

William Graham Sumner: Critic of Progressive Liberalism

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In America today, as throughout the West, most people fundamentally accept the "welfare state." Republican Presidents live happily with huge deficits in government accounts, while conservative politicians no longer challenge Medicare or Social Security. The State has become a pervasive force in every individual's life, from cradle to grave; it consumes an ever-growing share of national product and employs a sizeable percentage of the labor force. Yet the "positive" state that so many now take for granted is a remarkably recent phenomenon. In the United States, the transformation to a modern welfare state really began only in the Progressive era—less even in terms of the substantive reforms then enacted than in the growth of a climate of opinion, in political and intellectual circles, favorable to State intervention.

Until the Progressive era, laissez-faire reigned supreme, in accepted theory at least, as the principle by which social and political life ought to be organized. The profoundly important ideological shift that took place around the turn of the century has already become the focus of much scholarly research; this paper, however, seeks to revive and explore the opinions of one of the last, and certainly the most articulate, spokesman for laissez-faire in an era when more and more people were championing the cause of State interference in spheres of life formerly reserved to the individual or to private corporations. William Graham Sumner personifies the classical liberal viewpoint against which the new "progressive liberals," as I have called them, were reacting. As a challenge to the modern liberal synthesis, Sumner's views are even today of unusual interest.

I. The Progressive-Liberal Mind

By "progressive liberals" I mean those intellectuals identified with Progressive reforms or party politics who articulated the assumptions upon which modern liberalism is based. These liberals shared the optimism, but little of the substantive philosophy, of classical liberals in the early English Liberal

Party-Manchester School tradition. Instead they championed "taking into the hands of the state the business of the individual man," as William Gladstone sorrowfully described a tendency among members of his own Liberal party near the turn of the century.¹ They were not content to rely on the laws of God or the market place for social progress. "We can no longer treat life as something that has trickled down to us," insisted Walter Lippmann, one of the most self-consciously "liberal" progressives, in 1914. "We have to deal with it deliberately, devise its social organization, alter its tools, formulate its method, educate and control it."² With State power and the techniques of social science at their disposal, they were impatient to break the shackles of the Jeffersonian tradition of limited government and embark on an ambitious program of social reform. Drawing inspiration from utopian socialists, advocates of the social gospel, German-school economists, and others, the progressive liberals forged a new, activist conception of the State, in place of the laissez-faire ideal of the State as a mere policer of men and contracts.

The ideology of "progressive liberalism," which can be traced back to the birth of the republic, did not, of course, spring unheralded on America only after the turn of the century. "This battle between State-interference and laissez-faire," one writer commented as early as 1884, "is now upon us; it will be waged through all the near future."³ Years before the 19th century closed, reformers and socialists such as Henry George, Edward Bellamy, and Henry Demarest Lloyd gained wide audiences with their advocacy of state-sponsored solutions to social problems; the rise of vast new urban and industrial problems seemed to cry out for solutions on an equally grand scale.

Contributing to this attitude was the transformation taking place within American Christianity in its attitudes toward poverty. The common 19th century view had been uncompromisingly expressed by the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher: "No man in this land suffers from poverty unless it be more than his fault—unless it be his *sin*."⁴ The new advocates of the social gospel took a more sympathetic approach to the poor. A leader of this movement, the Monsignor John A. Ryan, devoted numerous speeches and writings to the theme that suffering, poverty, and indigence stemmed from social causes, not individual moral failings. In his 1912 presidential address to the Minnesota State Conference of Charities and Correction he offered a solution:

The State, and only the State, can prevent a large part, probably the larger part, of the social distress which is due primarily to the environment. . . . [I]t can and ought to provide suitable economic conditions by enforcing reasonable minimum standards of labor and livelihood.⁵

Ryan's own views had been heavily influenced by Richard Ely, leader of a school of young German-trained economists who had been heavily imbued

with the ideology of Bismark's nationalist-welfare state. Ely in particular infused his scientific work with a strong social gospel spirit. With his like-minded colleagues, Ely founded the American Economic Association in 1885, with the unwritten proviso that it must "not include men of the Sumner type. . . ."⁶ They agreed on a statement of principles that left no question as to their ideological commitments. "We regard the state as an educational and ethical agency whose positive aid is an indispensable condition of human progress," it read. ". . . [T]he doctrine of laissez-faire is unsafe in politics and unsound in morals. . . ."⁷ Ely's influence spread wide; he taught Woodrow Wilson, profoundly influenced LaFollette and the development of the "Wisconsin Idea," and Theodore Roosevelt paid tribute to him as the man who "first introduced me to radicalism in economics and then made me sane in my radicalism."⁸

The new political economists also influenced the most articulate and self-conscious spokesmen for progressive liberalism—Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl, and Walter Lippmann, founders of *New Republic* magazine.⁹ Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909) was perhaps the central statement of its time in favor of an enlarged role for the State. For Croly, the fundamental social problem was how, in the face of divergent interests and inequalities of wealth and achievement, to keep "such a highly differentiated society fundamentally sound and whole." He sought a solution in a program of nationalized democracy to replace the "chaotic individualism" which ever threatened to rend the social fabric. The State would have to play the central organizing role in this process, taking on responsibility "for the subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose. . . ." If Croly's reverence for the State clashed with traditional American principles, then "the fault in that case lies with the democratic tradition; and the erroneous and misleading tradition must yield before the march of a constructive national democracy."¹⁰

Theodore Roosevelt, the first President to put progressive principles into practice, admired Croly and shared many of his views. Undoubtedly, TR's ideas were influenced by his own ambitions and energies: "I believe in a strong executive," he said while President; "I believe in power."¹¹ But on a more theoretical plane he accepted Croly's rejection of the Jeffersonian tradition. ". . . [W]e must abandon definitely the laissez-faire theory of political economy," he wrote in *Outlook* in 1911, "and fearlessly champion a system of increased Governmental control, paying no heed to the cries of worthy people who denounce this as Socialistic."¹² His rejection of anti-trust laws in favor of close and sympathetic national regulation of the trusts perfectly reflected this stand.

The 1912 election campaign illustrates how far the progressive consensus had developed. Although many historians have observed in that campaign a clash between TR's Hamiltonian theory of government and Wilson's indi-

vidualism, these differences should not be exaggerated.¹³ For Wilson himself had come to completely reject the Jeffersonian policy of limited government. "We used to say," he observed, ". . . that the best government was the government that did as little governing as possible. . . . But we are coming now to realize that life is so complicated . . . that the law has to step in and create the conditions which will make it tolerable for us to live."¹⁴ He repeated the theme throughout the campaign. "Without the watchful interference, the resolute interference of the government," the future President insisted, "there can be no fair play between individuals and such powerful institutions as the trusts. Freedom today is something more than being let alone. The program of a government of freedom must in these days be positive, not negative merely."¹⁵

II. Sumner's Critique of the Positive State

William Graham Sumner, more than any other man, resisted and challenged these intellectual trends. Born in 1840 the son of a laboring English immigrant, Sumner owed his reputation as the "archenemy of the advocates of social reform"¹⁶ to his extraordinary ability and energy as a publicist, public speaker, and professor of political and social science at Yale. Until his death in 1910, he lectured the nation on the evils of tariff protection, industrial regulation, and militarism. Even as the object of national controversy, and *bête noire* of the conservative Yale alumni, Sumner never faltered in his crusade to roll back the State. He lived according to his conviction that every citizen had a patriotic and civic duty to resist the encroachment of the State.¹⁷

Sumner adopted the core of his opinions at an early age. In his early teens, he devoured Harriet Martineau's *Illustration of Political Economy*, an economics text in story form. Martineau unwaveringly opposed any interference with the free market, from strikes to poor relief. Any restriction "on the natural direction of labor and capital," she wrote, "is ultimately injurious to every class in the community." In particular, she championed free trade, the defense of which occupied Sumner throughout much of his adult life: "as the general interest of each nation requires that there should be perfect liberty in the exchange of commodities, any restriction on such liberty, for the sake of benefiting any particular class or classes, is the sacrifice of a larger interest to a smaller—that is, a sin in government." Sumner took her words to heart, admitting later that they, even more than his formal training, were responsible for his conceptions of "capital, labor, money, and trade. . . ."¹⁸ Certainly Sumner's religious training at Yale, by reinforcing his Christian belief in the responsibility and sanctity of the individual moral agent, must have contributed to the laissez-faire attitudes he adopted towards economic and social problems.

Sumner also borrowed from the great English social theorist and individualist, Herbert Spencer, whose Social Darwinian notions reached powerfully across the Atlantic. Aside from Spencer's commitment to laissez-faire and his conservative faith in the inefficacy of reform, Sumner was particularly influenced by Spencer's Social Darwinian doctrine of the "law of conduct and consequence" which held that to insure the survival of the human species, society must distribute rewards according to merit and "fitness."¹⁹

Sumner's Social Darwinism stemmed naturally from the Malthusian traditions of classical political economy, which gave economics its preoccupation with scarcity and its reputation as "the dismal science." In the face of scarcity, life is a persistent struggle to wrest from nature the means of subsistence. Some men, by virtue of character or skill, are particularly successful. "The millionaires are a product of natural selection," Sumner explained, skirting close to tautology. ". . . It is because they are thus selected that wealth—both their own and that entrusted to them—aggregates under their hands."²⁰

In a world of scarcity, unfortunately, not everyone can compete successfully. Sumner, hardly complacent about this fact, admitted that "it is frightful to know of the poverty which some people endure," but classified poverty along with disease, physical defects, and accidents as an act of nature which interferes with man's enjoyment of life. In speaking of abolishing poverty, "we might as well talk of abolishing storms, excessive heat and cold, tornadoes, pestilences, diseases, and other ills. Poverty belongs to the struggle for existence, and we are all born into that struggle."²¹

Socialists and reformers, by blinding themselves to these laws of nature, "bring forward complaints which are really to be made, if at all, against the author of the universe for the hardships which man has to endure in his struggle with nature." In the long run, their schemes would promote the "deterioration of society" by burdening the fit and successful members of society with the task of propping up "the bad ones. The law of the survival of the fittest was not made by man and cannot be abrogated by man. We can only, by interfering with it, produce the survival of the unfittest."²²

Yet Sumner did not write off the poor; with his pre-sociological conception of poverty, he offered them a way out, through the Protestant Ethic, in which he had been deeply engrained by his father. Social reform was a mere phantasm compared with individual self-improvement. "The only two things which really tell on the welfare of men on earth," said the preacher Sumner, "are hard work and self-denial. . . ."²³ He was confident, despite the pessimism of his Darwinian attitudes, that poverty could "be abolished in a few generations" if everyone acted industriously and brought up their children to do the same.²⁴ The State should support this process, not through grandiose reforms, but through protection of property, contracts, and life—what Sumner called civil liberty. "What civil liberty does is to turn the

competition of man with man from violence and brute force into an industrial competition under which men vie with one another for the acquisition of material goods by industry, energy, skill, frugality, prudence, temperance, and other industrial virtues."²⁵ Despite his rather Victorian way of putting things, Sumner was making an important point—that in an economy of scarcity, poverty can be overcome only through production, and not simply by redistribution.

Socialist schemes, Sumner believed, would unjustly penalize men who lifted themselves out of poverty by dint of their hard labor and self-sacrifice—thus in the long run undermining social advancement. Why, he asked in his famous essay on "The Forgotten Man," should the industrious man be taxed and penalized to raise the station of those less virtuous and successful? Sumner emerged as the spokesman for the middle classes, who were "always forgotten by sentimentalists, philanthropists, reformers, enthusiasts. . . . [They] have kept our attention for a long time on the . . . good-for-nothing people, as if they alone deserved our attention." Sumner's moralistic tone, of course, stemmed from his assumption that poverty was a reflection of individual character. "The whole system of social regulation by boards, commissioners, and inspectors," he complained, "consists in relieving negligent people of the consequences of their negligence and so leaving them to continue negligence without correction." Why should the "forgotten man" be asked to pay for the negligence of others?²⁶

Despite his hard and unsophisticated tone, Sumner was making several important points. First, he questioned the beneficence of self-professed philanthropists who agreed to tax third parties in order to support "the poor," "the weak," or other adopted social pets. Sumner himself frequently gave to charities. But, "[w]hat I choose to do by way of exercising my own sympathies under my own reason and conscience is one thing; what another man forces me to do of a sympathetic character, because his reason and conscience approve it, is quite another thing."²⁷ In criticizing the moral basis of redistribution, Sumner revealed himself as primarily concerned with questions of justice and liberty, even more than with Social Darwinian principles. In rejecting the egalitarian state as a "servant of envy," Sumner advanced a fundamental principle of justice: "I am entitled to make the most I can of myself without hindrance from anybody, but I am not entitled to any guarantee that I should make as much of myself as somebody else makes of himself." The real problem with a policy of "survival of the unfittest" is that it can only be achieved by "destroying liberty."²⁸

Sumner believed, further, that structural reforms of society could not really be achieved even at the expense of liberty, for society is much too complex a mechanism to permit man-made tinkering. In an essay on the "Absurd Effort to Make the World Over," he observed that social forces "will have changed the whole problem before our interferences have time to

make themselves felt.”²⁹ Only too aware of the inadequacy of his own knowledge, Sumner naturally resented the “reformers, philanthropists, humanitarians, and would-be managers-in-general of society” who fancied themselves experts in social science. Like quack doctors, he observed,

they always begin with the question of remedies, and they go at this without any diagnosis or any knowledge of the anatomy or physiology of society. . . . It generally troubles them not a whit that their remedy implies a complete reconstruction of society, or even a reconstruction of human nature. Against all such social quackery the obvious injunction to the quacks is, to mind their own business.³⁰

Contrary to liberals who thought the role of the State should grow in proportion to the size of social problems, Sumner believed that the very complexity of modern society militated more than ever against the success of reform programs. Unwise legislation, passed without sufficient study, tended to stay on the books, shackling future generations with their changed conditions.³¹

Reform programs are doubly fallible, Sumner argued, because of the nature of the agency called on to enact and execute them. The State, far from being “a tutelary genius over us all,” was simply

a little group of men chosen in a very haphazard way by the majority of us to perform certain services for all of us. The majority do not go about their selection very rationally, and they are almost always disappointed by the results of their own operations. Hence “the State,” instead of offering resources of wisdom, right reason, and pure moral sense beyond what the average of us possess, generally offers much less of all those things.³²

The reformers were equally unrealistic in their conception of the State as neutral and even-handed. In a society ridden with competing interests, the State becomes a natural arena for their struggles. As Sumner warned in 1909, those who have been “defeated in the competition of life” will seek to “fight over again, on the political domain, what they have lost on the economic domain.”³³ Sumner was astounded at the naiveté with which reformers believed the “legislative device” would be an unchallenged tool in their hands. “They never appear to remember that the device, when once set up, will itself become the prize of a struggle,” Sumner observed, “. . . so that after all the only serious question is: who will get it?” Could advocates of State interference really be certain that their enemies—the railroads, the liquor sellers, the trusts—would not seize control of the very institutions they had set up for less noble ends?³⁴

At least in civil society, the forces of competition exercise a sort of check over the actions of businesses and individuals; even commercial monopolies face the discipline of potential competition and must limit their profits accordingly. But the State faces no competition at all; it is “the greatest

monopoly of all; it can brook no rival or colleague in its domain," and thus potentially becomes "the most powerful engine by which some men may exploit others." What the reformers forget is that the very power of the State to do good can also become an unparalleled power to do harm.³⁵ Far from apologizing for big business, Sumner was simply following to a logical conclusion the findings of the muckrakers whose studies were proof of the political power of big capital. "Can anyone imagine," Sumner asked, "that the masterfulness, the overbearing disposition, the greed of gain, and the ruthlessness of methods, which are the faults of the master of industry at his worst, would cease when he was a functionary of the State, which had relieved him of risk and endowed him with authority? Can anyone imagine that politicians would no longer be corruptly fond of money, intriguing, and crafty when they were charged, not only with patronage and government contracts, but also with factories, stores, ships, and railroads?"³⁶

Sumner feared that American democracy was sliding into the hands of a new ruling class. The expansion of State power simply permitted the most powerful element in society—capital—to cement its domination. As he repeated endlessly during the Progressive era, the plutocrats, those who invested their money in politics rather than in industry, in lobbyists and in election rigging, had taken control of the reins of State. In 1907, looking back on this trend, he summed up the problem in stark, even radical, terms:

The history of the nineteenth century . . . plainly showed the power of capital in the modern state. Special legislation, charters, and franchises proved to be easy legislative means of using the powers of the state for the pecuniary benefit of the few. . . . The history is disgraceful, and it is a permanent degradation of popular government that power could not be found, or did not exist, in the system to subjugate this abuse and repress this corruption of state power. The protective-tariff system is simply an elaborate system by which certain interests inside of a country get control of legislation in order to tax their fellow-citizens for their own benefit. . . . It is the supreme test of a system of government whether its machinery is adequate for repressing the selfish undertakings of cliques formed of special interests and saving the public from raids and plunderers. The modern democratic states fail under this test. . . . Financial scandal is the curse of all modern parliamentary states with a wide suffrage. They give liberty and security, with open chances for individual enterprise, . . . but the political machinery offers opportunities for manipulation and corrupt abuse. They educate their citizens to seek advantages in the industrial organization by legislative devices, and to use them to the uttermost. . . . We hear of plutocracy and tainted money, of the power of wealth, and the wickedness of corporations. The disease is less specific. It is constitutional.³⁷

Sumner applied this critique of the State to a number of specific cases, including the problem of regulatory commissions and the entire system of

trade protection. In the case of commissions, Sumner foreshadowed a whole school of modern critics in pointing to their tendency either to "sink into nonentity" or to become captured by an interest group. Referring to a study of the Interstate Commerce Commission which cast doubt on the competence of its members, Sumner observed that "if a good man is appointed, the railroads presently invite him to come over to them, and they give him two or three times the salary." When such commissions failed in their purpose, Sumner complained, the public sought only to strengthen them further, never to scrap them. He would have preferred, in any case, to hold corporations more strictly to the law rather than sloughing their responsibility off onto an irresponsible commission.³⁸

Above all, Sumner was a tireless opponent of the protective tariff, his paradigm of the abuses to which government power can be put. As vice-president of the American Free Trade League, he fearlessly incurred the wrath of Republican conservatives with his steady stream of speeches and articles condemning protectionism. "Protection arouses my moral indignation," he explained in one of the last speeches before his death. "It is a subtle, cruel, and unjust invasion of one man's rights by another. . . . The moral indignation which it causes is the motive which draws me away from the scientific pursuits which form my real occupation, and forces me to take part in a popular agitation." Industries, he explained, sought protection to save themselves "the trouble and annoyance of business competition and . . . be assured profits in their undertakings by the State, that is, at the expense of their fellow citizens." Sumner objected to protection not simply because it encouraged the unfit to survive, but because it violated his principles of justice. Recalling the campaigns against tax abuse which made up the history of American civil liberties, Sumner called protectionism the worst such abuse, a government "license to certain interests to go out and encroach on others." Protectionism encouraged the corruption of politics and, perhaps worst of all, undermined the work ethic by teaching "us to believe that a man needs a 'pull' of some kind or other to make any industry a success. . . . That is the doctrine of pure graft."³⁹

After years of fruitless campaigning, Sumner was a disillusioned man. In 1906, surveying the failures even of such "reformers" as Theodore Roosevelt to press for tariff reform, Sumner concluded that "we are being governed at the present time by a combination of these protected interests which have got control of the machinery . . . and . . . the personnel of the government to such an extent that it is impossible, practically, to make any breach in this system at all."⁴⁰ These words sound more like the polemics of a muckraker than the apologetics of a conservative, but then Sumner was a radical when it came to the defense of individual liberty. He still saw hope in the "very great revolt in the public mind against graft and political and business

corruption" that had emerged since the turn of the century—but only if that revolt could be channeled into libertarian rather than Statist ends. "The way to minimize the dangers to democracy," he never tired of repeating, "... is to reduce to the utmost its functions, the number of its officials, the range of its taxing power, the variety of its modes of impinging on the individual, the amount and range of its expenditures, and, in short, its total weight. . . ."⁴¹

When all was said and done, Sumner's philosophy rested on a profound appreciation for personal liberty, rather than on the cold arguments of the Social Darwinians. He diagnosed many of the same social problems highlighted by the progressives, but refused to seek answers in the aggrandizement of the State; "[w]henever we try to get paternalized," he warned, "we only succeed in getting policed."⁴² Whatever one thinks of his philosophical stance, no one can deny his sophistication and prescience in warning of the uses to which new State agencies would be put, by the very interests they were designed to reform or regulate. The history of the United States since his time, from Teapot Dome to Watergate, has provided the raw material for thousands of muckraking accounts of American politics. Sumner's warnings still today provide a powerful antidote to the optimism of liberals everywhere as to the beneficence of state power.

III. Sumner: Opponent of Militarism and Imperialism

Sumner's laissez-faire doctrine and the emerging progressive-liberal synthesis nowhere clashed more sharply than over the issue of imperialism. The differences which put men like Sumner and Theodore Roosevelt so at odds over the Spanish-American War and over later examples of American imperialism, were not accidental products of personal temperament, but stemmed directly and crucially from their fundamentally opposed conceptions of the State.

While not all progressives agreed, a dominant wing of the movement favored an activist and expansionist foreign policy. Theodore Roosevelt, leader of the Progressive Party, was the archetypal imperialist—the man who championed war with Spain, led the Rough Riders in Cuba, seized the Canal Zone, extended the Monroe Doctrine, and sent the fleet around the world. Roosevelt couched his advocacy of imperialism in the moralistic terms of an international reformer. The United States, he wrote in December 1899, could not "compromise with unrighteousness." Like other colonial powers, it had a duty to conquer "barbarian" races in the cause of civilization and peace, for "every expansion of a great civilized power means a victory for law, order, and righteousness." Just as the U. S. had warred against the "savages or half-savages" who peopled the continent before the advent of the white man, "the same will be true of the Philippines." By imposing a "stable and orderly government" there, "one more fair spot of the

world's surface shall have been snatched from the forces of darkness."⁴³

Progressive-liberal intellectuals joined politicians like Roosevelt and Senator Albert Beveridge in promoting imperialism. Herbert Croly, whose dream of a Hamiltonian-nationalist State Roosevelt shared, believed that a vigorous and imperial foreign policy could bind the nation together with a common purpose and thus "constitute a beneficial and a necessary stimulus to that better realization of the Promise of our domestic life." He defended the Spanish-American War for the "tremendous impulse" it gave "to the work of national reform. It made Americans more sensitive to a national idea and more conscious of their national responsibilities." In practical terms, Cuba, a "center of disorder," had to be "pacified" in the interests of the establishment of the "American international system."⁴⁴

The Progressive-liberal defense of imperialism was no anomaly; on the other side of the ocean, Fabians were defending imperialism as a tool for producing national reform and "international civilization."⁴⁵ Progressives shared Wilson's dream of making the world safe for democracy—through force and occupation if necessary. "We Progressives preach within our own nation the doctrine of social consciousness," Roosevelt told a group of Progressive Party friends in 1912, as part of a defense of the Monroe Doctrine. "So likewise we preach the doctrine of international social consciousness. . . . [W]e intend to do all we can to help all the nations of mankind . . . to rise . . . toward an orderly and self-respecting and law-abiding civilization. . . ."⁴⁶ And as he wrote in *Outlook* magazine that year,

I feel that the Progressive Party owes no small part of its strength to the fact that it not only stands for the most far reaching measures of social and industrial reform, but . . . also for the right and duty of this nation to take a position of self-respecting strength among the nations of the world, to . . . show that it has both the spirit and the strength to repel injustice from abroad.⁴⁷

The reformist imperialism of the Progressives flowed naturally from their advocacy of statist intervention at home. William Leuchtenburg, in his study of the relationship between progressivism and imperialism, concludes that both were "expressions of the same philosophy of government, . . . a worship of definitive action for action's sake."⁴⁸ Perhaps the English sociologist and political philosopher L. T. Hobhouse, who himself pioneered the transition of English liberalism away from its original commitment to *laissez-faire*, best expressed this theoretical connection:

The socialist development of Liberalism paved the way for Imperialism. So non-intervention abroad went by the board along with *laissez-faire* at home; national liberty was ranked with competitive industrialism as an exploded superstition; a positive theory of the State in domestic affairs was matched by a positive theory of Empire, and the way was made straight for Imperialism.⁴⁹

William Graham Sumner, in rejecting the erosion of liberty and individualism at home, was no less fervent and staunch in his critique of militarism and state intervention abroad. Sumner was one of several vice-presidents of the Anti-Imperialism League, an organization dedicated to reversing the expansionist tide inaugurated by the Spanish-American War. Significantly, the AIL leadership almost without exception shared the laissez-faire economic doctrines characteristic of such English anti-imperialists as Cobden and Bright before them. The logical relation between their economic and anti-imperialist doctrines was not lost on ardent expansionists such as TR's friend Henry Cabot Lodge, who condemned the "theory of the Manchester school" for holding that "territorial expansion or national expansion must be stopped because they were likely to interfere with complete freedom of trade."⁵⁰

Sumner firmly established his reputation as an anti-imperialist even before the Spanish-American War; in 1896, sensitive to the rise in imperialist sentiment reflected in attempts to annex Hawaii and other Pacific islands, he warned that the costly attempt to acquire new territories would "lessen liberty and require discipline. It will increase taxation and all the pressure of government. It will divert the national energy from the provision of self-maintenance and comfort for the people, and will necessitate stronger and more elaborate governmental machinery. All this will be disastrous to republican institutions and to democracy."⁵¹

But nowhere did Sumner show more force or eloquence than in his famous and controversial 1898 address to the Yale Phi Beta Kappa chapter on "The Conquest of the United States by Spain."⁵² Sumner's thesis, as his provocative title suggests, was that despite America's military victory over the decadent and backward Spanish empire, "we are submitting to be conquered by her on the field of ideas and policies." In adopting the false doctrines of national glory and mercantilism which brought Spain to ruin, Sumner felt, America was threatened with the same fate.⁵³

Sumner perceived that in the course of conquering the Filipinos, "our institutions, our most sacred traditions, and our best established maxims have been trampled underfoot." Americans have believed from the time of their independence that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are natural rights, common to all men by virtue of their humanity. But apparently the Filipinos were to be an exception; at the first test of our principles

we throw that doctrine away and adopt the Spanish doctrine. We are told by all imperialists that these people are not fit for liberty and self-government; that it is rebellion for them to resist our beneficence, that we must send fleets and armies to kill them if they do it, . . . that we may buy them or sell them as we please, and dispose of their "trade" for our own advantage. What is that but the policy of Spain to her dependencies?⁵⁴

Sumner echoed a theme common to the anti-imperialists, many of whom were prominent in the struggle for civil rights at home:⁵⁵ if the United States could not insure rights to its own people, how could it be confident of spreading civilization to the Philippines? Sumner's commitment to liberty regardless of race or nationality comes through powerfully in his observation that

When the negro postmaster's house was set on fire in the night in South Carolina, and not only he, but his wife and children, were murdered as they came out, and when, moreover, this incident passed without legal investigation or punishment, it was a bad omen for the extension of liberty, etc., to Malays and Tagals by simply setting over them the American flag.⁵⁶

Sumner's complaint that despite "talk of civilizing lower races . . . we have exterminated them" was certainly borne out in the Philippines by America's systematic use of concentration camps, torture of prisoners, burning of villages, and the indiscriminate killing of civilians.⁵⁷ Ironically, it was Spain's commission of just such abuses as these that provided the moral impetus for American entry into war with Spain in the first place.

The repercussions of imperialism would be great both abroad and at home, Sumner predicted: abroad, because the logic of imperialism required that the U.S. move on to control ever more distant areas in order to "secure" its new possessions. "Of course this means that, on the doctrine, we must take the whole earth in order to be safe on any part of it. . . ." Not only was the doctrine absurd, but it would lead the United States into dangerous competition with other strong colonial powers.⁵⁸

Just as important for Sumner, however, were the domestic implications of imperialism. The sensationalism and jingoism which accompanied America's entry into the war had stifled intelligent debate and prevented "due formulation of public opinion." True patriotism, he objected, "is being prostituted into a nervous intoxication which is fatal to the apprehension of truth"—and he guessed that this climate had been artificially stimulated to "win the consent of classes who would never consent to either financial or political jobbery."⁵⁹

In this connection, he warned that "militarism, expansion, and imperialism will all favor plutocracy," by diverting taxpayers' money into "the hands of a few schemers" and by distracting public attention from the activities of plutocrats at home. Militarism, he predicted, would sap the energies and savings of the population, preventing them from giving "their attention to the problems of their own welfare and . . . their strength to the education and comfort of their own children."⁶⁰ National prosperity and security lay not in the direction of military glory and imperialism—the false values which brought down the old European empires—but in "domestic development, peace, industry, free trade with everybody, low taxes, industrial power."⁶¹

Sumner wanted men to win the struggle against nature, not to engage in fruitless and costly struggles with each other.

Sumner predicted in 1900 that "the political history of the United States for the next fifty years will date from the Spanish war of 1898."⁶² Like many sweeping generalizations, Sumner's is not free from objection, yet it contains an important element of truth. America's record of foreign involvements, culminating in the militarist epoch of the cold war and Vietnam war, have borne out many of Sumner's predictions. The growth of the "national security state," a logical culmination of the process Sumner described, has reduced liberties at home and abroad, interfered with the democratic process, distracted public attention from serious social problems at home, and continues to soak up vast resources that might otherwise be used to tackle those problems. Sumner's insights stemmed not from any special ability as a clairvoyant, but rather from his theoretical appreciation of the consequences to society of a massive growth in state power.

IV. Conclusion

Despite the cogency and incisiveness of Sumner's critique of the State, he failed to stem the tide of growing government intervention. The last decade of his life, in particular, saw the emergence of "progressivism" and the gradual replacement of laissez-faire doctrines with the ideology of the welfare state. Both intellectuals and politicians found grand reform programs and imperial glory more to their liking than the unexciting, hands-off program Sumner advocated. In his own time, Sumner became a reviled figure—among the imperialists who thought him weak and cowardly, among the German-school economists who thought him dangerously outmoded and "cantankerous,"⁶³ and, of course, among socialists, including Upton Sinclair who referred to Sumner as the "prime minister in the empire of plutocratic education" who "took a ghoulish delight in the glorifying of commercialism . . . and . . . never wearied of pouring out ridicule upon the man who imagined he could do anything to make society better."⁶⁴

Thanks to this intellectual attack, Sumner is little read today, with a reputation for conservatism and complacency, worthy of only brief mention in texts largely as a spokesman for the curious 19th century doctrine of Social Darwinism. Yet these stereotypes are far from the truth. Despite his cautious and pessimistic attitude towards social planning, Sumner was no conservative, much less a reactionary; a staunch rationalist and individualist, he ridiculed those who yearned for an old order based on status or "sentimental relations," while he defended the free society precisely because it enabled men to change their social and economic circumstances to meet their needs.⁶⁵ Far from being smug or complacent, his dedication to liberty and reform led him into a lifelong battle against plutocracy, protective

tariffs, and imperialism. His 1909 attack on the Republican Party for taking on "the character of a conspiracy to hold power and to use it for plutocratic ends"⁶⁶ and the long agitation of Republican notables and alumni to remove Sumner from his post at Yale suggest that his writings were not merely a defense of the established order. He simply refused to "reform" that order by assenting to yet another increase in state power.

What makes Sumner's thought endure, curiously enough, is the old-fashioned emphasis on liberty and rights that shines through the cold, positivist guise of his Social Darwinism. "A thoroughly consistent evolutionist," Richard Hofstadter observes, ". . . would not have been so disturbed by the decline of *laissez-faire* . . ."⁶⁷ In Sumner's case, a commitment to liberty came first. Today, few can sympathize with arguments taking as their premise the "survival of the fittest," but the libertarian component of his argument remains strikingly relevant to modern conditions:

If a black man is told that the only status allowed by social institutions to him is that of a slave, no black man can work out into realization the powers which he may possess. If the status of women is fixed by custom and law, no woman can show her power to do anything outside of the limits. The social arrangement which sets free individual energy is liberty; for under this each one may prove what he is by what he does, and the society profits by the expansion and evolution of all the power there is in it.⁶⁸

Today the welfare state is so deeply engrained that few Americans would find much to support in his position that the State owes nothing "to anybody except peace, order, and the guarantee of rights."⁶⁹ The truth is that Sumner, even in his own time, was a radical; and his modern libertarian descendants, such as Friedrich von Hayek, John Hospers, and Murray Rothbard, are equally so in challenging the assumption shared by both liberals and conservatives that the state has a right to control the individual's destiny.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Richard Crockatt, "American Liberalism and the Atlantic World, 1916-1917," *Journal of American Studies*, II (April, 1977): p. 126-143.
2. Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery* (New York: M. Kennerley, 1914), p. 267.
3. Quoted in Sidney Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956), p. 373.
4. Quoted in C. Resek, ed., *The Progressives* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. xvi.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 131-132.
6. Joseph Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization*, III (New York: Viking Press, 1949), p. 206. Cf. R. Ely, *Ground Under Our Feet* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 132-159 on the founding of the AEA. Sumner, in turn, was none too fond of the German-school economists, whose historical method he considered devoid of scientific interest. See Daniel M. Fox, *The Discovery of Abundance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 185n.

7. Fine, *Laissez Faire*, p. 216.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
9. Walter Weyl, in particular, was deeply influenced by his teacher Simon Patten, a German-trained economist and colleague of Ely who believed that in an age of abundance, cooperation could replace competition as a mode of social organization. On the influence and importance of the *New Republic* group in progressive-liberal thought, see Crockatt, "American Liberalism," pp. 123-143, and David Noble, "The New Republic and the Idea of Progress, 1914-20," 38 *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (December, 1951): pp. 387-402, and Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
10. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), pp. 139, 23, 276.
11. Quoted in J. M. Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 107.
12. E. C. Rozwenc, ed., *Roosevelt, Wilson, and the Trusts* (Boston: Heath, 1950).
13. Their differences were unavoidably highlighted in a campaign where two fundamentally progressive candidates needed to assert the uniqueness of their positions. TR frequently made Wilson out to be an unthinking advocate of outmoded Jeffersonian individualism, but this was a campaign exaggeration.
14. Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 27.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
16. Fine, *Laissez Faire*, p. 79.
17. Sumner expressed this conviction in "State Interference," in *War and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911), p. 225.
18. Harris Starr, *William Graham Sumner* (New York: Holt, 1925), p. 22; cf. Fine, *Laissez Faire*, p. 10.
19. Fine, *Laissez Faire*, p. 552. Sumner nearly lost his post at Yale thanks to his insistence on using Spencer's *Study of Sociology* in his classes. See Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (New York: G. Braziller, 1959), p. 20.
20. W. G. Sumner, "The Concentration of Wealth—Its Economic Justification," in *The Challenge of Facts and Others Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914), p. 90.
21. Sumner, "Reply to a Socialist," 1904, in *Challenge of Facts*, pp. 56-57.
22. Sumner, *War and Other Essays*, pp. 176-177.
23. Quoted in Starr, *Sumner*, p. 492.
24. Quoted in Fine, *Laissez Faire*, pp. 82-83.
25. Sumner, "Challenge of Facts," in *Challenge of Facts*, p. 26.
26. Sumner, "The Forgotten Man," in *The Forgotten Man and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), pp. 493, 482.
27. Sumner, "On the Case of a Certain Man Who is Never Thought of," in *War*, pp. 247-249; Maurice Davie, *William Graham Sumner* (New York: Crowell, 1963), p. 41.
28. Quotes from Starr, *Sumner*, pp. 427-430.
29. Sumner, *War*, pp. 209-210.
30. Quoted in Davie, *Sumner*, pp. 37-38.
31. Sumner, "Some Points in the New Social Creed," in *Earth Hunger and Other Essays* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), pp. 207-208; "The State and Monopoly," in *ibid.*, p. 277; "Federal Legislation on Railroads," in *Challenge of Facts*, p. 182.
32. Quoted in Starr, *Sumner*, p. 446.
33. Sumner, "The Mores of the Present and the Future," in *War*, p. 160.
34. Sumner, "Democracy and Plutocracy," in *Earth Hunger*, p. 287.
35. Sumner, "Separation of State and Market," in *Earth Hunger*, p. 310.
36. Sumner, "Absurd Effort . . ." in *War*, pp. 206-207.
37. Sumner, *Folkways* (New York: Dover, 1959), pp. 170-171.
38. Sumner, "The State and Monopoly," in *Earth Hunger*, pp. 277-278.
39. Sumner, "Protectionism: the Ism which teaches that Waste Makes Wealth," in *Forgotten Man*, pp. 10-11, 79, 110-111; "Protectionism Twenty Years After," in *ibid.*, p. 134.
40. Sumner, "Protectionism Twenty Years After," in *ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

41. Quoted in Davie, *Sumner*, p. 33.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
43. Theodore Roosevelt, "Expansion and Peace," in William Harbaugh, ed., *Writings of Theodore Roosevelt* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), pp. 28-34. In 1901 TR told an audience, along much the same lines, "It is our duty toward the people living in barbarism to see that they are freed from their chains." See H. K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 34.
44. Croly, *Promise*, pp. 289, 169, 297. Among the German-school economists, Simon Patten, Walter Weyl's teacher, was a particularly ardent imperialist. See Fox, *Discovery*, pp. 115-116.
45. Arthur Ekirch, *Progressivism in America* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), p. 182.
46. Quoted in Harbaugh, *Writings*, p. 77.
47. TR, "How I Became a Progressive," *Outlook* (October 12, 1912) reprinted in Resek, *Progressives*, p. 336.
48. William Leuchtenburg, "Progressivism and Imperialism," 39 *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (December, 1952): pp. 483-504.
49. Ekirch, *Progressivism*, pp. 185-186.
50. E. Berkeley Tompkins, *Anti-Imperialism in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1970), pp. 148-149.
51. Sumner, "The Fallacy of Territorial Expansion," 1896, in *War*, p. 292.
52. The outraged *New York Sun* called Sumner's speech "typical of the smart and shallow teaching by which that institution [Yale] has suffered him so long to pervert the intelligence of its students." Quoted in Starr, *Sumner*, pp. 297-299.
53. Sumner, *War*, p. 297.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 302, 309-310.
55. Many of the anti-imperialists—most notably William Lloyd Garrison, son of the famous abolitionist publicist—had a strong background in abolitionist and post-bellum civil rights activities. See Tompkins, *Anti-Imperialism*, p. 151.
56. Sumner, *War*, p. 331. These quotes should be sufficient to refute the view that Sumner, like TR, argued out the issue of imperialism on Social Darwinist grounds and came to an anti-imperialist conclusion only because of his fears that "Absorption of inferior peoples would mongrelize the race and dilute the purity upon which its supposed superiority depended." This erroneous interpretation is from Lloyd Gardner, et al., *Creation of the American Empire* (New York: Rand McNally, 1973), p. 222.
57. See Stuart Miller, "Our Mylai of 1900: Americans in Philippine Insurrection," in M. B. Young, ed., *American Expansionism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), pp. 103-116.
58. Sumner, "The Predominant Issue," in *War*, p. 351.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 298-299, 300-301.
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 324-325.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 351.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
63. Dorfman, *Economic Mind*, p. xxviii, quoting John Bates Clark.
64. Quoted in Starr, *Sumner*, p. 256.
65. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, p. 8. Hofstadter, with an eye for paradox, writes, "We may wonder whether, in the entire history of thought, there was ever a conservative so utterly progressive as this."
66. Sumner, "The Mores of the Present and the Future," in *War*, p. 160.
67. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, p. 65.
68. Sumner, "Separation of State and Market," in *Earth Hunger*, p. 308.
69. Quoted in Davie, *Sumner*, p. 42.