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William Graham Sumner and the Problem of Liberal Democracy

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Abstract: This paper examines problems of the liberal democratic order through an analysis of the political thought of a neglected American thinker, William Graham Sumner. Sumner argues that the liberal order is inextricably linked to laissez-faire, and is under siege from the closely interrelated threats of socialism, plutocracy, imperialism, and the degeneration of democracy. He recognizes that the liberal-democratic capitalist state has significant deficiencies, including atomization, "cold" economic relations, and a loss of "poetry." It also seems to depend upon values which are not readily propagated by liberalism. But efforts to address deficiencies through government action amount to attempts to intermix philosophically incompatible elements and serve to hasten the system's collapse. Sumner's work unwittingly suggests that the usual "Lockean" liberal model may be so flawed that a revised public philosophy, with new language and paradigms, is needed for the effective pursuit of his goals of freedom, dignity, and human development.

Introduction

Problems and questions of the liberal democratic order are central to much contemporary work in political theory. Questions of particular concern include the relationship of liberalism to free-market capitalism and to socialism; issues of atomization, concentrations of power, statism, and "crony capitalism"; and the central problem of building and sustaining a free, democratic, and humane state. Much of the contemporary literature on issues of political modernity fails to take full advantage of the work of earlier generations of thinkers. One neglected but particularly relevant social commentator is William Graham Sumner. Sumner's thought addresses—explicitly or implicitly—a number of central issues of the liberal order. On the one hand Sumner is, broadly speaking, a great champion of classical liberalism and of a laissez-faire capitalist state. On the other hand, what emerges from a study of his work is a sense that the liberal order is fraught with internal contradictions and fundamental problems. For Sumner the liberal-democratic free-market state is the only form of state worth pursuing, but we sacrifice much to obtain it. And that state is a fragile one, and may contain the seeds of its own destruction. Sumner's writings on political topics tend to be

modest in length, polemical, and more popular than scholarly in style. From a political-philosophical perspective they are not highly rigorous or systematic. However, they are full of insightful commentary, and careful consideration of them yields a fresh perspective on increasingly pressing questions as well as an important and useful analysis of the modern state.

Here, an examination of some of Sumner's writings and speeches serves to illuminate some contemporary problems of liberal democracy. One area of inquiry involves various deficiencies widely perceived in liberalism, and how—and whether—these may be addressed. Another, even more fundamental question is that of the sustainability of the liberal order. Is it inherently stable over the long term? Approaching such questions from a perspective of practical politics, we might ask: Can the liberal order be "tweaked" effectively by those who seek to improve or to save it? That is, can perceived problems or vulnerabilities in liberalism be readily fixed through politically driven changes? One conclusion to which Sumner's work points is that, if one wishes to maintain liberty and political stability, one must abandon attempts to depart from a free-market-based order while still subscribing to traditional liberal language and paradigms. He argues that only one form of liberalism is sustainable: a "cold" and harsh laissez-faire state. Yet his work suggests that even this form of liberalism may be doomed to collapse; the very conditions and qualities of liberalism ultimately undermine it. Consequently, an analysis of his writings also points toward another conclusion—one never explicitly advanced by Sumner himself. This is that the liberal order may be so problematic that a fundamental rethinking of the liberal tradition and its meaning—along with the possible development of different language and paradigms—may be needed if a healthy, free, democratic state is to be maintained over the long term.

William Graham Sumner Today

William Graham Sumner is one of those once-prominent social thinkers whose names remain widely known, but who have largely been reduced to a historical footnote. Consequently a very brief introduction to him and to his legacy is appropriate. An American scholar and writer of the later nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century, he is remembered in two capacities. First, he helped to develop the discipline of sociology. As a professor of sociology and author of a number of sociological works, including the major study *Folkways*,[1] he came to be widely recognized as one of the field's most important pioneers. Sumner was one of the early champions of the idea of what some call "value-free" social science. In developing a "scientific" approach to social and cultural studies, he helped bring such terms as

[1]William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959).

"mores," "folkways," "ethnocentrism," and "cultural relativism" into common use.[2]

Alongside his scholarly sociological works, Sumner had a second source of fame: his popular political essays. Sumner was a prolific writer, publishing a long string of polemical pieces in newspapers and magazines, some in serialized form. These addressed various political and social issues; some were republished (often in modified form) as short books or collections of essays. It is these works, which typically advocate a free, democratic, laissez-faire capitalist American state, and oppose both socialism and plutocracy, which are of particular interest to us. Although such essays, especially the antisocialist *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*[3] and the anti-imperial *Conquest of the United States by Spain*[4] are often treated—briefly—in courses in American political thought or American political development, Sumner's work has been the subject of remarkably little published scholarship by political theorists or philosophers over the past several decades. This could be partly attributable to the popular and often unsystematic nature of his political writings, but plenty of popular and unsystematic writers receive significant scholarly attention. A bigger reason is probably the common characterization of Sumner as a social Darwinist. Since social Darwinism is generally not given serious consideration today as a desirable or useful form of political thought, Sumner—often cited as its leading American representative—now seems to be viewed more as a historical artifact than as a political thinker with ongoing relevance.

The historian Richard Hofstadter probably helped to "close the book" on serious political-philosophical study of Sumner. Hofstadter began his academic career with a strong aversion to capitalism. With the aim of criticizing some of the thinking behind the excesses of the free market in America, he wrote his dissertation, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915*; this was published as a book in 1944.[5] A spin-off article, "William Graham Sumner, Social Darwinist," was published in 1941.[6] Later commentators have noted that despite his explicit focus on "social Darwinism,"

[2]Steve J. Shone, "Cultural Relativism and the Savage: The Alleged Inconsistency of William Graham Sumner," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 63, no. 3 (2004): 697. For general biographical information on Sumner, see Bruce Curtis, *William Graham Sumner* (Boston: Twayne Publishers / G. K. Hall, 1981), and Robert C. Bannister, ed., *On Liberty, Society, and Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), foreword.

[3]William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883).

[4]Available in Bannister, ed., *On Liberty, Society, and Politics.*

[5]Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).

[6]Richard Hofstadter, "William Graham Sumner, Social Darwinist," *The New England Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1941): 457–77.

Hofstadter never clearly defines the term.[7] It appears that Hofstadter applied the label "social Darwinist" to any advocate of free-market capitalism, whether or not that advocate espoused an explicitly social-Darwinist philosophy or made prominent use of Darwinian arguments. This broad brush may explain why Hofstadter never bothers to mount much of a defense of his categorization of Sumner, but simply takes for granted that this designation fits. At any rate, his article and book give the casual reader the impression that they convey all that one really needs to know about Sumner, while in fact they offer portrayals that are one-dimensional and very incomplete. With the downplaying of its classical liberal, republican, and traditionalist elements, Sumner's thought is portrayed as quite alien to the mainstream Anglo-American tradition. In case one misses his point, Hofstadter explicitly asserts that "Sumner's conception of the proper limits of state action, although not so drastic as [Herbert] Spencer's, was radical in the extreme."[8] Hofstadter does not explain how one's views can be "radical in the extreme" if they are "not so drastic" as those of another prominent thinker. In fact, one may argue that Sumner's general "conception of the proper limits of state action" could be characterized as not dramatically different from that which was taken for granted by many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers; also, it is difficult to see his political and economic views as notably more "radical" than those put forth by libertarian and free-market-oriented thinkers who are taken seriously in academic discourse today.

Sumner was certainly influenced by Herbert Spencer, and used Spencer's texts when teaching sociology at Yale.[9] And a prominent former student, Albert Keller, made an effort to "convert his mentor to Darwinism" very late in Sumner's career.[10] However, an open question exists among scholars as to whether Sumner can properly be labeled a social Darwinist. Since Hofstadter's time the general movement of Sumner scholars has been away from acceptance of the "social Darwinist" designation, at least in an unequivocal or unqualified way.[11] Full treatment of the question of the appropriateness of the "social Darwinist" label is beyond the scope of this study. And this question may in fact not be a critical one. What does matter is that this label

[7]Norman Erik Smith, "William Graham Sumner as an Anti-Social Darwinist," *Pacific Sociological Review* 2, no. 3 (July 1979): 334.

[8]Hofstadter, "William Graham Sumner," 471.

[9]Curtis, *William Graham Sumner*, 63.

[10]Robert C. Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 101.

[11]See, for example, Smith, "William Graham Sumner as an Anti-Social Darwinist"; Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); and H. A. Scott Trask, "William Graham Sumner: Against Democracy, Plutocracy, and Imperialism," *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 18, no. 4 (2004): 1–27.

has stuck among nonspecialists, and has consequently obscured interesting and important political-philosophical dimensions of Sumner's thought. For one thing, some of Sumner's views are genuinely conservative or traditionalist and could not be classified as social Darwinist in any way. Many of his most important arguments, however, can be characterized neither as social Darwinist nor as conservative, but as classical liberal. And a sort of "Jeffersonian republican" sentiment is also evident in some of his thought. The liberal dimensions of Sumner's thought are now generally taken for granted by the small number of contemporary scholars who write on him. However, the fact that arguments in defense of small government and the free market can spring from liberalism, and not only from social Darwinism, appears to have been lost to (or perhaps deliberately ignored by) mid-twentieth-century commentators such as Hofstadter. So, Sumner continues to be widely known, and widely dismissed, as "the social Darwinist," even though he can be considered an heir to the mainstream Anglo-American classical liberal tradition.

It is Sumner's approach to the liberal tradition and to the modern democratic capitalist order that makes his thought especially relevant to contemporary discourse. On the one hand, he takes on the role of defender of the laissez-faire capitalist state, and he articulates an honest and unflinching understanding of that order. On the other hand, he has a sort of "love-hate relationship" with the liberal-democratic free-market state, and with political modernity in general. Sumner is not one who believes that we can have it all; life inevitably consists of a series of trade-offs, and this applies to the state and to society as a whole as much as it does to individuals. To him the modern capitalist order is one which we must embrace fully, but in so doing we sacrifice much. He is also pessimistic about the ability of the United States (or, presumably, of any other state) to maintain either free-market economics or an effective and desirable form of liberal democracy over the long term in the modern world. Although Sumner's thought may once have been characterized as outdated, it now has a striking relevance to current political-philosophical discourse.

Socialism and Plutocracy

Before applying Sumner's thought to political-philosophical questions it is important to get a taste of his popular political arguments. For Sumner a proper liberal democracy is, or ought to be, relatively close to a laissez-faire capitalist state, and his defense of laissez-faire serves as the background against which discussions of his thought must be set.[12] His most famous rhetorical attack on the welfare state and government intervention in the market

[12]It should perhaps be noted that Sumner is not a dogmatic proponent of complete laissez-faire, in the sense of a state with absolutely no governmental roles related to

is his discussion of the "Forgotten Man." This popular argument can be seen to anticipate the kinds of critiques of the welfare state which became commonplace during the Reagan-Thatcher era. Per Sumner, there is a falseness to public discussions of what "society" or "the state" should do for certain persons who are deemed underprivileged. There is no such thing as a "society" or "state" with independent means of action. Society and the state are collections of people, and they draw their resources from the individuals who make them up. A public discussion about what "the state" or "society" should do for people is therefore really a discussion about "what all-of-us ought to do for some-of-us."[13] But, in the real world, even this formulation is false. What the public policy process really boils down to is "that A and B decide what C shall do for D."[14] "A" and "B" are social reformers, while "D" is the person deemed worthy of some sort of aid. "C" is the Forgotten Man, essentially "Joe Lunchbox" who works hard, takes care of himself and his family, but wants to be left alone—and to let others alone. To Sumner this is generally the most admirable sort of person, and the sort of person upon whom society most depends. He is, however, largely forgotten in the policy process; he is the person who, in one way or another, bears the brunt of the cost of any benefits which "society" confers on "D," but he is largely excluded from a meaningful role in decision making.

Arguments such as the "Forgotten Man" attack on social assistance for the poor may lead one to assume that Sumner is simply a champion of society's winners against its losers. This is not the case. Although Sumner is very concerned about creeping socialism, he argues at least as stridently against "plutocracy." This refers not just to government by the wealthy but, more specifically, to the dominance of the state by moneyed interests with political pull who manipulate public policies, and dip into the public coffers, for their own enrichment. One recent commentator observes that "Sumner discerned that the real danger to liberty under democratic forms came not from a majority bent on plundering the possessors and makers of wealth, but from elites acting in the name and under the cover of the people."[15] It is certainly the case that Sumner regarded plutocracy as a more immediate problem than the welfare state and, consequently, devoted more of his attention to it. Although he clearly feared a future of socialism, such as that being advocated by Edward Bellamy, he believed that plutocracy was with us already and was growing worse by the year. Along with writing on the Forgotten Man, Sumner wrote on the "Forgotten Woman," who represents the other half of

economic activity. And late in life he supported government action to preserve competition in the face of monopolistic tendencies. See Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, 110.

[13]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 12.

[14]Ibid., 23.

[15]Trask, "William Graham Sumner," 5.

his argument. While the wrongs done to the Forgotten Man are the result of governmental intervention on behalf of some needy group, Sumner's Forgotten Woman suffers from governmental intervention on behalf of wealthy commercial interests. She is a seamstress working at low wages to support herself and her family, who must absorb a steep increase in the price of thread as a result of tariffs imposed to protect—and enrich—domestic producers.[16]

To Sumner a major characteristic of plutocracy is the predominance of "jobbery" and of the phenomena today referred to as "crony capitalism" and "industrial policy." Instead of devoting their efforts to becoming more competitive in a free marketplace, plutocrats devote their efforts to influencing government; in this way they profit by obtaining lucrative contracts, putting in place some form of favorable governmental intervention, or otherwise tilting the playing field in their favor: "Modern plutocrats buy their way through elections and legislatures, in the confidence of being able to get powers which will recoup them for all the outlay and yield an ample surplus besides."[17] Plutocracy, "in its motive, its processes, its code, and its sanctions" is, Sumner maintains, "infinitely corrupting to all the institutions which ought to preserve and protect society."[18]

There is, of course, nothing particularly unusual about a political commentator of the late nineteenth century decrying plutocracy, jobbery, and corruption. What is of interest for our purpose is the fact that Sumner sees plutocracy and socialism as two sides of the same coin. Although he does not explicate the relationship as well as he could, it is clear that to him the mentalities of the two phenomena are much the same, since both focus on wealth transfers through government action. And, instead of plutocracy and socialism acting in opposition to each other, the growth of socialism actually feeds plutocracy, for at least two reasons. First, as has been suggested, it promotes the mentality that people should look to government for material goods beyond those basic public goods (roads, security, etc.) which are necessarily provided to all. Second, by yielding bigger, more active government, socialism creates many more opportunities for jobbery and for other plutocratic manipulations. This multiplies the danger that good government and a healthy society will be destroyed by "elites acting in the name and under the cover of the people."[19] What Sumner seems most to fear is plutocracy and socialism growing hand-in-hand, until the United States degenerates into a sort of bread-and-circuses state in which elites run the government for their own benefit while throwing bones to the broader population,

[16]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 145–49.

[17]Sumner, "Definitions of Democracy and Plutocracy," in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, 144.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Trask, "William Graham Sumner," 5.

which comes to see itself as dependent upon—and hence subservient to—the state.

Sumner's fear of the dangers of plutocracy, and of its most obvious symptom, jobbery, helped make him a vocal opponent of the Spanish-American War and of imperialism generally.[20] War and imperialism, he believed, promoted plutocracy by creating more opportunities for dubious government contracts and by offering justifications for government actions which favored powerful interests at the expense of the "little guy." And, by promoting bigger, more centralized government, war and imperialism also worked against democracy. Sumner explains:

> The fathers of this republic created a peculiar form of confederated state formed of democratic republics. They meant to secure us a chance to live in peace, happiness, and prosperity, free from the social burdens which had cursed the civilized nations of the Old World. We were to be free from war, feudalism, state church, balance of power, heavy taxation, and what Benjamin Franklin called the "pest of glory." ... [I]f we are to have what the fathers of the republic planned for us, we must submit to the limitations which are inevitable in the plan; and one of them is that we can never have an imperial policy and can hold no subject dependencies. There is no place for them in the system, and the attempt to hold and administer them would produce corruption which would react on our system and destroy it.[21]

Despite his dogmatic commitment to free-market capitalism, Sumner is a principled political thinker, and not an advocate for wealth and privilege, for established commercial interests, or simply for the status quo. Even Hofstadter admitted that "Sumner was always suspect to a large part of the community of wealth and orthodoxy because of his independence."[22]

Political Modernity vs. Medievalism

Sumner's linkage of socialism, plutocracy, and imperialism is most significant when understood as one component of his broader understanding of the liberal order. Before discussing Sumner's understanding of "liberalism," it is appropriate to note that, like many (perhaps most) nineteenth-century thinkers in the liberal tradition, he does not use the term. Instead he employs such substitutes as "free democracy," "free state," and "modern state," which would have been more in keeping with common usage. However, in mounting a defense of his preferred state, Sumner effectively articulates a classical

[20]His most famous anti-imperialism essay is *The Conquest of the United States by Spain*, available in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*.

[21]William Graham Sumner, "Earth Hunger," in *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1980), 56.

[22]Hofstadter, "William Graham Sumner," 475.

liberal vision: "The notion of civil liberty which we have inherited is that of *a status created for the individual by laws and institutions, the effect of which is that each man is guaranteed the use of all his own powers exclusively for his own welfare*. . . . All institutions are to be tested by the degree to which they guarantee liberty."[23] The latter sentence is a short textbook definition of liberalism, while Sumner's italicized phrase reflects a strikingly Lockean conception of the state.

Although Sumner openly acknowledges the unpleasant social realities of the United States—wealth and poverty, "great inequality of social position and social chances"[24]—he sees class talk and social claims as incompatible both with the American tradition and with what we would call the liberal order. To Sumner, the claims which some are making on others (or, more typically, which social reformers are making on behalf of some and at the expense of others) do not automatically flow from an impartial observation of social conditions. Rather, they are the result of "old social theories" which remain powerful in people's minds, but which are "totally inconsistent" with the liberal doctrines that are the controlling paradigms of the modern world.[25] These claims are premodern in their origin and in their nature. Sumner explains:

> In the Middle Ages men were united by custom and prescription into associations, ranks, guilds, and communities of various kinds. These ties endured as long as life lasted. Consequently society was dependent, throughout all its details, on status, and the tie, or bond, was sentimental. In our modern state, and in the United States more than anywhere else, the social structure is based on contract, and status is of the least importance.[26]

Here Sumner directly contrasts modern liberal society with the medieval world. The highlighting of this contrast has been common since the Enlightenment, when the feudal period came to be known as the Dark Ages. It is perhaps somewhat problematic for liberalism to understand itself in this way, since considerable time elapsed between the end of the Middle Ages and the self-conscious flowering of a free society as a controlling political and social paradigm. The contrast between the two orders is useful, however. According to Sumner, "the idea of the 'free man,' as we understand it, is the product of a revolt against mediaeval and feudal ideas; and our notion of equality, when it is true and practical, can be explained only by that revolt."[27]

[23]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 34 (emphasis in original).
[24]Ibid., 22.
[25]Ibid., 24.
[26]Ibid., 25.
[27]Ibid., 33.

The society of the Middle Ages was of course relatively static. Following a static model, "custom and prescription," along with one's birth, defined one's position in life. This in turn defined one's obligations to various other people, and defined what one could expect from others. Longstanding "sentimental" ties and bonds governed social and economic relations, maintaining the fabric of society while weaving each person into it. While in the Middle Ages society was generally understood to reflect some sort of universal order, the politics of the modern era are grounded in social contract theory. Society is composed of independent rational individuals who contract in some manner to form a state. As a part of this social contract model, employment, church membership, and most other forms of human interaction tend to be understood as voluntary associations. This contractualism is most clear in economic relations, which are Sumner's primary focus. He goes on:

> Contract, however, is rational—even rationalistic. It is also realistic, cold, and matter-of-fact. A contract relation is based on a sufficient reason, not on custom or prescription. It is not permanent. It endures only so long as the reason for it endures. In a state based on contract sentiment is out of place in any public or common affairs. It is relegated to the sphere of private and personal relations, where it depends not at all on class types, but on personal acquaintance and personal estimates.[28]

Today's people are independent individuals, not defined by fixed social positions, who freely contract with one another on their own terms. Contracts are based on convenience, not sentiment, and are terminated with no regrets when one party perceives that the relationship is no longer to its benefit. Sentiment is relegated to the private sphere of personal relationships, which now come to be distinguished more sharply from economic relationships and the public sphere.

This modern understanding of society is radically different from the medieval one. Sumner knows how great the difference is; the problem, in his view, is that most Americans have only a partial grasp of the sweeping nature of this difference, and of the nature of the new order. Consequently they make sentiment-based appeals for state assistance for particular social groups. Such appeals are incompatible with a liberal society. For one thing, besides their basis in sentiment, they involve class-based thinking. Although liberty is not to be equated with democracy, Sumner understands it to be intimately tied to the idea of legal equality. Despite significant socioeconomic differences among people, all are of equal "status" in the modern state. People of the same class, according to Sumner, cannot make claims upon each other; social claims (in the medieval model) are made between people in one recognized group and those in another recognized group. Class-based thinking is therefore invalid ina modern liberal world which champions equality and universalism.[29]

[28]Ibid., 25.
[29]Ibid.

An objection could be made here that the modern way of thinking of "class"—as a socioeconomic category into which an individual falls at a particular moment—is significantly different from the medieval conception of fixed classes. Sumner does not really address this objection. One might also question his assertion that claims for assistance have always been made across, rather than within, classes. It can be argued, however, that such objections miss his main point, since the most serious incompatibility of social welfare thinking with liberalism lies not in the identification of "classes" per se, but in its fundamental conception of economic and social relationships.

In contrast with many contemporary opponents of a socialized state whose work tends to have conservative or reactionary overtones, Sumner sees himself—not the socialists—as the truly modern or progressive thinker. In this particular sense he has a kinship with classical liberal thinkers of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, who represented the emerging modern order. Like them, Sumner understands himself to be battling against outdated ideas of the past, which are still holding on in modified forms. What makes the social reformers medieval throwbacks is their belief that various groups of people—no matter how defined—can legitimately assert claims against others. For, "one man, in a free state, cannot claim help from, and cannot be charged to give help to, another."[30] To Sumner this is essentially the very definition of a free state. Under the Lockean liberal model,[31] I have property in my labor, and, hence, in the fruits of that labor. If I am compelled to labor for another, I am in a state of servitude, not freedom. Or, one could say, I am in a state of feudalism, in which others can make claims upon me which I am bound to honor, not because of any obligations which I have voluntarily incurred but purely because of our relative positions in society. According to Sumner, the point of moving toward the modern liberal state was to get rid of such claims: "a society based on contract is a society of free and independent men, who form ties without favor or obligation. . . . A society based on contract, therefore, gives the utmost room and chance for individual development, and for all the self-reliance and dignity of a free man."[32]

For Sumner, "the free man in a free democracy, when he cut off all the ties which might pull him down, severed also all the ties by which he might have made others pull him up."[33] One cannot have it both ways. One cannot enjoy the autonomy that comes from being largely free from societal obligations, but at the same time impose obligations on others. To do so would constitute

[30]Ibid., 27.

[31]There is, of course, a great deal going on in Locke besides what is mentioned here. In fact, some of his thought could be characterized as more medieval and Christian than liberal/capitalist/modern. Our interest here is not Locke per se, but what is most commonly taken from him.

[32]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 26.

[33]Ibid., 39.

an attempt to claim a unique status above everyone else. One might point out that, even in the Middle Ages, no such status existed; that is, no one could impose obligations on others but remain entirely free of some sort of reciprocal duties and obligations. At any rate, the modern free man "wants to be subject to no man. He wants to be equal to his fellows, as all sovereigns are equal. So be it; but he cannot escape the deduction that he can call no man to his aid. The other sovereigns will not respect his independence if he becomes dependent, and they cannot respect his equality if he sues for favors."[34] Both freedom and the equality which is a prerequisite for freedom are violated by governmental intervention on behalf of some people at the expense of others, whether this intervention takes the form of handouts to the poor, or excessive regulation of conditions of employment and commerce, or jobbery for the wealthy and well connected, or protectionist trade legislation, or interference in the free market for any reason. All departures from laissez-faire are alike in that they violate the individualism that is at the heart of a free society.

Democratic Capitalism and its Discontents

Thus far, the argument advanced by Sumner is relatively straightforward. It is important to note that Sumner's writings not only reject socialism and plutocracy in their fullest manifestations, but also suggest that any attempts to erect compromises between a modern free-market state and such "medieval" forms are untenable. A liberal state cannot be maintained in the context of redistributionist, heavily regulatory, or protectionist policies. Sumner complains that political and social discourse in the America of his day suffers from "repeated confusion and absurdity" arising from an "elementary contradiction, that there are classes and that there are not classes."[35] Efforts to retain the language and, superficially, the public philosophy of liberalism while simultaneously pursuing socialistic and/or plutocratic policies end up hampering public discourse. For Sumner liberalism is based upon the idea that we have property in our persons and in our labor; this basic liberal paradigm is understood to be a necessary component of liberty. If our politics departs from such paradigms we are left with no widely recognized philosophical guides or boundaries to employ in evaluating policy proposals. A slippery slope potentially results, as the "confusion and absurdity" in public discourse yields a haphazard collection of interventionist policies which move the state farther and farther from a "free democracy." Moreover, one may speculate that, as the differences between a state's liberal rhetoric and its nonliberal policies become greater, the tensions and contradictions will

[34]Ibid., 38–39.
[35]Ibid., 15–16.

become more widely and plainly evident, until even the pretense of a liberal state is abandoned.

Sumner's lesson is: embrace laissez-faire capitalism and adhere to it rather strictly. But as is hinted at by his above reference to the "cold" nature of a contract-based society, he does not view the modern capitalist state through rose-colored glasses. It can be a harsh and uncaring world, and we gave up quite a lot when we adopted it: "That we have lost some grace and elegance is undeniable. That life once held more poetry and romance is true enough."[36] The "free man in a free democracy," Sumner tells us, "is, in a certain sense, an isolated man. The family tie does not bring to him disgrace for the misdeeds of his relatives, as it once would have done, but neither does it furnish him with the support which it would have given. The relations of men are open and free, but they are also loose."[37] Although Sumner embraces the liberal capitalist order, his view of it bears some resemblance to that of its harshest critics, such as Karl Marx, who observed that modern bourgeois society

> has pitilessly torn asunder all the many-coloured feudal bonds which united men to their "natural superiors," and has left no other tie twixt man and man but naked self-interest and callous cash payment. It has drowned religious ecstasy, chivalrous enthusiasm, and middle class sentimentality in the ice-cold water of egotistical calculation. . . . It has, in one word, replaced an exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions by exploitation open, unashamed, direct, and brutal.[38]

To a degree, Sumner would agree with Marx here. Besides the loss of "grace and elegance" and "poetry and romance," Sumner notes a decline in "patrician" values and a rise in more brutal and unsentimental economic relations. Social atomization is also part of the package, presumably along with any pathologies that may accompany it. Modern man is left to lead an isolated existence, with little social support available. Sumner also agrees with Marx that there is no going backward in the full sense: "The feudal ties can never be restored. If they could be restored they would bring back personal caprice, favoritism, sycophancy, and intrigue."[39] Where Sumner differs from the socialists is in his characterization of socialism as not a new progressive order, but a kind of step backward to a quasi feudalism. Despite its disadvantages, it is the modern, contract-based free state which maximizes freedom, human dignity, and individual development. And "a

[36]Ibid., 25–26.

[37]Ibid., 39.

[38]Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Communist Manifesto and Other Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 127.

[39]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 26.

society of free men, co-operating under contract, is by far the strongest society which has ever yet existed."[40]

In some ways, the picture which emerges of Sumner's modern free state is rather bleak. We gain freedom, but at the cost of exposure to a potentially brutal economic order, and at the cost of an atomized existence in which we have little support, be it economic, social, or psychological. "Grace and elegance" and "poetry and romance" have diminished in our lives. One may be tempted to raise the question how "strong" a society may in fact be under such circumstances. Sumner may be commended for his effort to reject idyllic dreams, to identify the trade-offs which he sees as inevitable, and to offer an honest characterization of the sort of state he supports. If, however, this state has such glaring deficiencies, the question arises how it may be maintained. Strong political pressures would presumably exist to alter the state and depart from laissez-faire. Even if a general agreement could be reached on an abstract level that a laissez-faire order is the best—and perhaps only—option for maintaining the kinds of freedoms that liberalism values, one could imagine public support arising for various initiatives to address particular problems on an ad hoc basis, which would, in Sumner's model, set the state on a path of decline.

Besides the danger of succumbing to socialistic pressures, Sumner's state is ill equipped to resist the rise of plutocracy. In opposing plutocracy Sumner sees himself as fighting "personal caprice, favoritism, sycophancy, and intrigue" not unlike that which existed in the Middle Ages. But Sumner celebrates free-market capitalism, a position which is not logically inconsistent with opposition to plutocracy but which raises practical difficulties. How does one prevent the rise of plutocracy in a climate of unrestrained capitalism and its accompanying concentrations of wealth? Sumner defends and even celebrates the concentration of wealth; in fact, he devotes an essay specifically to this topic.[41] At the same time, he is keenly aware of at least some of its dangers. He finds the situation of the modern-day capitalist order to be unique, remarking that "this is the thing which seems to me to be really new and really threatening; there have been states in which there have been large plutocratic elements, but none in which wealth seemed to have such absorbing and controlling power as it threatens us."[42]

Sumner tells us that "in the United States the opponent of plutocracy is democracy."[43] Such a statement seems reasonable enough, perhaps even obvious. But in the context of his thought this assertion is actually complex and problematic, and unpacking it requires some care. First, although

[40]Ibid.

[41]William Graham Sumner, *The Concentration of Wealth: Its Economic Justification*, reprinted in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*.

[42]Sumner, "Definitions of Democracy and Plutocracy," 143.

[43]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 106.

Sumner sometimes uses "democracy" in the popular sense of a liberal state, he is usually quite careful to impart a more precise meaning to the term. It is a form of decision making, and it is based upon the principle of equality. In Sumner's mind, democracy, although distinct from liberalism's freedom and mobility, is tied to the egalitarian sense that all citizens have opportunities to better themselves, and all are expected to take advantage of those opportunities and to contribute to society: "Certainly liberty, and universal suffrage, and democracy … carry with them the exaction of individual responsibility."[44] Society and the state are therefore seen as the product of the cooperation and contributions of a vast number of largely independent actors, equal before the law.

A problem exists in that democracy is the only real opponent of plutocracy available in the modern state, but is not a particularly effective opponent. Historically, Sumner notes, "the most successful limitation on plutocracy has come from aristocracy."[45] The prestige of hereditary rank helped check the raw and abusive political exercise of the power of wealth. This does not make Sumner a big fan of hereditary aristocracy; he suggests, in fact, that the old feudal lords were plutocrats of a sort. Like other plutocrats they wanted to acquire wealth "without paying the price of industry and economy," but by other means.[46] This meant, in part, plundering through the direct use of force, but they also "found that means of robbery which consisted in gaining control of the civil organization—the State—and using its poetry and romance as a glamour under cover of which they made robbery lawful."[47]

As bad as those feudal lords were, a culture and set of mores arose around them over time, tempering their behavior. Consequently, "the feudal code has, through centuries, bred a high type of men, and constituted a caste."[48] While to some the term "caste" may have negative connotations, to the sociologist Sumner caste has important functions, especially at the upper end of society. One need not be a modern sociologist to make this observation; the Old Whig Edmund Burke, for example, believed that the sort of class solidarity and honor that aristocrats developed was important in promoting good behavior and in softening and stabilizing the state.[49] To Sumner, aristocracy

[44]Ibid., 41.
[45]Ibid., 104.
[46]Ibid., 101.
[47]Ibid., 102.
[48]Ibid., 103.
[49]Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 8, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). For a general treatment of the relationship of older class structures to the new commercial order, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

helps to check the worst excesses of a deformed capitalism: "Aristocrats have . . . always been, as a class, chargeable with licentiousness and gambling. They have, however, as a class, despised lying and stealing. They have always pretended to maintain a standard of honor."[50] In contrast, the middle class—from which the new capitalist class and its values have come—has "abhorred gambling and licentiousness, but it has not always been strict about truth and pecuniary fidelity."[51] In the modern era the hereditary aristocracy has declined, while wealth has greatly increased. The result is "that the wealth-power has been developed, while the moral and social sanctions by which that power ought to be controlled have not yet developed."[52] He does note that the wealthy often try to imitate the aristocrats, and he holds out some hope that over time they will absorb their more desirable mores, since "society can do without patricians, but it cannot do without the patrician values."[53] However, he finds that the amount of progress which has been evident thus far has not been encouraging.

Therefore, although he believes that liberal democracy is the best available political and social system, Sumner is not entirely pleased with the fact that, as Burke observed, "the age of chivalry is gone."[54] He would like for us—somehow—to develop the best values of the age of chivalry (especially among our moneyed classes), without actually adopting the feudalism of that age as our political model. Unfortunately, Sumner does not explain precisely how this can be accomplished. In his major work *Folkways* he states that in the adoption of folkways and mores "the immediate motive is interest," and notes the role of "unconscious experiment."[55] While stronger and more prevalent "patrician values" may be good for our society, it is not obvious that they would be to the direct personal advantage of the individuals who adopted them. If folkways and mores are seen as largely the result of individual behaviors in the context of particular sets of social forces and conditions, and our conditions are seen as creating incentives to violate or ignore, rather than uphold, patrician values, it is not clear how we can build those values. In the absence of the right incentives, the path appears to be one toward more brutal economic relations and toward the rise of increasingly unscrupulous, narrowly self-interested plutocrats. Since the mid-twentieth century, many commentators have noted that the modern liberal-democratic capitalist order appears to be dependent upon values and social capital built up during earlier, more traditional periods, and that our modern society may be consuming that social capital. Sumner has a similar perception, expressed in the context of his own focus on plutocracy. He maintains that "the product

[50]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 103.
[51]Ibid., 103.
[52]Ibid., 104.
[53]Ibid., 105.
[54]Burke, *Reflections*, 127.
[55]Sumner, *Folkways*, 3.

of liberty and democracy is individualism" and that "individualism destroys institutions," creating an opportunity for the "plutocratic element" to dominate the state.[56]

Given that the desirable "patrician" values are weak, we are left with democratic values as the primary check on plutocracy. But, "there is no form of political power which is so ill-fitted to cope with plutocracy as democracy." One problem is that "democracy has a whole set of institutions which are extralegal, but are the most powerful elements in it," and which are particularly subject to domination and manipulation by plutocratic elements. Elements such as "the party organization, the primary, the convention, etc.," powerfully shape politics, and hence shape government and policy, but tend to involve secret backroom deals and "a large but undefined field of legitimate, or quasi-legitimate, expenditure, for which there is no audit." And "if legislation is applied to the control of interests, especially when the latter are favored by the facts of the situation, the only effect is to impose on the interests more crafty and secret modes of action."[57] Since democracy is subject to manipulation, and legal checks are inadequate to prevent this, Sumner finds himself in the traditionalist camp of seeing aristocracy and related quasi-medieval values as the only potentially effective checks on the misuse of power by elites. Yet, in a democratic framework, such aristocratic "checks" would themselves represent misuses of power by elites. Sumner's liberalism drives him to defend an egalitarian democratic order as the only one compatible with true freedom, but he tacitly admits, or at least suggests, that the democratic order is unable to protect or maintain liberalism. Paradoxically, some of the values and forces needed to help sustain a liberal democratic society—such as those of aristocracy—are (to Sumner, at least) inherently illiberal or undemocratic in their origin and their nature.

Since Sumner's time, the field of dominant political players has broadened beyond traditional big-business "plutocrats" to take in other sorts of interests; whether he would see this as an improvement or as a worsening of the situation is subject to debate. At any rate, the perpetuation of the problem of representing the true common interest would have come as no surprise to Sumner, since he sees this problem as fundamental to democracy in the modern age. No matter how the playing field is structured, the contest between special interests and the general interest is an uneven one: "plutocracy always comes into the contest with a small body, a strong organization, a powerful motive, a definite purpose, and a strict discipline, while on the other side is a large and unorganized body, without discipline, with its ideas undefined, its interests illy understood, with an indefinite good

[56]William Graham Sumner, "Separation of State and Market," in *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays*, 308–9.

[57]William Graham Sumner, "The Conflict of Plutocracy and Democracy," in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, 147.

intention."[58] Here Sumner anticipates a key observation of later twentieth-century scholars of American government: groups which are relatively small but which have narrow, well-defined shared interests often have strategic advantages in advancing their public policy positions against a broader but diffuse general public interest.[59]

Although Sumner greatly fears the political power of concentrated wealth, he is (as has been noted) comfortable with such concentration otherwise. To him, any efforts to constrain plutocracy by constraining wealth would destroy both American freedom and the American economy. They would not yield a more democratic state, but quite the reverse: "In any socialistic state there will be one set of positions which will offer chances of wealth beyond the wildest dreams of avarice; viz., on the governing committees. Then there will be rich men whose wealth will indeed be a menace to social interests."[60] Only the foolhardy would believe that the avarice and vice of industrialists and politicians would vanish when they became "joined in one" and could no longer check each other.[61]

Although Sumner finds himself relying upon democracy to check plutocracy and help maintain a free state, he has great concerns regarding democracy itself. These concerns are evident in an early (1877) speech in which he sets up a contrast between "democracy" and "republican government." By "republican government" he means government which emphasizes the rule of law and regular elections. He also hints that one should be able to recognize in such a state elements of what is today often called civic republicanism—that is, an engaged, informed, virtuous citizenry seeking the common good. "Democracy" is to Sumner a much broader term which denotes any political system emphasizing political equality and majoritarianism. He writes:

> If we want majority rule, we can have it—the majority can pass a *plebiscite* conferring permanent power on a despot. A republic is quite another thing. It is a form of self-government, and its first aim is not equality but civil liberty. It keeps the people active in public functions and public duties. … In our system the guarantees to liberty and the practical machinery of self-government all come from the constitutional republic; the dangers chiefly from democracy.[62]

[58]Sumner, "Conflict," 147.

[59]One of the most prominent works in this tradition is Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

[60]William Graham Sumner, "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over," in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, 259.

[61]Ibid.

[62]William Graham Sumner, Speech at McCormick Hall, Chicago (as reported in *Chicago Tribune*, January 1, 1877), in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, 83.

Sumner does not always maintain the sharp distinction between "republic" and "democracy," in which "democracy" has negative connotations; more typically he uses "democracy" as a catch-all neutral term for popular government such as it exists in the United States. But, not just in 1877 but throughout his career, he exhibits a belief that, owing to its growing size, the growing complexity and impersonality of its politics, and an accompanying rise of political machines, America is losing its republican government.

Sumner is drawn to what he himself calls "Jeffersonian democracy," but finds that the old "Jeffersonian democracy" proved unable to "push back against the organizations which were trying to drive it on to the undertakings which it disavowed."[63] In a democratic state, pressures to expand governmental activities in various ways are ever present and are difficult to resist. But a healthy democracy is incompatible with the activist state which results from such democratic pressures. Sumner maintains that, for an activist state, the German-type bureaucratic system is much more capable and efficient. Although he prefers democracy, he is skeptical that the masses have the deliberative abilities needed in order to yield an effective activist democratic government. Consequently, bigger government will create pressures toward a more and more centralized, bureaucratized, and undemocratic (or at least un-republican) state. Thus it appears that democracy contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction: "[T]he democratic state is destined to make bigger and bigger demands upon the reflective power of its citizens. If it does so, it will fail to get the response which it expects. Once more the path of wisdom seems to lie in making the demands of the state as few and simple as possible, and in widening the scope of the automatic organs of society which are non-political."[64] Sumner's argument against activist government, then, does not merely follow the familiar formula that such activism directly violates individual rights or liberties. He sees in big government a threat to American democracy itself. And without a healthy form of democracy, Americans' liberties are threatened even more.

In an essay written upon the turn of the century, Sumner finds the sort of person produced by the new American democracy—the man who "is now in full control"—to be

> ignorant, noisy, self-sufficient, dogmatic, and impatient of opposition or remonstrance. He is ready to talk at any time about anything, but he prefers to talk of public affairs. He talks a great deal. Often he edits a newspaper. The newspapers bow down to him. . . . His cleverness is put in especially strong contrast with that of the learned. . . . He calls the

[63]Sumner, "Separation," 307.

[64]William Graham Sumner, "Democracy and Modern Problems," in *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays*, 305.

> flag "Old Glory" and wants a law that it shall be raised on all schoolhouses. Such matters as this occupy his mind.[65]

Sumner goes on to criticize those who should know better, but who defer to the "common man" instead of attempting to educate him, or instead of taking the lead on social questions. In this sense, Sumner is an elitist. This is, of course, not elitism in the fullest sense, since it is paired with acceptance of political equality and strong opposition to the excessive political clout of the wealthy and well connected. It represents a vision of a more ideal "republican" democracy in which citizens are well informed and dedicated to the pursuit of the common good, and in which they possess the kind of knowledge and values that cause them to appreciate the views of learned and experienced authorities when evaluating public questions. Instead of such appreciation, actual knowledge of a subject has ceased to be a criterion for asserting a view; the search for truth has degenerated to the point that the newspapers subject us to the "man on the curbstone's" "valuable opinion on the strategy of the naval battle of Santiago."[66]

Some of Sumner's concerns about democracy reflect those which have been raised since ancient times about the sort of mentality associated with majority rule. These concerns revolve around a fear that the idea of political equality leads to the idea that all opinions are of equal value, and that all opinion holders are of equal merit:

> The mode of thought according to which popularity is a test of truth, right, or wisdom leads people to say that few believe in a certain proposition or hold a certain opinion, as if that was conclusive as to the truth or correctness of the proposition or opinion. No one could seriously believe this. The number of people who believe a thing to be true does not even create a presumption about it one way or the other. If it did, why not open the polls and get the oracle to solve some of the hard questions in the domain of science?[67]

Sumner is not offering a highly rationalistic model or advocating the sort of "government by experts" which was associated with some Progressive thought: "Of course we have no ultimate tests for truth and wisdom. That is a reason for caution and study."[68] What Sumner wants is for citizens to recognize that the true and the good must be actively sought, and that they make the effort to seek them. His concerns about democracy have a Tocquevillian ring; he notes, for example, that "everybody is passing judgment on the way in which his neighbors choose to live."[69] Sumner ultimately

[65]William Graham Sumner, "The Bequests of the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth," in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, 384–85.
[66]Ibid., 385.
[67]Ibid., 387.
[68]Ibid.
[69]Ibid.

relies upon a sound and healthy "republican" democracy as a guarantee of liberalism. Only such a democracy can stand up to plutocracy, and only such a democracy can resist pressures to enact the kinds of socialistic policies which he believes destroy a liberal state. However, such a democracy is difficult to maintain.

Are we Doomed?

Although Sumner is a champion of liberalism and a supporter of democracy, when his writings are taken together and carefully considered, they suggest that the liberal democratic state cannot endure. From his frank assessment of the modern capitalist order we can identify a series of contradictions and vicious circles within that order which, on the surface at least, appear to be fatal. First, the modern order is seen as a reaction against the constraints imposed by the traditional order of the medieval era. People want to be free to live their lives as they wish, to be socially and economically mobile, and to benefit from their own initiative and labor. To Sumner, such a "society of free men" maximizes human flourishing and possesses a kind of inherent nobility. However, it also has its drawbacks:

> If all privileges and all servitudes are abolished [as is the goal of "the modern jural state, at least of the Anglo-American type"] the individual finds that there are no prescriptions left either to lift him up or to hold him down. He simply has all his chances left open that he may make out of himself all there is in him. This is individualism and atomism. … The fact, however, is rapidly making itself felt that this civil liberty of the modern type is a high and costly thing.[70]

Modern free society, though the best alternative available, is costly in a number of ways. For one thing, it yields a potentially brutal economic order. For another, it is destructive of established institutions, traditions, and norms. Sumner is not a libertarian in the full sense; he does not simply celebrate liberty or advocate it as an unlimited human birthright. He sees liberty as socially embedded, limited, and bound up with duties and responsibilities, and explicitly rejects a conception of liberty as simple "unrestrainedness," which he associates with Rousseau.[71] The very social context which makes liberty possible appears to work against Sumner's preferred limited and responsible form of liberty, and against his preferred form of republican society.

The atomistic conditions which make freedom and mobility possible also lead to a massive increase in wealth, which includes an increase in

[70]William Graham Sumner, "What is Civil Liberty?" in *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays*, 127–28.

[71]See William Graham Sumner, "What is Civil Liberty?" "Is Liberty a Lost Blessing," and "Liberty and Responsibility," in *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays.*

concentrations of wealth. To Sumner this is not in itself a bad thing. But it is accompanied by a decline in institutional and traditional constraints and by a decline in "patrician" or "aristocratic" values. The combined effect of greater wealth and a more atomized society is much greater power for the very wealthy and for other politically connected elites. The only available check on plutocracy—democracy—is a weak one. Any efforts to tilt the playing field from plutocracy toward democracy by redistributing or regulating wealth would not only fail to strengthen democracy but would ultimately feed plutocracy, by making government bigger. Attempts to control the acquisition or use of wealth are counterproductive: "democracy turns into a plutocracy not when it recognizes wealth as a legitimate form of social power in any state but when after trying to exclude it from any power a state of things is produced in which wealth is the real power by secret, illicit, and corrupt operation."[72]

Democracy is not only a weak check on plutocracy, but is itself highly subject to degeneration. Again, the same conditions which make possible a free society also undermine the sense of responsibility and connectedness which are required for a healthy democratic state. Sumner's views on the modern democratic man echo an observation of Alexis de Tocqueville:

> As in periods of equality no man is compelled to lend his assistance to his fellow men, and none has any right to expect much support from them, everyone is at once independent and powerless. These two conditions, which must never be either separately considered nor confounded together, inspire the citizen of a democratic country with very contrary propensities. His independence fills him with self-reliance and pride among his equals; his debility makes him feel from time to time the want of some outward assistance, which he cannot expect from any of them, because they are all impotent and unsympathizing. In this predicament he naturally turns his eyes to that imposing power which alone rises above the level of universal depression. Of that power his wants and especially his desires continually remind him, until he ultimately views it as the sole and necessary support of his own weakness.[73]

Democracy tends to create pressures for bigger government and a more socialized state. But Sumner holds that such a state both destroys liberty and undermines democracy. As democracy degenerates, calls for bigger government increase, further weakening democracy and yielding a more and more bureaucratic and plutocratic state.

For Sumner, a free-market order is required both to respect individual freedoms and to maintain the sort of healthy republican democracy that

[72]Sumner, "Bequests," 383.

[73]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Francis Bowen, rev. and ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 2:294.

is required for a sound and desirable liberal state. He offers no magic bullet to preserve a free society. On a practical level, what he advocates most of all is a vigorous effort to adhere to an ethic of small government and laissez-faire. In that sense, his cure for the weaknesses of liberalism is more liberalism. For one thing, this limits the opportunities and temptations for plutocratic action. It also helps to prevent the development of a culture in which one looks to government primarily for the material rewards one can get out of it. This sort of attitude is understood by Sumner to be corrosive at all levels, leading ultimately to a severe loss of freedom or to the collapse of the state. What must be fostered is a healthy self-reliance, which will not only prevent creeping socialism and plutocracy but may help to build virtuous republican citizens, perhaps a sort of industrial-age equivalent to Jefferson's yeoman farmers. In strongly advocating both liberalism and republicanism, it appears that Sumner only partially recognizes the tensions between liberalism's emphases on freedom and self-interest and republicanism's emphases on conformity and the common good. As has been noted, he recognizes the corrosive effects of liberalism's atomism and promotion of "liberty as unrestrainedness." But he seems to hold out some hope that a state which is both liberal and republican can be maintained. As for the preservation or restoration of anything like Jeffersonian democracy, Jefferson himself would very likely have questioned Sumner's hope that good republican citizens could flourish in an advanced industrial economy and an urbanized environment.

At least two major, interrelated problems are evident in Sumner's position. One is that Sumner's own observations suggest that, if it could be implemented, even the laissez-faire solution would not work for long. Another, more immediate problem involves the desirability of a laissez-faire state. Even if it is correct that strict adherence to laissez-faire could help maintain a free republic, this does not appear to be what most people want. While views vary considerably—among both elites and the general public—regarding the proper scope of state action and the desirability of various forms of intervention in the market, few people today would embrace a government as constrained, or an economic system so laissez-faire, as that which Sumner advocates. As Sumner himself notes, significant drawbacks are inherent in a hard-core classical liberal capitalist state. The problem which appears to concern Sumner least is perhaps the most obvious to us: the fate of those who, for one reason or another, are unable to earn a decent living. At a simple level one can divide such people into several groups: those who work at low wages, those who seek work but are unable to find employment, and those who, whether through physical or mental disability, laziness, or some other circumstance, do not work. Sumner tends to have little sympathy for this last group. The "social Darwinist" label appears appropriate when he describes "those whom humanitarians and philanthropists call the weak" as "a dead-weight," and as "the ones through whom the productive and conservative forces of

society are wasted."[74] In contrast, Sumner does demonstrate concern for those who work long hours at low wages; his illustration of the Forgotten Woman is but one example. But, to Sumner, the wage earner's greatest enemy is not the honest capitalist, or free-market economics, but big government. In his view, taxes, tariffs, and other governmental intervention in the market tend to hit the working class and middle class the hardest. He does not much discuss the problems of unemployment or underemployment; the implication is that, in the U.S. at least, the presence of a healthy laissez-faire order should allow for ample economic opportunities for any responsible, hard-working person to lead a decent life.

The question of whether Sumner is correct on this last point is, of course, a very large one which cannot be addressed here. But even if it should be the case that a laissez-faire system can provide adequately for all of the able-bodied and able-minded, it certainly does not provide for the care of the "dead-weight." And it appears unlikely that a political consensus will arise that agrees with Sumner's view that a portion of the population should essentially be treated as disposable. This would make the implementation of a laissez-faire state an impractical solution to the problem of maintaining liberalism. Moreover, besides its potentially unpleasant material dimensions, the modern liberal state has significant social or psychic disadvantages, which Sumner readily acknowledges and which would not appear to be addressed effectively simply through adherence to laissez-faire. We must accept a certain coarsening of life, a coldness, a loss of "grace" and "poetry," as the price of freedom. We must also accept a more atomized or "isolated" existence. A problem again arises in that considerable dissatisfaction with such a state may arise among the public.

Efforts to justify social-democratic or liberal welfare-state systems—such as, for example, John Rawls's "original position"-derived model[75]—would not constitute coherent political philosophies from Sumner's perspective. Instead, such efforts would be understood to be amalgamations of liberal and illiberal (or, in Sumner's language, modern and medieval) approaches to politics which are fundamentally incompatible with one another. Such a mixed system would result in much "confusion and absurdity" in public discourse and would yield a society lacking a coherent public philosophy equipped to frame policymaking in a sound manner. Once again, the eventual result from such a condition would be either the collapse of the state or the degeneration of liberalism into an authoritarian or quasi-feudal society.

Sumner's work suggests that the history, logic, and paradigms of liberalism require a potentially brutal laissez-faire capitalist order. In order to reject such a state, one must also reject the idea that the maximization of freedom is a key purpose for the state, and/or one must argue that the effective pursuit of

[74]Sumner, *What Social Classes*, 20–21.

[75]John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

human development and dignity does not require a great deal of freedom, or should not be a priority at all. To make such arguments, however, is to reject what the Anglo-American tradition has taken to be fundamental tenets of liberalism. Such a position would not necessarily be invalid. Assuming that Sumner's model is correct, however, one must also accept laissez-faire, if one accepts the basic tenets of liberal democracy. The language and paradigms of liberalism logically dictate a minimal state with minimal market intervention. Once those basic tenets are abandoned, there is no workable compass or guide as to what kind of governmental activity or market intervention is appropriate, and what is not. Hence, the quality of public discourse is seriously impaired. Without clear, working paradigms to guide policy and to check various ambitions and desires, more and more programs for various classes of people, more and more constraints on economic activities, more and more imperial ambitions, and more and more jobbery and government protection for the well-connected wealthy would accumulate. These developments would most likely occur haphazardly, rather than in an orderly or carefully considered way, since such programs and activities would not be well accommodated by the public philosophy. Not only would this place severe financial constraints on the state, but, as tensions between public philosophy and political practice became more and more widely evident, the philosophical and psychological foundations of the liberal order would be undermined.

One major challenge presented by Sumner, then, is the idea that liberalism and laissez-faire are inseparable, and that welfare-state liberalism is an unsustainable contradiction. Arguments may certainly be mounted against Sumner's perspective, but it is presented in a compelling enough way to suggest that it cannot simply be dismissed out of hand. An even more troubling suggestion—not directly presented by Sumner but evident from the study of his work—is that, regardless of the form it takes, the liberal order contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. It will be recalled that Sumner maintains that while maintaining a highly liberal order we must also seek to restore and build up the best mores of the past, such as aristocratic or "patrician" values, which may mitigate the harshness of capitalism, offset plutocracy, and strengthen a "republican" democracy. But Sumner appears to be at a loss as to how we can effectively foster feudalism-derived values in an aggressively modern, dynamic, and individualistic environment. And, by Sumner's own admission, there appear to be inexorable trends toward socialism, plutocracy, and a degenerated democracy found within the liberal state.

Ultimately, the fate of liberal democracy can be understood to be linked to two of Sumner-the-sociologist's favorite concepts: folkways and mores. The conditions required for true freedom are, his work suggests, inimical to the kinds of folkways and mores needed to sustain that free order. This fundamental problem of the liberal state relying upon behavior patterns which it does not itself foster has been noted by many observers.

The mid-twentieth-century sociologist Robert Nisbet, for instance, devoted considerable attention to this problem.[76] Both Leo Strauss[77] and Alexis de Tocqueville held out hope that religious beliefs tracing their origins to earlier eras would help provide the values needed to make modern society work. Tocqueville maintains that "despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is … more needed in democratic republics than in any others. How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to the Deity?"[78] However, as a review of Sumner's work shows, the modern liberal state is fraught with such tensions and problems that it appears unlikely that religious belief alone would provide the resources needed to prevent the kind of degeneration that Sumner identifies.

Early in this article it was noted that the primary thrust of Sumner's political writings is liberal, but that republican and conservative dimensions are also present. While Sumner champions the values of liberalism, he also appears to recognize a need for republican values and for other older values, such as "patrician values," which tend not to arise in, or be well sustained by, a modern, capitalist, liberal-democratic state. But when attacking socialism and plutocracy, Sumner complains that such tendencies reflect older ways of thinking that are incompatible with the modern liberal order. A tension exists within his thought between a belief that the modern liberal order requires older values if it is to be sustainable and a belief that the modern liberal order must be free of older values if it is to be sustainable. This tension or contradiction within Sumner's thought reflects, and highlights, a basic deficiency in liberalism.

As Sumner notes, liberalism understands itself primarily in opposition to the older traditional order traceable to the Middle Ages and beyond. What Sumner fails to articulate (and, perhaps, to realize fully) is that, consequently, basic liberal political theory does not constitute anything like a "complete system." It offers a framework of ideas which works when it is applied against a backdrop of other ideas, behaviors, and relationships originating in premodern, preliberal orders. Sumner, however, often treats liberalism as if it were in fact a "complete system." Consequently, departures from laissez-faire, for example, appear as alien intrusions which cannot be properly accommodated within the existing framework and which will lead to the system's collapse. It is not just Sumner's own conception of liberalism that is the problem, but liberalism itself, at least as it is generally understood.

[76]See, for example, Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1990).

[77]See, for example, Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

[78]Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:307.

Liberalism provides only a partial framework for understanding reality, and offers only a partial representation of the good order. It is inadequate by itself; consequently, it both requires "outside" values which it does not foster, and is highly subject to modifications (such as the welfare state) which, not being accommodated within the liberal paradigm narrowly understood, result in "confusion and absurdity" and set the liberal state on a path of degeneration. A mismatch exists between the public philosophy of liberalism and other values and practices that are necessary to the survival of liberalism and/or are seen as desirable by many seeking a more humane order. Ideally, what appears to be needed is a public philosophy in which such elements are somehow integral to the system of thought, rather than add-ons; this would appear to require a conception of liberalism that is very different from that which we have generally known.

This brief study of Sumner suggests that in a variety of ways, the liberal state undermines itself. The liberal model as we understand it may be fatally flawed. The usual efforts to adopt some sort of a "mixed" or compromise system which attempts to operate under the guise of liberalism may be doomed to failure over the long term. And the usual battles between laissez-faire capitalism and socialistic or plutocratic statism may be missing the point. Our only hope may be a rethinking of liberalism, and the development of a philosophy and culture that foster the kinds of values needed for a free, democratic, and humane state to succeed, and that provide the guidance needed to maintain such an order in real-world conditions.