators, R. Charlton Wright of the St. Petersburg Times decided to take Carver not too seriously and replied using the weapon of irony. For the amusement of the reader, we cannot forbear quoting his note at some length:

In effect, as I construe him, the worthy doctor advocates, as it were, a sort of "ploughing under" of the surplus population of poor folks who supply the ranks of labor, and of whom there are too many to be useful in our mechanized civilization by the methods of (a) sterilization à la Hitler to prevent their breeding, and (b) by rigid regulation by the government to prevent marriages among any but those able to buy and operate automobiles. All this is very interesting, but I suspect it will inspire no madrigals from the G.O.P. who used to sing and ditties about the horrors of birth control among the worthy pigs of the republic. The case, however, is a bit different: pigs, even surplus pigs,

³⁸ It is significant that, in commenting on Carver's *Economy of Human Energy*, Knight (1925, 777) followed Johnson pointing out that "in a careful reading of the book I have not noticed the word 'joy,' and am definitely sure the word 'beauty' is not there."

³⁹ Similarly to Johnson, Richard Hofstadter describes Carver as someone who was attempting to "keep alive the individualism of an earlier day" (1970, 151).

can be butchered by rugged individualists and sold for a profit; but surplus poor people can't be eaten, and if there is no employment for them, they must nevertheless be fed, which costs money. In other ages, and other climes, defectives and unwanted infants were exposed to be devoured by the beasties, and some savage tribes, ate their aged and indigent dependents. If the good doctor could remove the odium of such a practice, and make the aged and indigent palatable, we might be able to avoid doles, unemployment insurance, and old-age pensions altogether, thus enabling the "rich and well born," to buy more yachts, Rolls-Royces and other necessities of the simple life. But somebody would have to buy the food to fatten the surplus labor, to make them fit for the pot or oven, and that would entail a burden on the wealthy. I admit the problem is difficult. (Wright 1936, 6)

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