Better Living through Political Engineering

Charles R. McCann Jr. and Vibha Kapuria-Foreman

Introduction

The era of American Progressivism produced a multitude of academic and popular works focused on the problem of social control, the aim of which is to establish “social amity in an association of individuals with conflicting interests by regulating conduct, setting boundaries as to acceptable behavior and establishing means for the resolution of conflicts” (McCann 2012: 89; Ross 1896: 519–20). In this endeavor, economists and sociologists were in the vanguard. Edward Alsworth Ross’s Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order (1901), Charles Horton Cooley’s Human Nature and the Social Order (1902) and Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind (1909), Ellen Richards’s Euthenics: The Science of Controllable Environment (1910), and Scott Nearing’s Social Adjustment (1911) are but a few of the more significant works proposing means by which society might be bettered through economic, political, scientific, and legislative means,
including, if necessary, methods of population enhancement, that is, eugenics.¹

At this time there appeared a movement, short-lived though it was to be, which approached the question of social control by changing the ethical nature of society through the application of scientific and engineering principles, promoting means by which the individual may understand his role in society as one that produces the greatest happiness and the least unhappiness for the greatest number. This was the basis for political engineering, which spawned an organization devoted to its mission of social advancement, the Institute of Political Engineering.

To date nothing has been written on the institute or the program of political engineering, devised during the era of Progressive reform as one of many alternatives to the purported excesses of capitalism and capitalist enterprise. It promised a forum for the discussion of alternatives directed to the end of societal improvement and social control. Otherwise authoritative histories of the era, including Richard Hofstadter’s The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (1955), Nancy Cohen’s The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865–1914 (2002), Robert Crunden’s Ministers of Reform: The Progressives’ Achievement in American Civilization, 1889–1920 (1982), Dorothy Ross’s The Origins of American Social Science (1991), and Thomas Leonard’s Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era (2016), make no mention of it. Perhaps this is understandable, as the association seems to have been confined to the Northeast, specifically Massachusetts (although its organizers had expectations of a nationwide association), and the institute itself appears to have attracted very few adherents. While its architect and principal advocate presented lectures on the subject of political engineering at Harvard, dutifully covered in the local press, it nonetheless failed to garner the support necessary to be judged a viable social and political movement. Still, it is worth mentioning if only because it represents a chapter of Progressivism that has heretofore been unknown.

This essay will offer an introduction to James MacKaye’s philosophy of happiness and his efforts at establishing a science of political engineering. We will show that, while he was indeed the principal advocate of the new “science,” he was heavily influenced by Helen Sumner (later Woodbury), who persuaded him to establish an Institute of Political Engineering as a

¹. On the role of social scientists in the promotion of methods of social control, see McCann 2012.
means to promote his philosophy of social control. Following an examination of MacKaye’s version of utilitarianism and a description of the philosophy underlying political engineering, we will touch on the formation of the institute, using previously unpublished material held in the Helen Sumner Woodbury Papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

The Economy of Happiness: Happiness as a Utilitarian End

In his 1906 *The Economy of Happiness*, James Medbery MacKaye set out to liberate the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham from what he perceived to have been the pernicious influence of John Stuart Mill and to contrast Bentham’s philosophy with that of Mill and Adam Smith. In his view, the dominance of the philosophies of Smith and Mill had unforeseen consequences for the development of political and economic thought:

Two divergent avenues of development had been proposed in the latter part of the 18th century—one by Adam Smith in “The Wealth of Nations,” which appeared in 1776—the other by Jeremy Bentham in “The Principles of Morals and Legislation,” which appeared in 1789. The first led to commercialism—the second to utilitarianism. At this critical period arose the dominant political thinker of the 19th century—John Stuart Mill. It was for him to determine the trend of political thought of the century. He determined it. Failing to appreciate Bentham’s discovery of the nature of intuitionism, Mill evolved an inconsistent theory of utility entirely incapable of application. Thus

2. James Medbery MacKaye was born on April 8, 1872, in New York City, the son of the actor James Morrison Steele MacKaye and the author and dramatist Mary Medbery. His siblings included the poet Percy MacKaye, the conservationist Benton MacKaye, and the suffragist Hazel MacKaye. Following graduation from Harvard University (BS, 1895), MacKaye joined the engineering firm of Stone and Webster, where he remained for nearly three decades. In 1931 he obtained a lecturer position in philosophy at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and in 1932 he accepted a position as professor of philosophy at Dartmouth College. He married Mary Morse on December 10, 1906. Among his published works are *The Economy of Happiness* (1906), *The Happiness of Nations: A Beginning in Political Engineering* (1915), *The Mechanics of Socialism* (1915), *Americanized Socialism* (1918), *The Science of Usefulness* (1920), *The Logic of Conduct* (1920), *The Dynamic Universe* (1931), and *The Logic of Language* (1939). MacKaye died in Boston on January 22, 1935, and is interred in Oak Grove Cemetery, Plymouth, Massachusetts (although a New Hampshire death certificate, which contains several errors, states he was cremated and his remains interred at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts).
deflected from the path of common sense, and influenced, no doubt, by the ideals of his age, Mill followed Adam Smith into commercialism and perpetuated the separation of politics and morality. (MacKaye 1906: vii)

Intuitionism, the theory “that right and wrong may be distinguished by a moral faculty or conscience” (MacKaye 1906: 253), Bentham referred to as “the principle of sympathy and antipathy,” which he defined as

that principle which approves of or disapproves of certain actions, not on account of their tending to augment the happiness, nor yet on account of their tending to diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question, but merely because a man finds himself disposed to approve or disapprove of them: holding up that approbation or disapprobation as a sufficient reason for itself, and disclaiming the necessity of looking out for any extrinsic ground. (MacKaye 1906: 253; quoting Bentham 1789: xii)

To Bentham, the principle of sympathy and antipathy was little more than a “negation of all principle,” as it only requires for a standard of morality—of right and wrong—that one “take counsel” of one’s personal feelings. In so doing, the principle comprises “so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing upon the reader to accept of the author’s sentiment or opinion as a reason for itself” (MacKaye 1906: 253–54; quoting Bentham 1789: vii–viii).³

Yet, despite his admiration for Bentham’s doctrine of utilitarianism, “that expectations of pleasure and pain determine all the voluntary acts of an individual,”⁴ MacKaye nonetheless concluded that Bentham’s system in

³. “[Should] we attempt to make approval the test of right and disapproval the test of wrong, we are led into a contradiction, because if approval is the test of right, then anything which is approved must be right, since it meets the test of right, but the same acts that are approved by some individuals are disapproved by others. Hence some acts must be both right and wrong since they meet both tests, and as wrong acts are of the class not right acts, it follows that some acts are both right and not right—that what is, is not” (MacKaye 1906: 254–55).

⁴. MacKaye quoted from An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think; every effort we can make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to adjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the
one sense was flawed, as “quantities of pain or pleasure are not invariable determinants of acts, though immediate intensities may be.” The true determinants of acts are habits or impulses, “the quantity of pleasure or pain involved in which have no particular value in determining the act.” Further, there is a moral distinction between “right and wrong and the nature of what motives do, as a matter of fact, actuate men,” the distinction being the equivalent of “what is and what ought to be.” MacKaye, then, accepting that acts may or may not be governed by pleasure and pain, Bentham’s “sovereign masters,” nonetheless maintained that “it is of interest to inquire in those cases in which pleasure and pain do decide voluntary acts, just what relation the kind, intensity, duration, and location of the pains and pleasures involved, bear to the decision” (MacKaye 1906: 107–8).

Happiness, pleasure, and gratification MacKaye asserted to be “indefinable,” that is, “incapable of expression in terms of other kinds of experience.” Happiness “is an elementary experience.” Pleasure, however, he defined as “the quality common to all pleasurable experiences from the highest degree of happiness to the faintest element of satisfaction, . . . the quality by which we recognize pleasurable experiences as constituting a class distinguished from all experiences in which the quality is absent” (MacKaye 1906: 105–6).

From the undefined “happiness” MacKaye proposed definitions of acts “absolutely right and absolutely wrong.”

By an act absolutely right, I shall mean that act among those at any moment possible which results in the greatest surplus of happiness. By an absolutely wrong act I shall mean any of the alternatives of an absolutely right act. Another way of expressing these meanings is to say that an absolutely right act is one which such an omniscient being as we have described would approve—an absolutely wrong one, one that he would not approve. (MacKaye 1906: 130)

Ruling out omniscience, MacKaye’s definitions are inapplicable to individuals uncertain as to which options “will result in the maximum surplus
of happiness.” Lacking certainty, one must rely on expectations based on probable knowledge (130). “Indeed, the selection of any alternative with the object of attaining pleasure or of avoiding pain implies the estimation of probability, and while man’s assurance of the results of some acts may be immensely greater than his assurance of the results of others, the difference can never be more than one of degree while he remains fallible” (131).

MacKaye then amended his definitions, defining a “right act” as “*that act among those at any moment possible whose presumption of happiness is a maximum*,” one for which utility is maximized, while a “wrong act” is simply “any alternative” (MacKaye 1906: 143). A “useful act” is defined as “one whose presumption of happiness is greater than the alternative of minimum activity, except when said alternative of minimum activity involves a greater presumption than any other.” A “right act,” then, “is simply the most useful act.” “Useless acts” are those “whose presumable surplus is not greater than that of the alternative of minimum activity, . . . except when the utility of said alternative is a maximum, in which case all other alternatives are useless.” “Harmful acts” are those “having a negative presumption of happiness when alternatives involving a positive presumption are selectable” (145). While Bentham emphasized the greatest happiness of the greatest number as the basis of his utilitarianism, “thereby making the *number* of persons affected a factor in distinguishing right from wrong,” MacKaye’s utilitarianism was predicated on the notion “that right and wrong are determined only by the presumption of happiness, independent of distribution” (146).

6. MacKaye expanded his definitions to include “correct” and “adaptive” acts as well: A “correct act” is “adaptive,” i.e., one “adapted to attain the end for the attainment of which it is selected,” if the end toward which it is selected is “hedonistic.” It is not necessarily “right,” as a “right act” is confined “to that class of correct acts whose end is the utilitarian end.” While an “adaptive act” may perhaps be “correct” or “right,” it may well be neither. A “right act” is one that is both “correct” and “adaptive.” Formally, “assuming a, b, c, d, e, &c. express the presumptions of happiness of sentient creation corresponding to alternatives A, B, C, D, E, &c., and of these a is greater than b, or c, or d, &c., then A is right and B, C, D, E, &c. are all of them wrong!” (MacKaye 1906: 143).

7. “There is the best of justification for the all but universal conviction that happiness should be equally distributed, since its unequal distribution means, in general, the unequal distribution of its causes, and this in turn involves bad efficiency and a consequent diminished return of happiness. It is wealth—opportunity for happiness—which should be equally distributed, since any other distribution will result in a diminished surplus of happiness, and only that alternative among those physically possible can be right which will presumably result in the greatest surplus of happiness. Hence unequal distribution must, in general, be wrong. Thus the theory of utility founds the doctrine of equal opportunity and equal distribution of wealth upon something more substantial than a *sentiment*—it founds it upon a *reason*. The doctrine is directly
Having thus established the utilitarian basis of the philosophy of happiness, MacKaye proceeded to announce the demise of intuitionism and Adam Smith’s philosophy as a foundation for economics:

It is the duty, and it should be the delight, of the economists of our time to purge their science of the archaic dogmas of Adam Smith, and to found it directly upon the foundation of ethics itself—namely, utility—the only sound foundation for any applied science. In so doing they will have accomplished for economics what Copernicus accomplished for astronomy—they will have replaced the geocentric system of commercialism with the heliocentric system of utilitarianism—they will have fixed the centre around which revolves the stupendous system of human effort and human interest—not in the dead world of wealth, but in the living sun of happiness. (MacKaye 1906: 491)

Methods for Promoting Happiness

Each individual is both an “immediate sentient agent”—a “happiness-producing mechanism” (the “primary capacity”)—and a social being, interacting with “other happiness-producing mechanisms” (the “secondary capacity”). Health and adjustability are essential “to insure efficiency in man’s primary capacity,” the latter a function of simplicity, variety, and adaptability of taste (MacKaye 1906: 196).

Intelligence or reason (distinct from intellectuality) and will are affective in the primary and secondary capacities. Intelligence aspires to the attainment of truth; “its ideal mode of expression is the mathematical,” while intellectuality is more the domain of the poet, whose aim “is to arouse emotion.” When the two are combined, the result “is generally a failure,” as the very attempt at expressing truths “as may determine acts” through poetry often leads to untruth being mistaken for or disguised as truth. “Feeling is thus made a guide to action, when its only proper function is to stimulate it, and the inevitable result is the encouragement of pathomania” (MacKaye 1906: 197–98). Will is defined as “that power by which a thinking being rules his impulses—by which man overcomes himself.” The impulse of egotism (self-interest), in the interest of promoting “the totality of happiness,” should, to the greatest extent possible, be

deducible from the definition of right and the principle of diminishing returns of happiness” (MacKaye 1906: 316).
supplanted by altruism. “Determination in the pursuit of principle is will; in obedience to impulse it is not.” Will is, in short, “the power by which all impulses, egotistic or altruistic, are governed, and it should be exerted in accordance with the dictum of principle alone” (198).

Finally, altruism “affects man’s efficiency, for the most part, in his secondary capacity alone.” It “implies the absence or slight development of traits like dishonesty, hatred, vindictiveness, treachery, cupidity, and peevishness, and the presence or high development of traits like honesty, generosity, benevolence, magnanimity, and good nature.” Will and altruism are the constituents of good character (MacKaye 1906: 198–99).

The next question concerns “the development of traits which increase efficiency and impede the development of those which increase inefficiency,” that is, those traits that “increase intelligence and virtue and decrease, or eradicate, unintelligence and vice.” Here MacKaye asserted that the individual’s “physical, mental, and moral” constitution derived from inheritance and experience, through which “the characteristics of every individual are completely determined.” Inheritance he defined as “the sum of the characteristics inherited by him [the individual] from his ancestors, immediate and remote, and indefinitely transmissible—though not necessarily transmitted—to his descendants,” while education is “any and all means voluntarily employed to determine his individual characteristics by determining his experiences.” To affect change in an individual’s behavior requires an alteration in one or the other or both (MacKaye 1906: 199–200). We will treat each of these in turn, as in so doing it may allow a better understanding of MacKaye’s position as regards the means to the promotion of human happiness, namely, his acceptance of eugenic controls. In this he seems to have been of a mind with many of the Progressive Era social scientists for whom the welfare of society as a whole, social happiness, in MacKaye’s sense, might be increased through the application of scientific principles. At around the time MacKaye published his book, the biologist Charles Davenport, the economist Irving Fisher, and the physician and food company cofounder John Harvey Kellogg established the Race Betterment Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan.8 Davenport also founded the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring Harbor, New York, in 1910. Yet while efforts at the promotion of race

betterment and eugenics practice were becoming accepted if not quite mainstream, MacKaye’s writings show no obvious acquaintance with such efforts, save those of Francis Galton. Likewise, his own ruminations on the subject garnered little or no acknowledgment from the establishment. Nonetheless, the means by which he intended to promote happiness bear close resemblance to the eugenic prescriptions offered by the academics and mainstream practitioners of the period.

Inheritance

MacKaye began his disquisition on the influence on individual characteristics of inheritance by offering that

with such particularity does inheritance act that it sometimes happens that particular markings or other characters consisting of a very complex aggregate are transmitted from parent to offspring intact, and the subtle resemblances of people to their relatives—sometimes remote relatives—are evidences of the remarkable power of inheritance to preserve and reproduce very complexly related morphological aggregates. (MacKaye 1906: 200)

Noting that sexual differentiation “is but a means employed by nature to multiply variations and thus increase the probability of producing favorable ones,” citing the work of the German evolutionary biologist August Weismann, MacKaye further noted that “the laws of inheritance apply as uniformly to mental and moral characteristics as they do to physical ones.” Thus, “the offspring of a man of congenitally weak character or intelligence will tend to be weak in the same particulars, while the offspring of a man of congenitally strong character or intelligence will tend to be strong in character or intelligence likewise; just as the offspring of a small man tend to be small and that of a tall man tend to be tall.” While he did, however, admit the possibility that “weak parents will occasionally produce fairly strong offspring and small parents fairly tall ones,” the conclusion at which he arrived was that “the way to obtain an individual or a community having inheritances adapted to make them efficient is to select for them ancestors who are efficient—in order to breed an efficient race, we must breed from an efficient stock.” The only question is, How might one go about such a process (200–201)?

Two methods present themselves: selection and education. Selection, having proved successful in agriculture and animal breeding, might, to
MacKaye’s mind, prove efficacious when applied to man as well, as “he is as susceptible of improvement as any other organism,” and, “so far as concerns his mental powers, he is, or should be, more susceptible than any other animal.” As “the characters of greatest antiquity are the least variable, while those of latest acquisition are the most variable,” and the mental capacity of the modern human is “the most variable of all his characteristics,” it appeared to MacKaye that “the ease with which a character may, by selection, be made to depart from the normal, will obviously depend upon its tendency to deviate from the normal in individual cases, i.e., upon its variability” (MacKaye 1906: 203–4).

By breeding from idiotic or feeble-minded human beings it would be easy to obtain a race whose grade of intelligence was on a par with that of sheep. In a corresponding manner, by repeatedly selecting from those of the highest intellectual power, a race of men could probably be produced as much superior to the average man in intellect as the average man is superior to a sheep. If a physical structure like the tail of a cock can be increased twentyfold in size, why may not a faculty like that of the intellect be increased twentyfold in power? (204)

MacKaye did acknowledge the difficulty in achieving his desired aims, noting that “much ignorance and prejudice must be cleared away before methods of the character suggested can be introduced into even the most civilized of modern states,” and he agreed that there were less dramatic means available to increase the total happiness of a society, including “advancement of science and art, of invention and government” (MacKaye 1906: 206). Yet these measures “fade into insignificance when compared with what might be accomplished were men bred for efficiency as happiness-producing agents, as domestic animals and plants are bred for efficiency as agents in the production of wealth. Nothing could so augment

9. MacKaye quoted in support the view of Francis Galton: “A remarkable misapprehension appears to be current as to the fact of the transmission of talent by inheritance. It is commonly asserted that the children of eminent men are stupid; that where great power of intellect seems to have been inherited, it has descended through the mother’s side; and that one son commonly runs away with the talent of a whole family. My own inquiries have led me to a diametrically opposite conclusion. I find that talent is transmitted by inheritance in a very remarkable degree; [that the mother has by no means the monopoly of its transmission;] and that whole families of persons of talent are more common than those in which one member only is possessed of it. I justify my conclusions by the statistics I now proceed to adduce, which I believe are sufficient to command conviction” (MacKaye 1906: 204–5; quoting Galton 1865: 157). The text in square brackets is missing from MacKaye’s quotation.
the power of the sentient world to produce happiness as thus to increase
the efficiency of the sentient agent itself” (206).

Education

The second method of societal improvement under consideration by
MacKaye was education. Education had been promoted as a means by
which to improve the character of an inferior or lesser class. Identifying
youths “of an inefficient or poor stock,” through education and training in
mind and morals they may be transformed into more “efficient individuals,” a more improved stock. Having been thus bettered in mind and mor-
als, their progeny “would tend to inherit the characters thus superimposed
upon their parents.” Thus might a “poor stock . . . be converted into a
good one, an inefficient race into an efficient one” (MacKaye 1906: 207).
Yet this would suggest that acquired characteristics are heritable, a con-
cclusion MacKaye took pains to prove false. While the individual may be
capable of improvement in intelligence or morals, this improvement is not
transmissible to the race: “It is a very general conviction, and one almost
inerradicable, that an inferior race may be converted into a superior one by
changing its surroundings, and particularly by the influence of education.”
But just as obvious, it must be understood that “the individual may be ele-
vated by education but not the race” (223).10

As an illustration, MacKaye offered the reader to consider the inferior-
ity of the “negro race,” one thought to be “congenitally deficient in intel-
lence and character as compared with the white race” (a claim he insisted
was offered for illustrative purposes only and not reflective of his personal
beliefs) (MacKaye 1906: 223). Then, consistent with the conclusion
arrived at above, we may “predict that unless some other means than mere
changed environment, including education, is adopted, that it will perma-
nently remain congenitally deficient in intelligence and character; that the
negro child born after ten or one hundred or one thousand generations of
education will start from exactly the same point as the child whose ances-
tors received no education at all” (MacKaye 1906: 224). While it may be
true that “the individuals of each succeeding generation are educated

10. Still, education, including physical education, is desirable on its own: “Useful education
is simply a means of increasing the efficiency of individuals as agents for the conversion of
potential into actual happiness—of converting terrestrial resources to useful purposes. It may
modify individuals physically, mentally, and morally” (MacKaye 1906: 230).
better than those of the preceding generation,” yet “the race remains stationery; that is, the congenital characteristics, the intellectual and moral capacity or efficiency of the race is not altered” (224). No matter the amount or quality of education, it is the congenital capacity that will determine what might be accomplished as a result. Racial improvement, then, can be accomplished only by an improvement of the breed, “by the method of selection,” and not through education (225). 11

Degeneracy

MacKaye perceived the impetus to race degeneration to have been fostered by civilization itself: “So far as I have knowledge no cause of race elevation is put in operation by civilization, while those contrary in tendency are fostered by it.” Civilized society, in fact, “eradicates those causes which in savage society tend to prevent degeneracy,” while it appears as though “those in power, who alone are in a position to do anything to check its progress, are ignorant of the whole matter” (MacKaye 1906: 227). Enlisting the authority of Stanford University president David Starr Jordan, a key figure in the promotion of eugenics, MacKaye concluded that

civilization sows the seeds of its own destruction by inducing racial decay. It suspends the natural selection which among savages neutralizes the tendency to decay, and in its place substitutes agencies which hasten the nation to its doom. These agencies are not always the same, but they all operate in the same manner—they result in the selection of the inefficient and incapable of each generation to be the breeders of the next. (228)

War, armed conflict, for instance, is a particularly dysgenic endeavor, as nations actively encourage the fittest men, “the best of their breed,” to enlist. As the ranks of the nation’s best and brightest are depleted,

11. “Many persons perceive that by means of the alleged power of modifying breeds by the inheritance of acquired characters mankind might be indefinitely and rapidly elevated mentally, morally, and physically, but they appear not to perceive that had such a power been in operation throughout history the human race would, by this time, have been in such a condition of mental and moral degeneration as to offer but a poor subject for improvement. . . . Fortunately for the human race, however, acquired characters are not inherited, and barbarism through lack of education has involved no race degeneracy, as civilization through education can involve no race improvement” (MacKaye 1906: 226).
sacrificed in greater numbers, those remaining—“the inferior residue”—remain to “furnish the characteristics of the succeeding generation.” Should such conditions persist, the result would be social decay, “a nation of incapables” (228).

Yet MacKaye (1906: 229) recognized another and more significant cause of race degeneration, “the most potent of all,” one that had previously been ignored. This cause was competition. Competition had on the authority of Charles Darwin been seen as leading to the improvement of man “through the effect of natural selection or the survival of the fittest.” As “nature selects a few from a great many as breeders of the species, and as these few are selected because of certain characteristics which distinguish them as best fitted to survive, these characteristics tend to become fixed, by inheritance, in the species. Competition, it is to be observed, is a necessary factor in this process” (369).

One may infer, then, that competition in improving the breed through natural selection would tend also to produce those deemed most useful and so would by that alone be adjudged beneficent. For MacKaye, the usefulness of any characteristic is dependent upon the degree to which it leads to an increase in total happiness. Fitness to survive does not, however, equate with an increase in happiness, but rather is “likely to be the reverse.” Contra Darwin, for MacKaye (1906: 370), “useful as a means of survival does not mean useful as a means of happiness, because survival does not necessarily imply happiness.” He added, “The aim of man . . . is, or should be, the maximum output of happiness. With ends so distinct it is inevitable that the means to be adopted to attain them must be distinct. If all we seek is survival, nature’s methods will serve our purpose, but if we seek happiness, we must devise very different ones” (371–72).

MacKaye concluded that competition, rather than resulting in racial improvement, in fact has a devastating impact on “intelligence and character.” It also, unarguably, in his understanding, produces conditions that increase poverty and inequality in the distribution of income, as “those whose intrinsic qualities are not such as to make them succeed in competition will tend more and more, through failure, to sink into the poorer, less educated and less fortunate class, while those whose qualities are such as to lead to success will tend to become prosperous and wealthy” (MacKaye 1906: 372).

12. Again, MacKaye (1906: 229) enlisted Jordan as support for his conclusion.
As the poor and uneducated tend to breed faster than the wealthy and educated, the “inevitable” result is race deterioration (MacKaye 1906: 372–73): “If the process of race deterioration implied by this law were permitted to proceed indefinitely, the human breed would rapidly retrograde toward the simian level, for the effects of such a process are cumulative or accelerative, and in accelerative processes the most pronounced effects are only a matter of time” (373). It is not enough to cajole the social classes to alter their habits, or even to educate them as to the consequences should they continue in their behavior, consequences that include the possibility of race suicide. The only available solution, then, “the only just remedy for this source of race-degeneracy,” one approved by MacKaye, is “the abolition of poverty.” Should such efforts fail to achieve the desired end result, “then the deterioration of the race by the selection of the incompetent is probably destined to proceed, unless by natural or artificial means a thoroughgoing inequality of opportunity is established” (373–74).

**Political Engineering**

Having defined his terms and demonstrated the need to place happiness at the center of his system of utilitarian ethics, it remained for MacKaye to explicate the means by which might be attained the maximum of societal happiness. He had hinted at the use of engineering principles in his 1906 *The Economy of Happiness* in associating social efficiency and justice with the efficiency attained by the engineer in the operation of a steam engine:13

First: just as a boiler is required to utilize the potential energy of coal in the production of steam, so sentient beings are required to convert the potentiality of happiness resident in a given land area into actual happiness, and just as the engineer’s first care is to select a boiler having maximum efficiency of conversion, so the first care of Justice should be to populate the domain over which she has jurisdiction with beings

13. An unsigned editorial in the March 26, 1908, issue of the *Independent* titled “Test-Tube Sociology” observed, “If sociology is practically to benefit the world as chemistry has done, it must proceed according to the methods of the chemist, who is continually trying experiments, and always in test-tubes before attempting them on a large scale” (p. 699). This editorial was included in the Woodbury (Sumner) Papers with a handwritten notation, “Pol. Eng.” (box 4, folder 1).
capable of utilizing the available resources in the production of happiness, in a manner which will insure the maximum efficiency of conversion. Second: following the analogy of steam engineering practice, the policy of Justice must be to ensure such a relation of each sentient being to its environment that in the consumption of resources available the greatest efficiency of adaptation of which the beings are capable, will be attained. In this way she will secure the maximum efficiency per capita. Third: she must so adapt the number of beings to the resources available that the efficiency per capita will be maintained a maximum. (MacKaye 1906: 191)

This new “science,” political engineering, based on Benthamite utilitarianism, he averred, would be founded “upon the simple and unassailable assumption that the goal of nations or of society is to do right, and to avoid doing wrong” (MacKaye 1915a: 14).

Political engineering as a doctrine aimed at social and economic reconstruction along socialist lines was formally introduced by MacKaye in a series of lectures in December 1909 at Harvard University. In 1911 he presented a second series of lectures at Harvard on the philosophy of socialism. These lectures were followed by a brief essay published in Technology Monthly in 1914 and refined and expanded upon in his 1915 book The Happiness of Nations: A Beginning in Political Engineering and his 1918 Americanized Socialism: A Yankee View of Capitalism. In his 1914 essay, “Political Engineering,” MacKaye (1914: 12) asked an interesting question: “By what authority except that of tradition, (which has proved untrustworthy in the past) is science excluded as a guide to the more vital part of man’s conduct, while admitted as a guide to the less vital part—why is science supreme in the material, and without authority in the moral world?”

The method of science had been accepted early in “such cold and unemotional subjects as mathematics, descriptive astronomy and physics” but could only progress into such subjects as biology and geology “so long as it did not disturb long cherished beliefs, superstitions or sentiments,” and even then it could advance into those fields only “by making a pretense of conformity” to avoid being “accused of encroaching upon realms of knowledge to which it was not applicable, realms reserved for higher

faculties of mind and spirit.” Yet eventually the methods of science took hold (MacKaye 1914: 13).

Still, the scientific method had yet to make inroads into “the most important and the most backward of all departments of human interest,” this being ethics, “the last stronghold of sentiment, tradition, superstition and mysticism.” Ethics remained the province of “mystics and metaphysicians,” which had succeeded in “divorcing ethics from all relation to the actual practical affairs of life, and by means of verbal confusion and appeal to sentiment successfully excluding reason from its legitimate function—that of guiding the whole range of human conduct” (MacKaye 1914: 13).

While the political economist, who attends to “the material result of acts,” concludes that welfare enhancement depends upon greater increases in production, without inquiring into the wants of the individual, the political engineer, by contrast, is more attentive to “the acts themselves,” and so he attends to the consumption side, the end of which is happiness (MacKaye 1915a: 124). The “political engineer,” seen as akin in certain respects to the “metallurgical engineer,” who devises methods of separating out unwanted elements from ore to produce a usable and far more valuable product, strives to eliminate those “harmful and useless acts, and acts of pleasureless production and negative consumption” to forge an “intrinsically desirable product . . . , the pleasurable or positive fraction of life,” which, when continually “refined and uplifted,” ultimately “produces ten times, a hundred times, or thousands of times the amount of happiness per day or per year as the raw material which is to-day so woefully wasted” (143–44).¹⁵

The objective of political engineering as an ethical doctrine “is to establish concrete rules or principles to guide the conduct of society.” It seeks to produce for society “the maximum quantity of happiness attainable,” guided by the principle of utility and the “universal rule of right” (MacKaye 1915a: 193–95). It is thus “the most comprehensive of appliable sciences,” as it infiltrates “every realm of human interest” and so “includes

¹⁵. The political engineer, MacKaye (1915b: 443) suggested, faces a problem similar to that of the mechanic: “He is confronted with a defective, unbalanced piece of social machinery that threatens to pound society to pieces, and his job is to find out what the matter is and to mend it. Only he must meet a difficulty which does not confront the mechanical engineer. He must set the industrial machine right without stopping it, for upon its continuous running the life of the community depends.”
in its broadest aspect all sciences which are usefully applied” (196). Without the “guidance” offered by political engineering, “not only applied economics, but all branches of applied science become dangerous, and the more dangerous the more they are perfected,” an outcome which is to be avoided, “for the highly efficient means of accomplishment which they place in the hands of men may be used as well to plunge mankind into misery as to raise them to happiness” (197).

MacKaye (1915a: 201–3) regarded utilitarianism as a theory that “judges all things from ribbons to religions, from potatoes to political systems, by the same standard—the standard of utility.” By that standard, happiness is to be judged by “its quantity and nothing else.” Furthermore, its scope extends far beyond the interests of mankind; it cannot, if only to escape the charge of arbitrariness, treat of the happiness of society alone but must be applicable to all “sentient beings,” including animals as well as humans. “Utilitarianism simply seeks to make the amount of happiness experienced in the universe a maximum. It seeks the greatest total quantity of that particular kind of consciousness. It cares not whether the beings which experience happiness are men or other sentients, . . . or indeed whether they inhabit the earth or some satellite of Sirius.”17 The science of political engineering must thus be restated as “the science which treats of the adaptation of the means of sentiency to its end.” To the extent that one accepts the utilitarian argument, as defined by MacKaye, that “the object of all human endeavor ought to be the production of the greatest quantity of happiness in the universe,” it must follow that “the more an act, a policy, an event, or an object, tends to produce universal happiness, the more useful it is. Man is no exception to this rule.”

Human beings, however, are, in MacKaye’s (1915a: 208) view, “exceedingly inefficient,” as they experience a greater sensitivity to pain than to pleasure and so must expend a great amount of energy to produce little happiness. In his actions “as a direct happiness generator,” man acts in his

16. MacKaye (1915a: 196–97) immediately qualified his statement, noting “while we cannot say that the practices of all applied sciences are tributary to it, we can say that they all ought to be.”
17. In his review of The Happiness of Nations, the Yale University sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild (1915: 832) quipped, “It would have been logical if the author, before asking his readers to contemplate seriously the evolution of a species of beings of whom there is not now the faintest foreshadowing, had discussed the question whether the interests of utility in the universe would not best be subserved, for the present, if men, who have the necessary intelligence, altruism, and will, devoted their entire time to creating happiness for the largest possible number of cats and dogs.”
“primary capacity,” while “as an indirect agent of happiness,” adapting means to ends, he acts in his “secondary capacity” (159). It is through the secondary capacity that man seeks to promote or produce happiness (altruism, as opposed to egotism), to “overcome or repress desires of a contrary tendency” (will, controlling egotistic tendencies), and to “recognize and utilize the means which will lead to the desired end” (intellect, imagination) (211; see the discussion up to p. 216).

The scientist constantly endeavors to promote perfection, in contrast to the theologian, for whom “the best the universe can do has already been done” (MacKay 1915a: 244). Knowledge is key. “If the present generation is to effectively promote the process of converting the earth, and eventually perhaps the universe, into a great happiness producing mechanism, it must convert itself, and seek to convert its immediate successors, into a great knowledge producing mechanism” (245–46). The end is the establishment of an enlightened society, one in which happiness is the supreme aspiration. An enlightened community, the teleology of science in ascendance, might very well, in striving to advance the goal of utility, to promote the greatest happiness, seek to do so through selective breeding of the species:

The great success which has been met in attempts to alter and improve the races of domestic animals and plants in a great variety of ways by breeding affords good reason for the belief that similar methods applied to the human race would meet with similar success. A faculty in the plastic condition of intelligence is particularly susceptible of great and rapid improvement in the hands of breeders; and it is probable that by intelligent selection a few generations would produce a type of intelligence as far above that of the average man, as the intelligence of the average man is above that of the average horse. The advance in knowledge of, and control over, the universe accomplished by such a race would be to the science of present men as our science is to that of the bushmen. (247–48)

One can see in MacKay’s vision for the betterment of society much of what falls within the ideal of social control and the moral philosophy of the socialist reformers of the period.18 His proposal, “a modification of

18. “A brief glance at the development of American institutions will show how genuine Socialism rationally follows from universally accepted American traditions familiar to every American schoolboy. Indeed the American theory of popular government, which no politician

UNCORRECTED PROOFS
socialism which will presumably combine all the advantages of public monopoly with the single advantage of competition, at the same time augmenting that single advantage in a degree impossible under competition” (MacKaye 1906: 429), he termed pantocracy; production would be socialized, while consumption would be left to the individual (346). In the preface to Americanized Socialism, he makes the connection explicit:

The program of socialism rests both on a material and a moral foundation. The material foundation of socialism as expounded in the philosophy of Karl Marx is not the theme of the following chapters. They are concerned more particularly with the moral foundation, which deserves greater attention than it has heretofore received because the justification of any proposed program must, in the final analysis, be a moral one. The moral foundation of socialism is to be found in the philosophy of utility, which tests all acts or courses of action by their presumable power to promote the happiness of mankind; and if socialism cannot be justified by its usefulness it cannot be justified at all.

Reasons for claiming that a socialism grounded in the philosophy of utility embodies the best traditions of Americanism will be found in the pages that follow. (MacKaye 1918b: v–vi)

As MacKaye identified the new field of social research, political engineering, promotion of the greatest utility is the paramount concern:

To apply the engineering method to the attainment of the end of greatest utility is as reasonable and feasible as to apply it to any other end. Indeed to fail to apply that method is to fail to attain the end of all ends most important. The science which directs human conduct to this end, therefore, is as much entitled to the name of engineering as those which direct it to merely proximate ends, as the common branches of engineering do. Human experience already affords the material for the formulation of such a science. Indeed, it is already formulated in a fragmentary manner. Its parts are found scattered through all the social sciences. They only require the coördination and unification obtainable from the recognition of a common end to constitute a starting point for

19. On MacKaye’s socialist leanings, see especially Luca Fiorito and Tiziana Foresti (2018). The authors link MacKaye as well to the eugenics movement of the period.
the most important of all branches of engineering—that which guides men in adapting their means to the end of greatest interest to them. This science I shall call political engineering. (MacKaye 1918b: 88–89)

Political engineering was purported to furnish a scientific framework by which to coordinate those “great numbers of observations, laws and speculations relating to human nature, human institutions, and human experience in general” to the constitution of “a science devoted to the sole object of adapting men’s means to the end of greatest ultimate interest to them—to wit, the end of utility” (89). MacKaye confessed that while it may appear to be utopian, employing as it did “the use of the imagination to devise a theoretical plan, and the elaboration of this plan on paper,” it was nonetheless far from impractical, as most critics may accuse. Such utopianism as here envisioned is in fact “an essential part of the method of applied science” (90).

The Institute of Political Engineering and the Role of Helen Sumner

A new field that purports to develop methods devoted to institutional change requires, of course, an organization dedicated to the fulfillment of its ends. To this end, James MacKaye, together with the economist Helen Laura Sumner, the Boston attorney Charles Ramsay, and others, proposed the establishment of an Institute of Political Engineering, to be headquartered at 643 Tremont Temple in Boston.20 As indicated by Sumner in a set

20. A handwritten card in the Woodbury (Sumner) Papers lists the membership at that time as follows: president, James MacKaye; vice president, Charles C. Ramsay; treasurer, Charles C. Ramsay; recording secretary, Charles C. Ramsay; corresponding secretary, Helen L. Sumner; board of directors, the officers, and Ella A. Merritt, Howard N. Wade (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 6, folder 2). Box 4, folder 2 of the Woodbury (Sumner) Papers contains three handwritten pages (no date) containing the names of forty-eight prominent individuals, presumably those to whom the institute may be of interest. Included among the names are civil engineer Lewis Jerome Johnson, Wellesley economist/sociologist Emily Greene Balch, lawyer and cofounder of the Socialist Party of America Morris Hillquit, lawyer and cofounder of the Socialist Party of America John Spargo, Harvard psychologist and eugenicist Robert Yerkes, Harvard zoologist George Howard Parker, George Winthrop Lee of Stone and Webster, attorney and journalist Milton Reed, attorney Charles C. Ramsay, founding member of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society Harry Laidler, Columbia University sociologist Franklin H. Giddings, journalist Walter Lippmann, University of Wisconsin economist John R. Commons, Columbia University historian Charles A. Beard, businessman William A. Filene, sociologist John Graham Brooks, author Gilson Gardner, political consultant Judson King, author William Leavitt Stoddard, Senator Robert M. La Follette, economist Scott Nearing, Senator Edward P. Costigan, and president of the American Eugenics Society, Boswell H. Johnson.
of handwritten notes, the motto of the institute was, “The happiness of a nation is merely the aggregate happiness of the individuals who compose it” (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 6, folder 2).

Handwritten notes also suggest that plans for the establishment of the institute began as early as July 1915, a proposal for such having been offered by Helen Sumner and later accepted by MacKaye. These notes take the form of reflections as to the direction such an organization might take, an attempt at the construction of a mission statement or statement of purpose (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 4, folder 2).

Political economy is unique among the social sciences in its ability to fulfill the aims of the political engineer. In the prospectus, dated July 19, 1918, political economy is actually identified as a branch of engineering, as it seeks not just knowledge but solutions to problems, “the adaptation of material means to material ends.” Yet the search for a “material end” in itself is only of value if, “directly or indirectly, it affects consciousness in some serviceable manner.” Given this understanding, “it is essential [to political economy] ultimately to adapt their means [the means of the engineer] to immaterial ends,—to make their service to men expressible finally in terms of human consciousness.” Political engineering, thus understood,

is a science concerned with the adaptation of means to the end of greatest service to mankind. As medical science seeks the greatest health of society, so political engineering seeks its greatest happiness—thus placing applied science on a moral foundation. Moreover, by its scientific treatment of morals it develops a true science of ethics. It studies happiness by methods as scientific as those used by other branches of engineering in studying the material ends sought by them, its object being to formulate concrete rules which will render applied science, and indeed human conduct in general, ultimately tributary to the end of greatest utility. (Institute of Political Engineering, prospectus, July 19, 1918, Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 4, folder 2, pp. 1–2)

To accomplish its objective, “to ‘seek the maximum quantitative excess of happiness over unhappiness among mankind as a whole, during the foreseeable future,’” the institute, its members cognizant of the fact that the current international crisis calls for the creation of a “new social order,” dedicates itself to rely “squarely upon the exclusive use of the
human reason as a means of discovering right and wrong and of verifying moral truths” (p. 2).21

The “Announcement” of the institute, dated September 1, 1918, declared, “The progress of science is the progress of society, but there is no science in which progress is so essential to the interests of society at the present time as in the science of political engineering” (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 4, folder 1, p. iii). At that time the membership was quite small and informal, suggesting little interest beyond a close-knit group associated with MacKay and Sumner. The list of active members as of September 12, 1918, included MacKay, Ramsay, Sumner, Ella A. Merritt, Benton MacKay (brother of James), Ethel E. Hanks, Bennett L. Mead, Emma Duke, Francis H. Bird, Kurt Sanders, Howard R. Wade, and J. Francis O’Brien (box 4, folder 2). (Merritt, Hanks, Mead, Duke, and Bird were coauthors of or otherwise assisted Sumner in her work on child labor legislation.)

Helen Laura Sumner’s place in this story cannot be overemphasized.22 A student of Katharine Coman and Emily Greene Balch at Wellesley and Richard T. Ely and John R. Commons at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, she gained national attention with her first book, Equal Suffrage (1909), contributed to Commons’s Trade Unionism and Labor Problems (1905) and History of Labour in the United States (1918), and wrote numerous books on child labor. She was also influential in the establishment of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society while at Wisconsin.

Sumner not only played a major role in the founding of the Institute of Political Engineering; she was as well an influence on the thinking of James MacKay. As early as November 1907 they had begun

21. There was even produced a document titled “A Catechism of Political Engineering,” the purpose of which was to answer questions from students who had expressed interest in the subject. The manuscript includes extensive quotations from John Locke, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 4, folder 1).

22. Helen Laura Sumner was born on March 12, 1876, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, the daughter of George True Sumner and Katherine Eudora Marsh. Following graduation from Wellesley College (AB, 1898), she attended the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she studied economics (PhD, 1908). Unable to secure a full-time university appointment, she worked at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and in 1913 she became a staff member of the US Children’s Bureau. Among her published writings are Equal Suffrage (1909), Industrial Courts in France, Germany, and Switzerland (1910), and Child Labor Legislation in the United States (1915). A revised version of her doctoral dissertation, “The Labor Movement in America, 1827–1837,” appeared as pt. 2 of Commons’s 1918 History of Labour in the United States. In 1918 she married the economist Robert Morse Woodbury. Helen Sumner Woodbury died on March 10, 1933, in New York City and is interred in Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, D.C.
corresponding—MacKaye expressed interest in hearing her objections to his *Economy of Happiness*, although he would be unable to do so at the upcoming meeting of the American Economic Association, to be held in Madison, Wisconsin. As mentioned above, MacKaye’s explicit statement of the principles of political engineering was expressed in his 1915 *The Happiness of Nations*. It was around this time that Sumner began communicating her thoughts on the issue. In an undated letter—the first page of which is missing from the material sent from the Historical Society, but it is with a group of letters from early 1915—MacKaye wrote, “What you say about the wide need for political engineering is very true. Human problems calling urgently for scientific solutions are lying about in clusters, and we are only in the stage of beginning to overcome inertia on the subject. I am not sure we have even made a beginning” (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 2, folder 6).

In a folder marked “Political Engineering” (box 6, folder 2) are among the contents fragments of an undated and untitled handwritten manuscript and notes on the subject. Here, Sumner offered a plan for the formation of a Society of Political Engineering:

Let a committee be formed of representative students of political and economic questions. Let this committee formulate upon a broad basis the principles and purposes of a Society of Political Engineering. Let it have printed a small leaflet containing the statement of the principles and purposes of such a society and asking all those interested to communicate with the secretary of the committee. Let this leaflet be distributed to persons engaged in all lines of economic or political research, to trade unionists, socialists, single taxers, cooperators, charity workers, pacifists, and to the members of all organizations working for political or industrial democracy or for the conservation, either of human life or of natural resources, the inheritance of posterity. These would include, of course, members of many of the Federal Bureaus, of State Labor Bureaus and Industrial Commissions, of the Popular Government League, the National Voters League, the Russell Sage Foundation, the Carnegie Institute, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Association for Labor Legislation, the National Child Labor Committee, the Consumers League, the Bureau of Municipal

23. Letter from MacKaye to Sumner dated November 18, 1907, Woodbury (Sumner) Papers, box 2, folder 6.
Research, the American Federation of Labor, the Woman’s Trade Union League, the College Settlements Association, the Socialist Party, etc.

She further addressed the functions of such an organization and even acknowledged the radical nature of such an initiative:

The institute of political engineering would act as a clearing house of information for members of the society, would make special investigations when necessary, and would systematically and scientifically weight the evidence for and against existing institutions or laws and preferred [sic] remedies. The institute should, of course, make use only of the broadest and fairest minded investigators obtainable, chosen from the ranks of professional students of political and economic questions and not from the membership of propagandist organizations. Once chosen, these investigators should be given the greatest possible amount of freedom and also of responsibility. Neither the officers nor the members of the society, however, should be called upon to assume responsibility for the opinions or the advice of its experts. Their reports should stand, before the members of the society, as well as before the world, simply upon their own merits.

The prescriptions of an institute of political engineering would doubtless be radical,—in the sense that all change is radical. But in this sense radicalism is an essential quality of all scientific progress. No earthly power can prevent the mind engaged in any branch of inquiry from leaping forward toward the unknown, toward the ideal which is, perhaps, “the thing that is to be,”—the goal of our evolution.

In a letter dated July 13, 1915, dealing with the idea of an Institute of Political Engineering, MacKaye wrote, “I am still a little foggy about an Institute of Political Engineering, but it sounds all right, and I should like to co-operate with it if I knew what it was going to do. Perhaps it will dawn on me before long” (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 2, folder 6). This suggests that the idea of an institute had clearly begun with a proposal not by MacKaye but by Helen Sumner. MacKaye, in fact, seems to have been quite perplexed at the very notion, but intrigued nonetheless. On August 5, MacKaye expressed his desire to meet with Sumner “in Shirley [Massachusetts], when we can talk over the Institute, etc.” (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 2, folder 6).

By November 25, 1917, it appears as though much work had been done with respect to the formation of the institute. MacKaye wrote to Sumner
regarding the prospectus, “which will probably be the first thing we should print,” enclosing a copy of the document. Regarding the constitution, MacKaye expressed his thanks to Sumner for her efforts “in having so many copies made,” and then he requested her assistance in editing:

I have not found a way to better Article II [dealing with the object of the institute], but if you know how to enumerate the principles of political engineering in a manner which would fit then I wish you would try your hand at it. Principles, like theories, are sometimes subject to change. Truth is a matter of probability, and sometimes only a piece of it is seen at a time. Probably that article can be better written, but I guess I cannot do it. (Woodbury [Sumner] Papers, box 2, folder 6)

This would suggest as well that MacKaye, while having originated the concept of political engineering and having enumerated its basic principles, nonetheless had difficulty in formulating its objectives such that the principles might be of practical use. This task he left in the hands of Helen Sumner.

Conclusion

James MacKaye’s proposal for a reimagining of society, political engineering, was offered as a means to social control and race improvement. His philosophy was essentially a refinement of the principles of Benthamite utilitarianism from the perspective of early twentieth-century socialism. He asserted that his philosophy was better suited to the nature of the American economy and society, the name itself meant to distinguish his version of socialism from the Marxian and other competing variants. While his name alone had been in his time associated with the philosophy, due in no small part to self-promotion and to his publications and lectures on the subject, the importance of Helen Laura Sumner to his vision had been largely ignored. No acknowledgment of her comments on his work, written or otherwise, appears in The Happiness of Nations or Americanized Socialism. Yet as we have demonstrated, her influence on his thinking was greater than he appears to have acknowledged; the very idea of an institute devoted to the enterprise seems to have originated with her. In the end, little came of the institute and the philosophy itself. It attracted few followers, and even then the majority had previous connections to Helen Sumner.24

24. In the 1920–21 edition of Who’s Who in America, the entry on Helen Sumner Woodbury includes among her accomplishments the Institute of Political Engineering, while mention of the institute is absent in the entry on James MacKaye.
While MacKaye and Sumner’s vision ultimately came to naught, it does nevertheless represent a chapter in the history of American Progressivism and the desire for racial and societal improvement, one that has been little acknowledged and that should be studied alongside other failed or dismissed attempts at reconstituting American society.

References


