Order Number 9009750

William Graham Sumner: Critical theorist of modernity

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City University of New York, 1989

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WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMNER:
CRITICAL THEORIST OF MODERNITY

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1989

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Oct 5, 1989
date

Chairman of Examining Committee

Oct 5, 1989
date

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation argues that Sumner's analysis of the economic, political, and cultural developments of modern society makes a major theoretical contribution to twentieth century sociology. Though Sumner's focus and analysis changed during the nearly fifty years he wrote about modernity, he consistently wrestled with several distinctively modern problems still addressed in contemporary critiques of late capitalism. First, he analyzed the political conflicts confronting capitalist modernization in the 1870's and elaborated his ideas in regard to three related points: one unanticipated influence of competition among interest groups on government is the systematic subversion of the deliberative processes and policies on which the furtherance of societal interests depends; the theory and practice of a progressive, internally regulated society requires distinctions among political authority, power, and particular interests; the possibility of social reform depends on the inculcation and institutionalization of conditions for civic virtue as a latent function of social progress (Chapter 2).

Second, he explored the societal ramifications of the vast accumulations of wealth, the new forms of power, and the "sensationalist culture" of "luxury" that characterized the late 1870's and early 1880's (Chapter 3).

Third, he examined how the modern economy's operation generates powerful interests that undermine the unprecedented capacity of modern science, education, and law to modify social life within historically imposed limits in the late 1880's and 1890's (Chapter 4).

Fourth, he provided, in Folkways (published in 1906), an analysis of two key theoretical issues: the role of force in social development and the position of the moral

order in social structure. In regard to the latter, Sumner attempted in Folkways to conceptualize a degree of relative autonomy of the moral order in its relation to material "life conditions." He attempted to establish that a functionally effective morality is possible only given the psychological latency of its operations and a constant renewal through collectivized agency and social change (Chapter 5).

Fifth, he applied the theoretical concepts he developed in Folkways in a final analysis of modernity which, though it shares the concerns of Progressives about the concentrated wealth and corruption, was more critical and pessimistic in regard to the depth of the modern crisis, the extent to which corruption is located at the core rather than the periphery of modern society, and the possibility of overriding the economic, political, and social power that enables particular interests to counter policies of general reform (Chapter 6). In short, Sumner's work provides a non-Marxist socio-historical analysis of force, the limits of human agency, and the relationship between culture and life conditions.

My decision to write about Sumner emerged from an initially more ambitious proposal to study the six figures generally considered to be the first major sociologists in the United States: William Graham Sumner, Lester Frank Ward, Albion Small, Edward Ross, Charles Cooley, and Franklin Giddings. In contrast with their shared reputation as uncritical apologists for nascent American or emerging corporate capitalism, my investigations suggested that their work manifests a deeper grasp of the economic, political, and social forces underlying the "transition from community to society," and the nature of modern society than is usually attributed to them. At first glance, Sumner's work appeared to be the most accommodating to the emerging industrial and corporate order. The realization that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, he covered more aspects of the economic, political, and cultural developments of late capitalism than most of his contemporaries, that his analysis was a least as critical as it was

accommodating, that he seemed particularly representative of turn of the century social theory, and that many of his ideas were compatible with later theoretical developments in sociology, led me to a systematic study of his work.

OVERVIEW OF SUMNER'S WORK

Sumner's initial attempts to analyze modern society drew on Maine's fundamental distinction between status and contract. The generalization of the principles of contract and the concomitant establishment of a web of practical relations that were legally and morally reinforced in all institutional domains -- economic, political, religious, mass media, and educational -- was said to be due to the replacement of archaic beliefs and superstitions by the rule of practical reason. Sumner believed that the principles of contract, rational deliberation, universalistic law, and justice, provided a foundation for the modernization of institutions and a basis for modern social development.

Sumner argued against mechanistic characterizations of the relationship between state and society in favor of one that stressed interaction and mutual regulation. On the one hand, he saw political institutions as emerging from and molded by historically specific social conditions that set limits within which social policy can operate. On the other, since all features of public life are affected by politics, social structure and change can only be seen in the light of conflict and the institution of authority, and only in terms of a certain type of agency-formation in the operations of modern society. The fact that state and society constitute an interaction determined, in part, politically implies that policy will vary in its effectiveness independently of any single causal factor. This qualified Comtean positivism and gave Sumner's analysis more progressive and critical aspects than have been generally attributed to it.

Sumner's writings in the 1870's maintained that the modern polity produced an historically unprecedented capacity for more rationally directed social change, and that this capacity was limited by its own conditions. The promise of modernity flowed, in part, from the creation of a governmental apparatus shaped by the process of rational deliberation and subject to the controlling influence of collectively constituted and impartially implemented knowledge. An institution formerly constituted by force, tradition, and partiality was now able to formulate universalistic policies appropriate to ever-changing social conditions. The elimination of arbitrariness in government meant that administration could simultaneously realize the potential of modernity and respect the limits set by existing "conditions of life."

Sumner argued that the fulfillment of this promise depended on two conditions: first, the development of a political process able to promote the "public interest;" second, the creation of an informed and publicly oriented citizenry with sufficient intelligence and independence to select qualified representatives and to formulate appropriate policies.

The problem that moved Sumner beyond the distinction between status and contract was that the public sphere was liable to contamination by the very private interests whose interactions were regulated by contract. He argued that political arrangements based on the generalization of contract permit the exercise of "irresponsible" as much as responsible power, and that the culture of modernity supports both. Political culture encourages private interests to organize parties aimed at maximizing their particular interests at the expense of the general interest. This tendency is reinforced by a distinctively modern cultural orientation that conflates the play of private interests with the interests of society. As a defender of classical political economy, Sumner believed that the economic pursuit of private interests was essential for the commonwealth, but that its transference to the realm of politics

promoted "irresponsible power" inconsistent with general political development. Sumner's initial focus in the 1870's on the polity broadened as he came to realize that its institutionalized practices could only be understood and reformed in the context of other institutions. This was the theoretical issue which his later works attempted to engage and which he felt was crucial to the resolution of the practical problems of societal development.

Sumner believed that his epoch was decisively different from the past. He began, in the late 1870's and early 1880's, to conceptualize modern society as an intricate network of arrangements and operations based on the generalization of contract, the development of a public sphere (with its tension between private and public interests), the application of science to production, the accumulation of wealth and "wealth-power," and the growth of luxury and a regional morality corresponding to luxury.

His discussion of the corruption of the public sphere established the preliminary terms for investigating "social codes" and what he later analyzed as a moral order. Sumner realized that the inconsistent and conflictual nature of modern social processes implied that modern "social codes" were neither monolithic nor fully systematic. The normative elements corresponding to the experience of material interdependence are features of an evolution of society for which contract is a key aspect of the modern period. However, luxury and the "thirst" for luxury establishes an alternative morality that supports the acquisition of wealth and success regardless of any means. Initially limited to those who possess vast wealth, this development was a product of the unprecedented productivity of modern society. Its normative tendency was to produce a regional morality of luxury incompatible with the normal development of the moral order of the public interest. This disruption was rooted in the political realm and disseminated by those agencies (such as schools, churches, the media) responsible for the maintenance of moral codes. The emergence of an ineffectively regulated wealth-

power not only enabled the wealthy to abuse state power, but also had problematic cultural and therefore moral effects: the political realm became a negative socializing mechanism which spread a corrupting influence throughout modernity. Similarly, modifications of the agencies which should have contributed to the positive growth of a distinctively modern culture unexpectedly produced a "sensationalist culture" inappropriate to the modern "conditions of life." The modern polity translates the initially marginal morality of luxury into a more general code, undermines the more generalizing social codes regulating modern society, and thus transforms the nature and experience of modernity. Sumner's elaboration of this analysis in the early 1880's led him to an understanding of the anti-developmental nature of the emergent cultural and institutional framework of modern society.

Sumner's concerns were consistent with the efforts of other pioneering sociologists to analyze the nature and potential of the modern order in terms of the concept of social control. The original meaning of this term, as Morris Janowitz has observed, was quite different from the current emphasis on socialization, conformity, and social repression:

> In the emergence of sociology as an intellectual discipline, the idea of social control was a central concept for analyzing social organization and the development of industrial society. Originally, the term dealt with a generic aspect of society and served as a comprehensive basis for a sociological examination of the social order. In fact, it was one intellectual device for linking sociological analysis to the human values and philosophical orientations employed by some pioneer sociologists interested in "social progress" and the reduction of irrationality in social life. In the most fundamental sense, "social control" referred to the capacity of a society to regulate itself according to desired principles and values. Sociological analysis had the task of exploring the conditions and variables likely to make this goal attainable.[1]

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[1] Morris Janowitz, "Sociological Theory and Social Control," American Journal of Sociology 81 (July, 1975): 82.

Social control, therefore, is not merely a mechanism "adjusting" members to situations. Rather, it refers to the institutional forms and cultural patterning implicit in the self-regulation of society. Therefore, social control is the internalized aspect of social rationality. Theorists who accept the original formulation of social control tend to emphasize the role of social policy in social organization and the relationship of the "invisible hand" of societal self-regulation to the problem-solving experience of the collectivity as a whole.

In this sense, Sumner was a theorist of social control. He held that the workings of modern society tended toward self-regulation, and that this tendency depended on the development of decisive, rational action formulated as policy. Normatively, he was committed to identifying the conditions under which policy could be formulated and made suitable to the modern "conditions of life."

Based on his investigation of the operative conditions of economics, politics, education, religion, and mass media, Sumner identified those practices whose generalization would render these institutions incapable of reproducing themselves. His analysis of luxury was intended to warn his readers that modernity's desirable aspects could be undermined by certain "extreme" tendencies of its own social codes and practices that were not desirable. His interest in the role of reform derived in part from his recognition that the development of social codes may, under certain conditions, disrupt the self-regulatory process of society that it was originally their function to sustain. For Sumner, moral crisis consisted of more than merely the lag of culture behind material organization. It depended as well on the internal development social codes to the point at which their contradictions had societal effects.

Sumner thus developed an evolutionary conceptualization of modernity which showed a certain dialectic of social order in two relationships: that of the moral order to its conditions and that of the moral order to its own development. His analysis of

the "conditions of life" in the latter part of the 1880's deepened Sumner's understanding of the vulnerability of modern society to the spread of corruption arising from its own rationalizing processes. His rejection of a class-based revolutionary option forced him to come to terms with processes of reform to which most later sociologists looked, namely, the cultural sources of social change, especially science, education, and law.

In a number of articles written in the late 1880's, Sumner analyzed law and the modern state in regard to their relationship to the governmental apparatus and to the modern "industrial organization." "Industrial organization" establishes practical interdependencies of an unprecedented scope, thus creating the need for a distinctly modern societal administration and legal framework. Modern law stabilizes material relations and thereby enables people to become more calculating in their actions and it provides a mechanism for accommodating changes in material life and "moral convictions." The modern state institutionalizes rational deliberation, thereby freeing "the educated reason and intelligent conscience" of the people to formulate laws compatible with the "moral convictions" of the community. This embodiment of the "active reason" in institutions has two theoretically significant effects: it redefines "community" as an extended and self-regulating sphere of sociality, and it provides for an intrinsically self-critical process of social development. Sumner's analysis of modern "conditions of life" suggested that the interest based struggles unleashed by modern economic relations had come to qualify the applicability of this model.

Like the classical liberals, Sumner defended the market as a bastion of individual freedom as well as a basis for increasing the wealth of society. Like the critics of laissez-faire, however, he argued that the market generated problematic "social consequences," including insecurity, social disruptions, suffering, and industrial struggle. More to the point, though he often reiterated the classical liberal claim that

the market is essentially self-regulating, Sumner tried to demonstrate that the general law of "supply and demand" is not sufficient for self-regulation. In addition, parties must "struggle to the utmost" to maximize their interests. This social psychology of exchange was to leave Sumner with the problem of accounting for a motivational factor relatively independent of the conditions for rational change. Ultimately, he addressed this more fully in Folkways and in his comments on education and moral development.

Modern industrial relations, Sumner argued, do not and cannot eliminate conflicts of interests. Interests comprise the "new center" of modern society, and the operation of market forces has created conditions of "industrial war" in which industrial groups struggle to defend their economic status. The modern organization of industry produces a "tendency" for interest groups to strengthen their positions by using "legislative compulsion" as well as by more traditional economic means. Though the state's function is to institute the necessary legal framework for the effective operation of market forces, it is limited in its capacity to perform this vital role. The "struggle" of interests undermines the political conditions that sustain its normal operation.

Sumner introduced to classical market liberalism the significance of society considered as a social totality, including, beyond the social psychology of economic motivation, non-economic relationships embodied by the modern state and in modern "social codes." But, he argued, because the state becomes a resource for the pursuit of particular interests, it is limited in its ability to combine economic with non-economic rationality.

Like many of his contemporaries, Sumner argued that the greatest threat to the social effectiveness of the state was the tendency of the market toward plutocratic organization, a "political form" in which the "controlling force" is wealth. Though plutocratic processes and a corresponding morality of wealth infect all modern

institutions, its spread is not inevitable. Plutocracy, Sumner said, is a "tendency." Its growth can be disrupted by the socializing agencies that educate the "reason" and the "moral convictions" of the citizenry and by policy reforms aimed at limiting untoward accumulations of wealth and the political uses of wealth.

In 1896, Sumner published an article on "Earth Hunger" that examines the significance of "ethical forces." This essay appears to defend the Malthusian emphasis upon the man-land ratio and to confirm Sumner's reputation as a technological determinist.[2] But, instead of treating the man-land ratio as a natural and therefore "arithmetical quantity," as Malthus did, Sumner argued that the ratio is a social product. It can therefore be changed by improving legislation, ideas, or ethical forces, as well as by advances in industry and science.

Even in 1896, Sumner characterized modernity as an age of deliberation, but only by contrast with earlier epochs. Therefore, he acknowledged that modernity, like pre-modern society, has "instinctual" aspects and depends on normative orientations and doctrinal beliefs that operate beyond the awareness or capacity for self-control of individuals. Sumner's analysis of the events which culminated in the Spanish-American War contained three key hypotheses: first, modernity is vulnerable to nonrational social currents; second, the ruling elite, a group he referred to as "the new masters of [modern] society," possesses the determination and power to dominate social and political institutions; third, the exercise of such "irresponsible power" prevents those social organs responsible for reconciling "moral convictions" with social policies from fulfilling their function.

The assumption that economic forces, though qualified by non-economic factors, "condition" political and social relations informed Sumner's writings from the 1870's to the 1890's. But an over-emphasis on the economic aspects in his early work made it

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[2] Earth Hunger, "Earth Hunger," (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1913): 31-64.

impossible for him to account for the divergence of political and social institutions, "social codes," and "ethical forces" from the "conditions of life" to which they referred. Sumner assumed that there was a relationship between moral order and material "conditions. But without a theory of the former, he could not account for the development of the latter. He acknowledged that if a "gap" between the "conditions of life" and the moral order grew beyond a certain threshold, social disruptions and even crisis would ensue. Yet, even as late as the mid-90's, his analysis of the tensions in and discrepancies between institutionalized practices and the material conditions to which they referred to was incomplete. Sumner argued that "ethical forces" operate "unconsciously" -- what we would now call a "latency" of operation. This implied that they possess a certain autonomy which complicates their relation with "conditions of life." He also maintained, though he could not conceptualize it, that social epochs are qualitatively as well as quantitatively different, that they not only possess historically specific "conditions of life," but generate social mechanisms of varying capacity to sustain conditions of rational deliberation.

By the end of the 1890's, Sumner stressed that only a critical sensibility based on scientific knowledge and generalized by reformed educational practices could sustain policies that maximized the potentials for social development residing in modern "conditions of life." Yet, he was unable at that time to fulfill the theoretical promise of this insight. This would have required specific descriptions of the reflective and critical processes involved in modern education, science, and law. It also would have required a more comprehensive analysis of the social conditions under which the instinctive and unconscious "ethical forces" might contribute to a critical sensibility in tune with modern conditions. As of the turn of the century, Sumner had not theorized what we now call the "latency" of the moral order, or the ways in which "active reason" emerged from the encounter of the ethical forces with material conditions of

life. Nor was he able to demonstrate the ways in which rational deliberation had come to be coopted by the mobilizations of powerful groups and classes whose interests led them to undermine this process.

Sumner's analysis suggested that the stability and growth of modern society required deliberative processes that its operations thwarted. He wanted modernity to be regulated by rational deliberation and the controlling influence of knowledge, not interest-driven behavior, but was unable to point to the agency by which this transformation would occur. Sumner's call for laissez-faire was shaped by his desire to reduce the impact of "irresponsible [state] power," not by a belief that governance was unnecessary. His analysis combined the apparently paradoxical elements of despair and hope. That is, his investigations of modern society uncovered powerful "tendencies" that could destroy modernity's ability to reproduce the conditions that sustained it. Yet, despite Sumner's recognition of these forces and his inability to show what modern agency could transform them, he repeatedly called for a more rational orientation to and regulation of modern social life.

The trajectory of his work thus left Sumner with several unresolved problems: first, what is the relationship between historically specific "conditions of life" and "ethical forces"? What is the nature of "ethical forces" and the process by which they normally develop? Sumner's belief that powerful interests dominated socializing agencies and distorted the normal development of "ethical forces" raised other questions for which he had no satisfactory answer: what was the role of force and manipulation in human society? To what extent were power and domination constituent parts of social life and development? How did the operation of force shape the values and practices of social life, either leading people to tolerate or embrace the limits of their societies against the conditions that make change possible?

Despite his steadfast opposition to theories then identified as Marxist, Sumner began to systematically address three issues typically associated with Marxism: the role of force, human agency, and historically specific limits. Simply put, he elaborated a non-Marxist theoretical framework explaining how ruling classes use force and power to shape the codes and institutionalized practices of different societies. Similarly, he analyzed why people accept beliefs and social forms which are antagonistic to both individual and societal well-being. Though Sumner was pessimistic in viewing force and domination as two obstacles that actively deformed social life and thwarted social development, he also examined historical openings. That is, Sumner identified social forces which opposed the otherwise destructive tendencies he had isolated and, despite his pessimism, explored the opportunities they created and the possibilities they embodied.

Sumner's pessimism about modern conditions did not lead him to fatalism. Instead, it pushed him to search for the agencies that might transform the conditions that limit the possibilities of change. In this spirit, he asked what social processes enable modernity to cultivate critical thought and practice in the midst of an anti-critical social environment? What are the possibilities for rational reform and how are these possibilities rooted in modernity's operations? Finally, what are the means by which rational reform can be effected, the obstacles it must overcome, and the limits beyond which it cannot proceed?

In the course of nearly a quarter of a century of activity as a publicist, teacher, and public speaker Sumner generated a number of concerns, problems, and unanswered questions. But he did not attempt to provide a more systematic treatment of the issues that his life's work had raised until the turn of the century. Sumner made voluminous notes for his long projected Science of Society, but he died before finishing his magnum opus. The subsequent revisions of Albert Keller, his student and successor

at Yale, created a work which largely reflects the perspective of Keller, not Sumner. Sumner, however, did complete an important part of the projected The Science of Society -- namely, the section on the mores. When he realized that his treatment of the mores required more than a single chapter, Sumner revised his plans and published it in manuscript form. The result was Folkways, a book that was, and still is, a sociological classic.

Sumner did not write Folkways because he suddenly became interested in the primitive. Nor was it a book whose relevance is limited to the pre-modern. On the contrary, Sumner wrote Folkways because he needed to provide the answers to the questions and theoretical issues that his analysis of modernity had raised. He did not discard his previous concerns, analyses, or even his language -- indeed, Sumner still used the term "social codes" and "conditions of life" in Folkways, though he now referred to the latter as "life conditions." Sumner thus drew upon his previous findings in the hopes of more systematically theorizing them.

Folkways defined a relatively autonomous but systematic level of normative development which shapes the society that produces it. It focused on the historical process that transforms the culture of folkways into the normative order of mores and, eventually, into laws and institutions. Sumner depicted the system of mores to be a "supreme and controlling" force shaping beliefs, practices, and institutions, and producing distinct "societal states." Mores condition social life but do not necessarily advance the material needs of people in society. Mores do not mechanistically correspond to existing life conditions nor do they automatically respond to changed life conditions. Since the technological foundation of social life does not create social structures or regulate social development, culture has autonomy and can lead people to act in ways that are not consistent with material survival.

Despite Sumner's reputation as the most influential exponent of Social Darwinism, Folkways demonstrates the inadequacy of an understanding of evolution which is solely guided by the process of adaptation to material order. The nature and development of the "superorganic domain," Sumner said, is inherently different than the life processes that characterize the organic realm. The mores are not "organic or material;" they are "superorganic," the product of social relations and institutional arrangements. Mores shape the consciousness, practices, and institutions that characterize a social epoch, but they do not guarantee the progressive development of the "societal states" they produce. On the contrary, "error" and "force" are constituent aspects of the social process by which mores and social structures are formed. Here, as in all of his earlier work, Sumner clearly opposes the straight-forward determinism typically identified with the social evolutionist perspective.

According to Sumner, the power of the mores is threefold: they shape social structures and set limits on social consciousness and activity, including the processes that make rational deliberation possible; they operate unconsciously; and finally, the mores are acquired in a manner that makes it difficult to critically evaluate their merit. Therefore, the latent character of the mores makes them highly resistant to change and thus strengthens their "persistency;" but, since the latency of the mores is vulnerable to the processes of reflection and "formulation," it also makes the mores susceptible to change.

Sumner's analysis of the relationship between life conditions, folkways, and mores on the one hand, and of latency and reflection on the other, provided the basis for several significant accomplishments. First, theorizing the social order in terms of the moral order suggests that each "societal state" generates its own "enchantment." Sumner's work therefore challenges Weber's thesis about the modern "disenchantment of the world." When judged by the standards of rationality grounded in life conditions,

Sumner said, social consciousness, practices, and institutions possess non-rational elements shaped by the imperatives of the moral order rather than the life conditions themselves. Despite modernity's unprecedented technical rationality, all modern social structures, even supposedly rational forms such as education and the state, are subject to the distorting effects of the "error" and "force" existing within the mores. Even here, the free unfolding of the process of deliberation necessary for the rational criticism and regulation of social life is only partially realized.

Second, Sumner's analysis in Folkways helped him to explore the problematic relationship between the latency of the mores and the social processes contributing to an "educated skepticism." The latent character of the moral order can be brought to conscious awareness by changed life conditions, the development of "enacted institutions" and "positive laws," or the generalization of a critical sensibility. Third, Sumner's analysis of the tension between latent and formulated mores and the tension between mores and conscious reflection enabled him to develop a notion of change that took account of these tensions and contradictions. Folkways shows how the development of latent moral orders creates processes of reflection or codification (through educational practices and legislative enactments) that transform its unconscious character. Therefore, the latency of the moral order can be challenged by changed life conditions or disturbed by reflection or processes of formulation that frustrate the spontaneous operation of the mores.

Fourth, Sumner's distinction in Folkways between "crescive institutions" and "customary" or "common law" and "enacted institutions" and "positive law" allowed him to analyze different societies and to contrast the pre-modern with modernity. In other words, his conceptual framework provided the resources to discuss the nature of moral orders and to apply this analysis to specific "societal states." In this regard, Sumner's analysis of moral order fulfilled at least some of his theoretical intentions.

Fifth, Sumner applied his analysis of the relationship between life conditions, folkways, and mores to the study of modernity, thus enabling him to examine the nature of the modern crisis and to uphold the possibility of overcoming it. He located modernity's uniqueness in the relationship between its mores, enacted institutions, societal administration, educational process, and scientific world view. The "art of societal administration," a political development corresponding to the emergence of a modernizing industrial capitalist order, creates an unprecedented opportunity for intentional change. Societal administration is made possible by the evolution of "enacted institutions" that draws on the mores but codifies them (thereby threatening their latency) and by the emergence of a scientific world view and "science of society." The emergence of the "scientific world philosophy" as part of modern mores means that modernity contains a uniquely self-correcting element. The "science of society" enables "statesmen" to more effectively understand the operation of the mores and to "gauge their tendencies." Sumner's distinction between the "statesman" and the politician suggests that the very process that could support rational policies of reform for the good of all also can be used to consolidate the interests of the few. The same is true of education: it provides an opening for social change that interests try to manipulate for their purposes.

Sumner's discussion of the possibilities of modern education drew upon the theoretical concepts he elaborated in Folkways. His analysis not only focused on the problem (the mores), and the solution (the generalization of the critical habit by reformed educational practices), but the structural weakness of the mores (their vulnerability to reflection) enabling the critical habit to be efficacious. The instrumentalities of science and education are crucial to the generalization of a "free and rational criticism" that can challenge the "dominion" of the mores. Sumner argued that modern society, like all other societies, requires this type of criticism. Here, as

elsewhere, "error" and "force" shape the very foundations of social life. His emphasis upon the importance of generalizing a critical sensibility reflects Sumner's desire to recover rationality in the midst of irrationality, his recognition of the modern crisis, and his attempt to sustain the possibility of criticism and reform.

Sumner's desire to use science, education, and law to reform corrupting social processes was similar to that found in the Progressive Movement. However, he argued that corruption and the abuses of vast concentrations of power do not operate at the margins of social life, but shape the core of modern society. Modern mores have been subjected to a corrupting social process that "infected" all social codes, practices, and institutions. The directive and socializing agencies, most notably, the state, school, mass media, and religion, are controlled by interests and cannot support a critical response to corrupting social processes. The modern moral order, Sumner concluded, is incapable of effectively regulating modern life conditions. Enormous concentrations of wealth allows a "small controlling oligarchy" to dominate modern social life.

Sumner elaborated his ideas about the modern crisis in regard to four key points: first, the need for state intervention to restore a competitive economic order. The power of law had to eliminate the exercise of "irresponsible power" currently supported by vast concentrations of wealth and "social power" and prevent their future growth. Second, a cultural transformation was necessary to avoid the excesses of luxury and to check the spread of corruption. This change could only come about through a more rational approach to education, societal administration, and other morally significant domains (such as media). Third, the complexity of the network of modern mores and the capacity of powerful interests to administer and control the socializing, educational, and governmental resources made rational reform as difficult to accomplish as it was necessary to achieve. Fourth, under conditions such as these the best that

could be hoped for is a critical practice and modernistic agencies that can keep alive the possibility of criticism and reform.

Folkways was not a new point of departure for Sumner. On the contrary, it is rooted in the issues he addressed and draws on the analyses he developed in his life's work. Folkways provides a fuller, more self-consciously theoretical treatment of ideas that were implicit in his previous work: the tension between material and moral orders; the inability of modern socializing agencies to come to terms with luxury and the "thirst for luxury;" the centrality of "interests" to all of social life and modern society's inability to overcome their destructive influence; the need for the state to harness the "active reason" and prevent the emergence of "irresponsible power;" the importance of the principle of societal self-criticism for the effective operation of modernity; the obstacles that the generalization of the critical habit confronted. Most intellectual historians, however, have been unable to grasp these features of Sumner's writings, and those that do, typically recognize only some of them.

INTELLECTUAL HISTORIANS ON SUMNER

Sumner is best remembered as a conservative ideologue whose advocacy of laissez-faire and Social Darwinism made him the leading apologist for the excesses of late nineteenth century capitalism. Sumner's reputation began in the early 1880's when several critics attacked him for championing a social order in which the strong preyed upon the weak and only the "fittest" survived. But the roots of the modern view of Sumner did not emerge until the publication of L.L. Bernard's "The Social Science Theories of William Graham Sumner" in 1940, Richard Hofstadter's Social Darwinism in American Thought in 1944, and Robert McCloskey's American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise in 1951. The ideas of Hofstadter and McCloskey, in particular, have

influenced a generation of scholarship and still shape the popular image of Sumner as expressed in textbooks and other non-specialist references.

These authors argued that Sumner's prolific dissemination of "neo-Darwinian philosophy and laissez-faire" ideas made him the most "influential Social Darwinist," the "St. Paul" of this new "gospel."[3] The distinctiveness of Sumner's social theories, McCloskey said, flowed from the degree to which he was willing to "accept and follow through as few others would, the full implications of his [Darwinian] premises."[4] These authors suggested that Sumner's unqualified application of Darwinian premises seriously impair his analysis of modern society and his contribution to the nascent discipline of sociology.

The main "premise" that these authors uncovered in Sumner is his assumption that the natural and social worlds are similar. Sumner, they wrote, emphasizes the parallels between the competitive contest for wealth and the life-and-death struggle in the animal world, arguing that the former represents "the fulfillment of the classical ideal of an automatically benevolent, free competitive order" [5] This conflict is intense, but it supports economic growth and moral development: "in such a conflict the strongest would survive and the strongest would always be good and worthy, while the losers would be vicious, ignorant, and socially incompetent." [6] Sumner believed that the modern economic order allows everyone to compete and that the achievement of success presupposes moral character. He concluded, therefore, that capitalism is

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[3] Luther Bernard, "The Social Science Theories of William Graham Sumner," Social Forces 19 (December, 1940): 173; Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 51; Robert McCloskey, American Conservatism in an Age of Enterprise (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 30.

[4] McCloskey, p. 41.

[5] Hofstadter, p. 52; Bernard, p. 169; McCloskey, p. 27.

[6] Bernard, p. 173; Hofstadter, p. 57; McCloskey, p. 26.

inherently moral: "the capitalist system became, if not the sum, at least the apex of moral goodness."[7]

Sumner's work was "ideally suited to provide post-bellum conservatism with what it required -- a new justification of its basic aims harmonious with the new political and social context." Sumner elaborated his justification of capitalism in regard to three main points: first, the social arrangements of a competitive capitalist order are not just natural but progressive, and that its operations maximize the liberty and interests of all. He argued that capitalism eliminates exploitation, even though the "liberty" of the "competitive order" he supports is "economic license" and the "industrial warfare" he endorses involves "violence and open warfare." Sumner, Bernard noted, "undoubtedly lays himself open to the charge of defending the liberty of getting what you want as long as you have the physical strength, superior wages, or the law on your side."[8] Second, he offers a vision of society in which accumulation of wealth and success is not just the highest end, but the only one:

> Material values is the controlling norm, and since, by definition, the best measure of such value is success, the successful businessman is meritorious whether he practices Sumner's Protestant virtues or not. The more he aggregates wealth, the more the industrialist serves the community; and the methods he employs are morally unimpeachable because no moral standard for impeaching them exists.[9]

Third, Sumner conceded that some suffering is socially induced, but he argued that nearly all human suffering is due to natural causes. But, despite his recognition that

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[7] McCloskey, p. 69.

[8] McCloskey, pp. 40, 70; Bernard, pp. 165, 159.

[9] McCloskey, pp. 51-52.

> not all human maladjustments were the result of purely natural causes, and also that those that were not should be treated differently, ... it is a peculiarity of Sumner's social theory that he paid but little attention to this second class of ills and their remedies.[10]

In other words, Sumner's work either denied that capitalism produced any social "ills" or simply ignored them. Fourth, he argued that capitalism must be accepted as it is. Reform and revolution, he said, could only undermine the progress of society. Evolutionary forces must be allowed to shape social life and provide for social change. Sumner thus converts the concept of natural order into "a cold and sterile determinism" that precludes the possibility of human agency.[11] Those who wish to do well were told the best they could do is leave things alone. Sumner was a "defender of the status quo" who

> tried to convince men that confidence in their ability to will and plan their destinies was unwarranted by history or biology or any of the facts of experience -- that the best they could do was to bow to natural forces."[12]

Sumner, they argued, did not attempt to "use legislation and other modes of social control" to enhance social life, as modern sociologists do. Indeed, he was content to "leave the fate of society to unaided nature and the natural impulses of man." Sumner's dogmatic opposition to governmental activity reveals a "total lack of any conception of the state as a constructive reform institution capable of contributing to the public welfare. Therefore, his work represents "laissez-faire twaddle in its least intelligible form."[13]

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[10] McCloskey, pp. 51-52.

[11] McCloskey, p. 37.

[12] Hofstadter, p. 66.

[13] Bernard, pp. 169, 162, 173; McCloskey, p. 55.

Sumner lived in the midst of a "great transformation" that changed the United States from a primarily rural, pre-industrial social order into an urbanized, modern industrial capitalist society, but he was unable to come to terms with these crucial developments. As McCloskey observed, "his mind appears to have closed in youth to the entry of new basic ideas." Bernard agreed: "it is doubtful if he ever changed a fundamental notion throughout his life." Sumner's "lifetime prejudices" exacted a huge toll on his work. He assumed that modern society would always be afflicted by scarcity and that this dynamic shapes individual and social life. Even when the socio-economic framework that produced this ethic was transformed, the concepts of scarcity and "character" remained central to Sumner's thought, thus making his frame of reference archaic: "we think of the economic order in terms of welfare and abundance rather than scarcity; we concern ourselves more with organization and efficiency than with character and punishments and rewards."[14] Though modernity was increasingly dependent upon organization, Sumner refused to modify his individualistic precepts:

> A new era of thought was being ushered in which demanded that the efforts of many individuals, instead of remaining isolated and therefore relatively ineffectual, should be pooled and employed cooperatively through government or otherwise. Sumner was well aware of this trend [but] fought it consistently until he finally become nationally known for his conservatism and his individualism.

Finally, despite his efforts to develop an objective "science of society," Sumner was unable to apply the lessons he learned from the study of other societies to the modern order: "for Sumner, the marriage customs of the Wawanga and the property relations of the Dyaks were always in a separate universe of discourse from like institutions of his own culture."[15] Simply put, Sumner was unable to analyze modernity.

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[14] McCloskey, pp. 33, 69; Bernard, p. 154, Hofstadter, p. 53, 10.

[15] Bernard, p. 174; Hofstadter, p. 65.

This view was challenged by Bruce Curtis in 1964 in his dissertation on "The Middle Class Progressivism of William Graham Sumner."[16] Curtis argued that despite his acceptance of a naturalistic world view, Sumner is not a "social Darwinist pure and simple." Rather, he "softened raw social Darwinism" by introducing several "qualifications." First, Sumner's concept of "antagonistic cooperation" reflects his belief that "internecine competition is fruitless," that social cooperation makes possible the benefits of "organized power," and that more effective cooperation and organization is possible and necessary. Second, modern society cannot be reduced to natural forces, for "civilization" operates on "an unnatural plane above the brute level of existence." In fact, the development of science, technology, and industrial organization transforms "the struggle for existence" into a struggle for luxury.[17] Though conditions of scarcity might well return, they do not presently exist. Sumner, therefore, was able to analyze the social developments associated with luxury.

Third, Sumner had a typically liberal respect for law and wanted the political realm to act as an agency that provides for the commonweal. The belief that governmental regulation is necessary to preserve industrial society shapes all his work, even What Social Classes Owe To Each Other, a book that historians portray as a classic expression of the laissez-faire position. But, when Sumner became convinced that the concentration of wealth threatened the "good society," he argued that the state's role was no longer preservation but restoration. At that point, Sumner no longer portrayed industrialism as "an ultimate good, but a relative good to be carefully hedged about to prevent accompanying ills." It was necessary "to restore the good society through the instrumentality of the impartial arbiter state." Despite his

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[16] Bruce Curtis, The Middle Class Progressivism of William Graham Sumner (Ph.D dissertation, University of Iowa), 1964.

[17] Curtis, pp. 161, 229, 22, 179.

ambivalence about the role of the state and his reputation as an intransigent supporter of laissez-faire, Sumner ultimately became a progressive: "like other middle class Progressives, [Sumner] called upon his ideal state, the normative "democracy," to rescue "the people" from the effects of industrialism."[18]

Finally, Curtis challenged the prevailing view of Sumner's "determinism." His evolutionary perspective, Curtis said, emphasizes that humanity lives in two related environments, physical and social. Since change and the emergence of "new conjunctures" is constant, so is the opportunity for "choice and control." Human agency is possible within historically defined limits:

> It is clear that Sumner recognized a relatively free agent, intelligence, in the social process despite strong determining factors and despite a certain amount of ambivalence regarding it. Roughly speaking, the degree of individual and social freedom gained in the struggle against nature depended upon the degree of intelligence, necessarily supported by power, which was utilized in the struggle.[19]

Curtis argued that Sumner did not "follow through" on his premises, as Hofstadter and McCloskey suggest. Rather, it is Hofstadter and McCloskey "who carry Sumner's laissez-faire and social Darwinist thought to its logical conclusion and generally fail to relieve the resulting portrait with the necessary qualifications." Hofstadter and McCloskey, Curtis said, ignore the complexity of Sumner's thought, emphasize selected features of his work, and "present portraits which are virtually caricatures." The inadequacies of their analysis stem "from a concern to portray Sumner as the prototype American social Darwinist." Though he did possess a "certain amount of social Darwinism," much of it is "exaggerated" and "misunderstood."[20]

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[18] Curtis pp. 212, 224, 223.

[19] Curtis, pp. 27-28.

[20] Curtis, pp. 241, 26.

Robert Bannister's analysis of Sumner further challenges his reputation as a social Darwinist. Bannister wrote an article on "William Graham Sumner's 'Social Darwinism'" in 1973, situated his discussion of Sumner within a more comprehensive evaluation of social Darwinism in Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Thought in 1979, and later expanded his analysis in Sociology and Scientism: The American Quest for Objectivity, 1880-1940 in 1987.[21] Sumner, Bannister argued, never "endorsed an unabashedly Darwinian struggle within society" and therefore seems "not to deserve the label, at least as usually applied." In fact, Sumner's distinction between "the struggle for existence" against nature and the "competition of life" among individuals in society cannot be traced back to Darwin, but Malthus. The Malthusian conceptual framework that Sumner adopted denies that intra-species struggle results from the struggle against nature or that individuals do or should engage in an animal-like struggle. Since this distinction is crucial to Sumner's position, both the popularity of Sumner's reputation as a social Darwinist and the inaccuracy of this image are due to the failure to take Sumner seriously on this key point.[22]

Sumner did not seek "a justification for the jungle-like struggle" in science, but "a more certain basis for order and authority than that provided by existing institutions and beliefs." Sumner therefore did not uncritically defend the status quo, nor is he a "leading Spencerian" or "social Darwinist" who relied on analogies from biology. Rather, he is "a progenitor of objectivism" whose "worship of facts" was produced by his inability to sustain the liberal assumptions of his earlier years. Though Bannister portrayed Sumner's later work, especially Folkways, as "the personal,

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[21] Robert Bannister, "William Graham Sumner's Social Darwinism: A Reconsideration," History of Political Economy (Spring, 1973): 89-109; Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Thought (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); Sociology and Scientism: The American Quest for Objectivity, 1840-1940 (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press), 1987.

[22] Bannister, Social Darwinism, pp. 99, 8.

no less than intellectual, testament of a mid-Victorian liberal strayed into a world he found acutely uncomfortable," he did not suggest that this problem was Sumner's alone. Since many other Americans confronted similar tensions, Sumner's "pilgrimage from positivism and economics to naturalism and sociology was one measure of a significant crisis in late nineteenth-century liberalism."[23]

Though Sumner, like most other late nineteenth century intellectuals, was influenced by Darwin, he did not "blindly accept" Darwinism. On the contrary, his work reflects a "piecemeal accommodation" to the new science. Sumner, Bannister said, was not a crude apologist for the "dog-eat-dog practices he observed around him," nor did he embrace "the cult of success" and the corruption it unleashed. His initial advocacy of laissez-faire did not prevent Sumner from eventually accepting the need for state reform: "no less than the reform Darwinists, he came gradually to see (however much he regretted it) that history (in fact) and Darwinism (in theory) pointed toward solidarity and social control." Folkways represented the culmination of Sumner's lifelong efforts to formulate a scientific basis for social policy in a modern order increasingly beset by conflict and crisis: "the naturalism of Folkways ... expressed a growing pessimism over man's willingness (although not his ability) to use social science to escape this plight." [24] The difference between Sumner and other early American sociologists was therefore a matter of degree, not kind. He, more than any other sociologist, emphasized "the essential irrationality of human behavior." Sumner's shift to sociology was spurred by his increasing "disillusionment" and "cynicism" with modern social developments. Folkways reflects Sumner's desire to analyze irrationality "in terms of 'folkways' and 'mores,' words he coined to describe the unconscious and the more formalized patterns of behavior manifested in a society." His longstanding

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[23] Bannister, Sociology, pp. 88, 98-99; Social Darwinism, p. 10.

[24] Bannister, Social Darwinism, pp. 113, 100.

belief that "men are not controlled by cold logic" provided the basis for Sumner's argument that even though the mores shape social life, they "are sometimes wrong and even mischievous." Though Bannister acknowledged the "many valid criticisms of Sumner's social and economic views," he also emphasized the accomplishments of Folkways. Sumner's analysis of "the mores represented a new way of conceptualizing social reality" and Folkways was "one of the two or three most important books published in the United States in the prewar years.[25]

Ronald Fletcher went even further than Bannister in his positive evaluation of Sumner's work. He argued that Sumner was "undoubtedly one of the most important American scholars contributing to the making of sociology towards the end of the nineteenth century." Instead of dismissing his work as rooted in mid-nineteenth century assumptions, Fletcher presented Sumner as a "bridge" figure between late nineteenth and twentieth century sociology. Sumner's analysis of folkways and mores, Fletcher said, makes him one of the foremost theoreticians of the moral order. For Sumner,

> the basic regulatory order of a society ... [which] embraces the material, technical, organization structuring of men's relationships, is essentially a moral order. There is no societal fabric of technical and social procedures and relationships which is not at once an order interpenetrated by morality ... [Morality] is not, and is never, an abstract, intuitive thing of philosophical ethics alone, but is a part and parcel of men's practical efforts to live well, to accomplish welfare in society, and -- what is crucial -- is not one aspect of society, but an all-pervading, interpenetrating core of all social relationships. [26]

Sumner's analysis of the moral order in Folkways suggested several key points: first, the moral order shapes all aspects of social life and social structures; second, the

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[25] Bannister, Social Darwinism, pp. 110, 112; Sociology, pp. 99, 106-107.

[26] Ronald Fletcher, The Making of Sociology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), pp. 502, 510.

nature of societal phenomena form a category of facts that are fundamentally different than "material" and "organic" facts. Since social life and organic life are different, biology cannot provide the basis for an analysis of social structure or social change. Third, folkways and mores are not always suited to the life conditions to which they refer: "one cannot speak of folkways becoming 'corrupted' if they are always relative to the conditions to which they are adapted." Fletcher argued that this corruption is generated by the fact that the mores contain "errors" and are also intimately tied to the structuring of interests; groups and classes use force to advance their interests and these "devices" affect the mores.[27] Fourth, the mores use a powerful and conservatizing social force that limit the possibility for self-conscious reform of social life. Folkways conceived of an interconnected social order "laid down without over-all conscious and rational planning, before men become aware of it, let alone desirous of reforming it." This order provides the basis from which more formal differentiations of structure emerge and the framework within which "conscious control (to some extent) may take place." Fifth, despite Sumner's emphasis upon the obstacles to effective reform, he was not "opposed to the conscious application of reason, critical reflection, legislative reform, and education in efforts to improve the social order." Like other major sociologists, he was concerned about the "nature and dangers" of the "savage development of industrial capitalism" and wanted sociology to provide "the basis for a wise and satisfactory art of achieving a new, enriched order of human society out of the chaos of modern industrial change." Sumner wanted sociology to help people in modern society to "liberate" themselves from the mores by providing "reliable knowledge of society so that such matters could be put right."[28] Since Fletcher did not examine Sumner's earlier writings, his conclusion that Sumner was an important

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[27] Fletcher, p. 533.

[28] Fletcher, p. 533.

and representative figure in the "making of sociology" is based on his discussion of Folkways.

Alfred McClung Lee, in sharp contrast, focused on the entire body of Sumner's work and stressed that a "creative marginality" made Sumner an "irritating" and "radical" social critic who challenged his contemporaries more orthodox perspectives on societal processes.[29] Most discussions of Sumner, Lee said, are based upon his writings in the 1870's and 1880's and fail to see their connection with his later, more critical thought. Few note that his later "radicalism, economic determinism, cultural relativism, [and] disillusionment with capitalism and 'democratic' politics" are present in his earliest writings, though they were more fully developed in the 1890's and the first decade of this century.[30]

Sumner's emphasis upon "human irrationality and subservience to traditional cultural patterns" shaped his early work and eventually found its mature expression in Folkways.

> Sumner realized the strengths of the cultural controls in terms of which we are socialized as we grow up in our groups. He could see how such cultural controls usually keep us from visualizing accurately even pressing economic predicaments in any except a traditional fashion. He was aware of the power of ecological, economic, and technological changes to modify culture and social institutions and thus individual personalities and modes of life. He understood the influence of those who exploit symbols and themes embedded in popular culture and who thus facilitate or impede changes in life conditions. [31]

Folkways showed how the "strength of cultural controls" meant that social development could not be reduced to adaptation to material environment: "cultural controls" have a

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[29] Alfred McClung Lee, "The Services of Clinical Sociology," American Behavioral Scientist 23 (March/April, 1979): 495; "The Forgotten Sumner," Journal of the History of Sociology 3, (Fall/Winter, 1980-1981): 87.

[30] Lee, "Forgotten Sumner," p. 93.

[31] Ibid. p. 98.

conservatizing impact that leads people to cling to traditional responses even when new ones are needed. Moreover, these "cultural controls" are shaped by the efforts of "economic and political entrepreneurs" to enhance their social power. Sumner's work thus addressed the traditionalizing features of culture and the "devices" by which powerful groups shaped "popular culture." But Sumner also examined the possibilities for social change and the means by which human agency could facilitate change: he was "concerned with the extent to which people are bound by" culture and the degree to which we can "utilize folkways and mores, customs, and morals, and how such cultural patterns resist change, can be changed, and do change." A careful reading of Folkways reveals its "basically radical diagnosis of persisting societal problems and also prescriptive suggestions for change."[32] Government is one such resource for Sumner: he recognizes that constructive governmental legislation and enforcement can direct changes in social conditions and group practices.

Arthur Vidich and Stanford Lyman are the only scholars who note that Sumner's efforts to "comprehend directly the social and historical realities of his age" gave his work a "specifically American content." Sumner critically analyzed the "triumph of industrial over landed capital in a society where European feudalism had never existed" and the rise of a distinctively American "culture based on the primacy of wealth."[33] Even his earliest essays suggest that "the nation was mired in cultural and political chaos." The formerly hegemonic Protestant values that encouraged frugality and led people to resist the temptations of excessive wealth have been replaced by conspicuous consumption. The individualism and preoccupation with self-interest generated by modernity takes the social form of what Sumner called "the cult of success" and

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[32] Lee, "Services," 504.

[33] Arthur Vidich and Stanford Lyman, American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and Their Directions (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 39, 36.

produces a "deep depravation of all social interests." Eventually, the "materialism of American business" shaped "the character of America's major social institutions:" even the political realm became "depraved." Though a modernizing social order requires a "great political organization," in a society divided by conflicting interests, government becomes "a cockpit for contending private interests." Political corruption flourishes; state action is paralyzed.[34]

Vidich and Lyman correctly note that Sumner "opposed the evolutionary illusions of his age" and that his analysis of "social and cultural change without the perspective of a determining, unilinear, and inevitable evolutionary trajectory" was one of his foremost theoretical contributions. His assumption that culture is relatively autonomous and that social development is not mechanistically determined enabled Sumner to formulate a compelling analysis of "the fundamental problem of the relationship between ideology and social structure and the effects of social processes upon it."[35] But Vidich and Lyman's discussion of Sumner's analysis of modern society, its nature, problems, and the possibility of correcting them is not consistent with this insight in several respects. First, they argue that Sumner believed that "industry and capitalism would develop according to their own processes."[36] But, Sumner's analysis of modern society was shaped by his early recognition that "social codes" which do not correspond to experiences in the material world have emerged. The modern polity had been corrupted, and the media, schools, and churches, all of which are quintessential products of "industry and capitalism," have become disseminators of a "sensationalist culture." The generalization of the principle of contract, a constitutive feature of

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[34] Vidich and Lyman, pp. 42, 40, 40, Sumner quoted p. 37.

[35] Vidich and Lyman, pp. 36, 38-39, 47.

[36] Ibid., p. 47.

capitalism, bred social processes that turned against it: neither industry nor capitalism are able to "develop according to their own processes."

Second, the problem was not that "emergent American capitalism had not yet developed a value system consistent with its institutional framework." Vidich and Lyman suggest the advent of modern capitalism created conditions in which "the mores governing society were no longer the displaced (and obsolete) values of covenant-oriented Puritanism but rather a new set of rules, not yet fully defined." But the "mores" were "fully defined" and the emergent "value system" was "consistent" with the existing "institutional framework." The rise of enormous concentrations of wealth, the "thirst for luxury," and a public sphere that is vulnerable to abuse by private interests generated processes and an "institutional framework" that conflicted with the more rational order of contract. On some level, the corruption of the "value system" was a consequence, a "symptom" of the fact that the normal development of the "institutional framework" had been disrupted. Sumner did not suggest that this development was an instance of cultural lag, as Vidich and Lyman imply. Rather, he thought that it was due to the fact that the "materialism of American business" shaped "the character of America's major social institutions," a point that Vidich and Lyman themselves acknowledge.[37]

Third, they misrepresent Sumner's view on the responsibilities and possibilities of modern governance. Sumner, they say, "regarded government as either inadequate or utterly corrupt."[38] While this view certainly captures aspects of Sumner's thought, it neglects his belief that the modern polity had to institutionalize rational deliberation, thereby enabling the "active reason" to shape institutions and social development. Sumner was admittedly pessimistic about the obstacles that prevent modern government

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[37] Ibid., pp. 36, 46, 40.

[38] Ibid., p. 41.

from fulfilling its vital administrative functions. Nevertheless, his work not only explores the problems confronting governance, but the resources that make it possible.

Vidich and Lyman ultimately reduce Sumner's ideal state to an "obstacle remover." Nature, "working through predominant social forces and through the crescive social institutions fostered by new values, would do the rest." This statement ignores Sumner's distinction between the "crescive" and unformulated institutions that characterize pre-modern societies and the "enacted" nature of modern institutions. Vidich and Lyman are so focused upon the degree to which the Protestant Ethic shapes Sumner's work that they neglect the importance of contract, rationality, science, education, and the "critical habit." They recognize that Sumner did not "oppose all forms of rational control or institutional guidance" and thus implicitly acknowledge that he was open to the question of directed change. But they never develop this crucial point. Instead, they suggest that Sumner (1) denied social policy could effectively promote social change and (2) believed that even though the emergent mores were "morally derelict and scientifically unsound," they "could not be halted."[39] Despite their perceptive discussion of Sumner's work, Vidich and Lyman ignore both his examination of how the operation of the modern moral order creates openings for social change which interests try to counter and his analysis of the relationship between force, the mores, and the possibilities and limits of human agency.

"READING" SUMNER

Neither Sumner's defenders nor his critics consider him to be a theoretician. At best, his defenders argue that "he was less concerned with developing an abstract conceptualization of society than with confronting its empirical and historical

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[39] Ibid., pp. 45, 37.

reality."[40] At worst, his critics maintain that Sumner was not only atheoretical, but more biased than most intellectuals: "Sumner, to a degree unique among American intellectuals," lacked "the goal of acquiring and disseminating disinterested knowledge."[41] Either way, most scholars emphasize that "moralism" was a central part of Sumner's analysis of modern society.

Sumner's reputation as a "moralist" is not unfounded: even a brief glance through his writings reveals that he analyzed the problems of industrialization from a moral standpoint. Instead of treating this as an obstacle to theory, I assume Sumner's recognition of the moral issues associated with industrialization pushed him to develop the theoretical resources to analyze them. In other words, I perceive a positive relationship between his moral perceptions and theoretical analysis and therefore examine Sumner's moral concerns about industrialization and his theoretical analysis as part of the same intellectual development. This allows me to analyze Sumner's moralizing as one aspect of his theoretical project of identifying the distinctive features of modernity, to explore the theoretical significance of his work independent of his moral positions, to take his work seriously, and to show that he was an innovative theorist.

My approach does not deny that Sumner was polemical and made rhetorical statements that obscured or contradicted the logic of his analysis. As a man of his times who wished to influence it, his work was motivated by several concerns. Sumner was a prolific publicist and an influential speaker whose desire to influence social matters led him to participate in current debates on most of the major social issues of

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[40] Vidich and Lyman, p. 39; Fletcher, p. 503; Lee, "The Forgotten Sumner," p. 93.

[41] Robert Notestein, "The Moralist Rigorism of William Graham Sumner," The Journal of the History of Ideas 16 (June, 1955): 389; Bernard, p. 173; Hofstadter, p. 65; McCloskey, p. 42 Dusky Lee Smith, Some Socio-Economic Influences on the Founding Fathers of Sociology, 1865-1917 (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1969), p. 339.

his era (protectionism, currency, governmental and civil service reform, labor-capital relations, socialism, to name a few). His description of modernity in terms of issues that were most striking to social critics is therefore understandable. Sumner, however, was not just a muckraker. He was also a scholar who tried to shape these debates so that they lent themselves to systematic analysis. He not only said that his is the side of the debate that I support, but that this is how the debate should be carried on in sociological terms.

Most sociologists have read Folkways but are not familiar with his other work. One aim of this dissertation is to establish the need to read Sumner's writings as a whole, though recognizing that his thought changed over time. Sumner encountered certain problems in the course of his analysis that did not lend themselves to solutions, but pushed him to confront other questions which required more nuanced and sophisticated handling. Even though his past work did not necessarily lead to his future thought, it influenced him, and the later Sumner would not have been possible without the earlier one. For instance, if he had not developed his early notion of the individual and contract, he would not have been led to his later position that an "educated skepticism" can disturb the latency of the mores and that a "free and rational criticism of mores is essential to societal welfare."[42]

I assume that Sumner never simply discarded the ideas or insights he developed. In fact, he continuously used his earlier discoveries and findings to complicate the issues he addressed later. His writings contain a striking succession of concerns, but his work possessed a developmental nature. Sumner's attempt to integrate his ideas was not completely successful. His work left a number of ambiguities, such as the fact that he emphasized the primacy of economic forces and the "public or social aspect" of modern life, yet frequently pointed to the importance of "will" and "character." But,

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[42] Sumner, Folkways, pp. 56, 95.

his commentary, polemics, and evaluations represent but one side of these ambiguities. The other aspect is the concepts he developed. The implications that I draw are from his concepts. Sumner may not have completely or consistently followed through on the concepts he developed, but contemporary sociologists can use them as resources for analysis. To solely focus on Sumner's moralizing, commentaries, and evaluations, as most historians do, ignores that Sumner's concepts provided insights and have a value independent of his personal leanings and prejudices.

Sumner had deep prejudices. Some had to do with the economic presuppositions he accepted; others flowed from his moral convictions; still others were rooted in the political beliefs he espoused. It is important not to deny these prejudices, but to understand how they opposed or enriched his conceptual framework. For instance, his emphasis on "will" and "character" certainly was connected to the social and religious world-view he was exposed to as a child and later as an Episcopalian minister. His discussion of "will" and "character" often contradicted the rules of sociological explanation operative in other aspects of his thought. Therefore, it is possible to find in Sumner the critical sensibility which we identify as sociological and the moralistic side of him which exempts at least some portion of social phenomena from the sociological forces he identified as primary. However, by the time he wrote Folkways Sumner clearly argued that all social developments must be understood as aspects of a system and that room for agency was a constitutive feature of the system itself. His early stress on the rational underpinnings of contract and the freedom of individuals to enter economic relations thus provided a resource for his later writings. This example provides one instance of how the failure to take Sumner and his "prejudices" seriously prevents interpreters from grasping how these "prejudices" sometimes enhanced his thought. The fact that most historians have dismissed Sumner's prejudices and ignored the complex influence they had upon his work has produced a widespread inability to

understand the development of his work or the nature of his theoretical contributions.

Finally, I wish to argue that the reasons that Sumner has been mis-read are neither simple or innocuous. Popular references to Sumner typically portray him as an apologist for an unfettered capitalism, a conservative ideologue whose social Darwinism, fatalism, and moralism prevented his later, more sociological work from understanding modernity and the degree to which modern agencies of science, education, and governance make possible a more rational regulation and reform of social life. Many historians have denied Sumner's complexity and his theoretical contributions because they refuse to confront the problems that his work grappled with. If his analysis of the conservatizing features of the mores is true, if he is correct in arguing that even modernity is not exempt from this non-rational feature of social existence, then where is the objectivity, the agency, and the ability to rationally regulate social change that we pride ourselves on? If Sumner's analysis of the existence of force and the pervasiveness of "irresponsible power" is accurate, then where is the justice and progress of modern society? If Sumner's analysis of the crisis of modernity speaks to the present, not just the past, what then? "To sneer at his social Darwinism" and "to ignore the important insights" he provided is, as Robert Bannister observed, mistaken: "Sumner deserves a better fate."[43]

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[43] Bannister, Social Darwinism, p. 113.

THE PROMISE AND PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN POLITY: SUMNER'S ANALYSIS OF MODERN SOCIETY IN THE 1870'S

In the 1870's, Sumner argued that the political conditions necessary to sustain the well-being of modern society were absent. He believed that the elaboration of a representative democracy in a complex industrial society enabled private interests to use state power to advance their particular interests at the expense of the public interest. In this chapter I will (1) demonstrate that Sumner's critique of what today is called "pluralism" derived from his understanding of the problems posed by power and organization for representation and governance, (2) show that his examination of the "political code of morals" generated by modern political arrangements pushed Sumner to elaborate a sociological analysis of morals, and (3) explore what Sumner saw as the theoretically implicit tensions and contradictions between the material "conditions of life" and the institutional structures and moral codes.

Sumner maintained that the modern epoch could not be understood or reformed unless it was analyzed sociologically. His discussion of "the degraded state of American politics and public life" emphasized that political processes had moral consequences that were sociological in nature. He argued that the relationship of the polity to the modern economy encouraged interest groups to struggle for state power and that the prevailing "theory and practice of elections" sustained a "political code of morals" that justified success by any means. His belief that the pursuit of ungoverned private interests undermined the conditions supporting the public interest was one instance of his hypothesis that institutional arrangements and moral "codes of action" can constrain the possibilities for development contained in the "conditions of life."

This analysis led him to examine the conservatizing, anti-developmental aspects of modern social life and to propose reforms that could guarantee the co-existence of

civil liberty and self-government within a responsive public sphere. Although Sumner criticized aspects of democracy, he was not anti-democratic. Rather, he maintained that changed social conditions required the modification of the existing theory and practice of democratic politics. Sumner was a defender of democratic republicanism who wanted reformed political processes to sustain civic virtue, further the public interest, and help fulfill the potential of modern society.

Just as modern political arrangements had to reflect changed social conditions, so did the idea of civic loyalty. For Sumner, this loyalty required a modernist's critical perspective qualified by a sense of the importance of tradition. A corrupt political process could not generate civic virtue unless citizens were capable of a critical response to corruption itself. It follows that Sumner saw something of a dialectical rather than a mechanical relationship between citizen participation and social structure. Therefore, an adequate policy of reform would have to reinforce at least some level of criticism without, however, undermining the foundations of social order.

The particular reforms proposed by Sumner reflected his desire to separate political authority from the mobilizations of particular interests. This concern makes Sumner's political analysis even more noteworthy than the specific reforms he advocated. Here, as elsewhere, Sumner's ability to analyze the sociological roots of a distinctively modern problem surpassed his proposed solutions.

THE "GENERAL TENDENCY OF THINGS" IN MODERNITY

Sumner was persuaded that contract and civil liberty comprised the general "tendency" of modernity and encouraged the types of productivity and morality necessary to promote individual and social welfare:

> the tendency of things in modern times, with the destruction of class privileges, the extension of liberty, the popularization of education, and the introduction of machinery, is to enhance every day the importance of the economic virtues, industry, frugality, prudence, and temperance, and to increase the penalties of the economic vices, idleness, thriftlessness, improvidence, intemperance, and extravagance; because true and permanent success is less and less likely to be attained save by practicing the virtues and avoiding the vices mentioned.[1]

Sumner's analysis of modern socio-economic arrangements led him to conclude that the "tendency of things" in modernity was to make economic and moral development inseparable. He believed that the "extension of liberty" as civil liberty (or, as he put it, liberty under law) played a vital role in this development. Modern law established two indispensable conditions: that the flourishing of exchange would be respected and secured and that the competitive struggle would not be won by the strongest or most brutal, but by those who were most industrious, skillful, frugal, and temperate. An effective operation of the modern political economy ensures that the "normal methods" by which people satisfy their material wants will be unavoidably moral: "wealth is only to be procured by means which exert the most wholesome moral influence on mankind -- industry and economy."[2]

Sumner maintained that the "set of experience" involved in the acquisition of wealth was far more influential than any other experience: the desire to acquire wealth is "the most universal to mankind, demands the most immediate attention, [and] absorbs the most time." For Sumner, the material order and the moral order of modernity were interpenetrating parts of an organic whole. The conditions of this interpenetration, he said, were themselves moral and political as well as economic.[3] Therefore, though the modern economic order created necessary conditions of economic

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[1] William Graham Sumner, "Money and Morals," Good Company Sunday Afternoon (July 1, 1878): 371.

[2] Ibid., p. 370.

[3] Ibid.

development and a flourishing moral life, it could not establish, by itself, sufficient conditions.

THE PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN POLITY

Sumner believed that the generalization of the principle of contract had created the "public interest" and that the foremost purpose of modern government was to promote the "public interest." However, the nature of this crucial desideratum had long been misunderstood. For Sumner, the "public interest" was neither the "sum" of private interests nor a "compromise" among them. Rather, it was a distinct conception, "neutral and impartial as to all private interests; it simply creates equal conditions under which private interests may develop."[4] The state could only enable people to use their energies "without any hindrance from the cupidity, envy, etc. of other men" if it elaborated an impartial system of law that could "really be neutral and impartial in the competition of man with man."[5] The state had to guarantee that private interests operated within "equal conditions." Sumner argued that state neutrality was as important to create as it was difficult to sustain.

Sumner believed that the modern political system was particularly vulnerable to the abuse of the private interests to which it gave opportunities for expression. He maintained that this problem was not due to individual self-interest, but to interest groups: "self-interest in politics oftenest takes the form of the interest of a class, a

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[4] Sumner, Challenge of Facts, "Responsible Government and Democracy," 1877, p. 261.

[5] Sumner, "Theory and Practice of Elections," Princeton Review (November, 1881): 99-100.

clique, [or] an industrial interest...."[6] He elaborated his ideas about self-interest in regard to two key points: first, he said that the modern polity generates a public sphere that is particularly prone to contamination by interests; second, he said that interest groups possess both the motivation and the resources to exploit the public sphere's vulnerability. Political power enabled interest groups to advance their interests more effectively in the "modern industrial system" and provides such groups with compelling reasons to organize for the pursuit of power. Private interests also possessed advantages made available by the very contractual arrangements which allowed them to develop and manifest interests in the first place.

Sumner suggested that the "greatest fault" of a representative government was its inability to overcome the onslaughts of organized interests.[7] As he put it, the

> weakness of the representative democracy [was due to] its inability to give support to the public interest, or the national welfare, or a permanent policy, or a far-sighted benefit, in the face of a sectional demand, or a temporary and short-sighted desire of a large number, or the selfish purpose of a strong clique. This weakness is especially apparent in face of the effort of a powerful corporation which can influence a large number of votes and has an interest strong enough to make it use money freely. The deepest disgrace which has ever come upon us as a nation has come from this source, and we are threatened with more.[8]

Despite the inherently "peaceful" nature of elections, competition among interest groups tends to "arouse the deadliest passions -- those which are especially threatening to civil order."[9]

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[6] Ibid., p. 116; Challenge of Facts, "Democracy and Responsible Government," 1877, p. 261.

[7] Ibid., pp. 116-117; Challenge, "Democracy and Responsible Government," p. 270.

[8] Sumner, "Responsible Government," pp. 261, 271.

[9] Sumner, Challenge, "Republican Government," 1877, pp. 227-28.

Sumner maintained that contractual relations, which he had initially seen as providing for the "peaceful experience of a civilized state," had a "darker side." He invited his readers to consider "the struggle of two persons who are forming a contract, each of course seeking his own advantage in the stipulations." This example is revealing. For Sumner, political struggles were analogous to the process of contract formation and, on the scale of modern legal and political relations, were connected as a matter of practice:

> an election belongs to the primitive and formative stage, which is analogous to the formation of a contract, and like all the primitive and formative acts of human social life it bears in it the marks and character of the original struggle and competition which nothing can ever do away with, however much we may regulate and soften it.[10]

Sumner believed that representative democracy was vulnerable to "interests" because it inevitably relied on "delegates" -- at a certain point in a society's development, the spread and size of the population demanded it. But delegates were not chosen to represent the public or advance the public interest. On the contrary, they were "agents of local and other interests who are sent into an arena where interests are lost or won, to fight for particular ones." Their aim was rather straightforward: to defend and advance the "private interests" that selected them. The political realm thus becomes an arena in which groups struggle to defend and advance their particular interests. This struggle, Sumner noted, has a most injurious influence upon the "public interest" which "has little chance of prevailing, except so far as the local and private interests may neutralize each other."[11] The economic struggle of competing interest groups may promote the commonwealth, but the transfer of this struggle to the political realm undermines the public interest.

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[10] Sumner, "Theory and Practice," p. 123.

[11] Sumner, "Democracy and Responsible Government," p. 260.

Sumner compared the electoral struggles of political parties and interest groups to the struggles which attend the formation of contract and also highlighted its resemblance to war: "elections are struggles for power -- war between the two parties -- and the end is conquest." Though elections do not necessarily entail violence,

> the code of elections is yet the code of war, in which the means are not fastidiously chosen, if they only lead to success; in which the law of retaliation is the only law which is thoroughly undisputed; in which the only restraint is the sense of honor and decency of the parties; in which the standards of right and wrong are changed from moment to moment as the question is, "What is right for us?" or, "What is right for them?"[12]

Sumner's statement that electoral institutions supported "standards of right and wrong" recognized that politics not only shaped "social codes" but generated social processes that exercised more influence on political behavior than that exercised by individual morality or character. Plainly put, Sumner believed the modern polity created social relations and "social codes" which stripped away "honor" and deformed "character."

"THE CODE OF POLITICAL MORALS"

For Sumner, the source of this problem lay in modern social arrangements, not corrupt individuals. This is why he insisted that it was "idle" to merely denounce the "spoils doctrine" and "the degradation of political and public life." Rather than being an aberration due to the machinations of a corrupt few, these were social products caused by the "social and political circumstances of our communities."[13]

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[12] Sumner, "The Theory and Practice of Elections," p. 118.

[13] Sumner, "Democracy and Responsible Government," p. 270.

Sumner was especially concerned with the emergence of "an entire code of political morals" which affected in different ways elected officials, members of the "political party machine," and the general citizenry. In this spirit, he examined William Marcy's enunciation of the doctrine "to the victors belong the spoils" in his 1832 speech to the United States Senate. Sumner argued that this idea did not merely express faulty character, that Marcy was not one of the "bad men" who flourished in American politics, and that "men of decent character and good education do not invent such doctrines ... on the spur of the moment." Rather, the doctrine was the culmination of a long historical development of competitive practices and justification of them in zero-sum terms or total victory or defeat:

> When Marcy said, "To the victors belong the spoils," he only gave new, distinct, and dogmatic expression to the theories in which he had been educated, and the context of his speech shows that he was not conscious of uttering anything which ought to shock any one of those who heard him.[14]

Sumner believed that the modern political process generated a political culture consisting of norms and connected to values that influenced the general orientations and conduct of citizens. He concluded that the prevailing "code of political morals" was not admirable, that it reduced moral standards to justifications for self-interest and, in effect, rendered standards of right and wrong meaningless.[15]

THE REPUBLICAN SYSTEM AND THE FAITHFUL CITIZEN

Sumner's analysis of the conditions necessary for the effective operation of the republican system led him to several conclusions: first, "no one can be a righteous

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[14] Sumner, Forgotten Man, "Politics in America," 1876, p. 309.

[15] Sumner, "The Theory of Elections," pp. 117-18.

man in our time and country unless he is also a faithful citizen;" second, "the duty of the good citizen is to support the existing institutions of his society as long as he can;" third, the republican system "assumes and imperatively requires high intelligence, great political sense, self-sacrificing activity, moderation, and self-control on the part of the citizens." It demanded above all, that its citizenry be willing to sacrifice "individual interest against the common good" when necessary.[16] In this sense, Sumner accepted the basic assumptions of civic humanism.

Civic humanism assumes that participation in the political community is necessary for responsible and autonomous citizenship. Here, citizens are exposed to a social process that enables them to transcend self-interest and to direct their energies to the good of all. Citizen involvement in the modern polity nourishes the public spirit by educating people to broader, more collective concerns than mere self-interest allows.

Sumner embraced the goals of civic humanism, but argued that the education provided by participation in the modern polity thwarted moral development by channelling self-interest in the worst possible direction: "the education the election exerts is education in the art of elections, in the tactics of party management, in shrewd and cynical dealings with the weaknesses of human nature, and not in the principles of self-government or the knowledge of public questions."[17]

Sumner maintained that political parties shaped the operation of the electoral process far more than any other agency.

> Parties here are highly organized and well drilled, and they form, as it were, nations within the nation. The ideas of the nation and patriotism fade out, and the ideas of party and party fealty take their place. The elections are struggles

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[16] Sumner, Challenge, "Introductory Lecture to Courses in Political and Social Science," 1873, p. 402; "Democracy and Responsible Government," pp. 247-48; Forgotten Man, "Politics in America," 1876, p. 331.

[17] Sumner, "Elections and Civil-Service Reform," 1881, reprinted in Collected Essays on Political and Social Science (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1885), p. 149.

> for power -- war between the two parties -- and the end is conquest. The successful party seizes upon the state and deals with it as formerly a conquering nation dealt with the conquered.... Under this system the party is a band held together by organization and discipline for success in a common undertaking, and that is the aggrandizement of the members of the band at the expense of others.[18]

Parties invariably taught their members to weigh means more than the value of ends. Success was not just the highest but the only good. Furthermore, members of political parties quickly learned that autonomous decision-making was not rewarded. Instead, blind loyalty and conformity to the party line were the "highest political virtues." Sumner insisted that without reformation of the modern polity, participation would be inimical to civic virtue: "we get out of an election, at best, something less than went in, of political energy and civic virtue."[19] He saw this as a paradox. Modern society required that the faithful citizen become politically involved. However, the political vehicle by which civic faithfulness was made practical was defective. Therefore, paradoxically, those who became politically involved were exposed to a corrupting social process that had the advantage of their civic faithfulness. Representative democracy undermined the virtues necessary for its own effective functioning.

Sumner's analysis of the defects of modern political processes required that he distinguish between two types of faithfulness: one led citizens to become involved in politics while the other enabled them to participate critically. These two forms of "faithfulness" reflected differing historical conditions. The faithfulness of the involved citizen corresponded to the now defunct town democracy in which

> the officers are only administrative functionaries; their powers are closely defined

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[18] Sumner,"The Theory and Practice of Elections," pp. 107-8.

[19] Sumner, "Politics in America," p. 309; "Theory and Practice of Elections," p. 134.

> and limited, they act under immediate direction, they exercise routine functions, have no initiative and little discretion.[20]

In town democracies, citizens did not need special qualifications for public office. They were directly responsible to the public opinion of neighbors since every public act was subject to close observation. When citizens became involved this not only discharged their political obligations but also ensured that the integrity of the polity would be preserved. The nature and the needs of a complex society, Sumner said, were quite different.

As towns expanded into huge cities and agricultural society was transformed by industrial organization, public affairs became more important and more complex. This increased the "demand for great technical knowledge and skill."[21] The enormous size of the citizenry made direct participation archaic and the "ballot" became the new "method" for determining the will of the majority. Sumner argued that the intimacy of the ballot blinded people to the distance engendered by modernity.

> Right here, however, lies the birth of the political "machine"; for in the next step it is found that organization and previous concert are necessary. With this comes the necessity for nomination, and it is then found that the center of gravity of the system lies rather in the nomination than in the election.... The machinery is multiplied at every step, and with every increase in machinery comes new opportunity for manipulation and ... [this creates] small bodies in which chicanery, bargaining, and improper influence can be brought to bear. By ward-primaries, caucuses, nominating committees, pledged delegations, and so on, the ultimate power is concentrated in the hands of a few who, by concerted action, are able to control the result.[22]

Sumner maintained that the present structure of electoral institutions enabled "the party machine" and interest groups to exercise a lasting influence upon governmental

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[20] Sumner, "Democracy and Responsible Government," p. 257.

[21] Ibid., p. 279.

[22] Sumner, "Republican Government," p. 231.

activity. He also argued that under these conditions there was no reason for voters to want to further the public interest. He concluded that "the notion that the people desire only to have the public good provided for" was a "delightful political dogma" which was as popular as it was false. Sumner believed that this "notion" assumed that the "people" possessed certain pre-social characteristics, and ignored the degree to which social processes actually shaped their political orientations. The corrupting influence of the political process ensures that "the people do not positively want what is for the public good; they want, in a positive and active sense, what is for their interest."[23] Even if voters wished to further the public interest, there was no guarantee that they possessed the critical ability to distinguish what measures are required or the intellectual and emotional independence to reform problematic practices.

The role of faithful citizen had to change: mere involvement was no longer enough. The critical sensibility thus constituted a second type of civic faithfulness. Sumner argued that a truly faithful citizen had to possess the intelligence to discern what measures best promoted the public interest, the emotional autonomy to resist public opinion, and the strength of character and determination necessary to reform corrupt or archaic practices and institutions. Sumner did not yet examine the type of education this required, but he was aware that the "active reason" had to shape modern society and that only an effective educational system could create this "reason."

> The assumption which underlies the republican system is that the voter has his mind made up, or is capable of making up his mind, as to all great questions of public policy; but this is plainly impossible unless he is well informed as to some great principles of political science, knows something of history and of experiments made elsewhere, and also understands the great principles of civil liberty. It is assumed that he will act independently of party if party clashes with patriotism. He is assumed to be looking at the public good with independent power to discern it and to act for it. Thus it follows, in general, that the

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[23] Sumner, "Democracy and Responsible Government," p. 258.

> citizen of a republic is animated by patriotism, that he is intelligent enough to see what patriotism demands, that he can throw off prejudice and passion and the mysterious influence of the public opinion of the social group to which he belongs, that he has education enough to form an opinion on questions of public policy, that he has courage enough to stand by his opinion in the face of contumely and misrepresentation and local or class unpopularity, that he will exercise his political power conscientiously and faithfully in spite of social and pecuniary allurements against his opinion, and that he is intelligent enough to guard himself against fraud. Finally, it is assumed that the citizen will sacrifice time, interest, and attention, in no slight degree, to his public duty.[24]

Although the critical sensibility was as important to the well-being of modern society as the uncritical "faithfulness" of the involved citizen was to the past, it found little support. Despite his frequent allusions to the importance of "will," Sumner argued that this failure was caused by problematic institutions, not defective individuals.[25] This was another reason to investigate why modern institutions had failed and to explore how they might be improved.

Sumner believed that the polity could no longer sustain the public interest or the virtues of civil society. It follows that its modern form was either hopelessly antithetical to civic virtue and the public interest or it was amenable to reforms at the foundation that nevertheless retained aspects of what needed to be reformed. The first implied a more radical act than Sumner believed historically possible; the second involved an intricacy of political reform that the polity seemed unable to entertain.

Sumner's desire to modify the political institutions to eliminate their vulnerability to interests and abuses of power led him to several proposals. The first revolved around civil service reform. Sumner argued that "the most fatal breach in all existing abuses would be the separation of all office-holders from the work of organizing parties and managing elections." In this respect, Sumner's position was similar to many other reformers of his era who wished to check the power of parties and politicians.

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[24] Sumner, "Republican Government," 1877, pp. 228-29.

[25] Sumner, "Republican Government," p. 234; "Theory of Elections," p. 124.

He also proposed another reform in which political arrangements would follow the lead of modern society and "adopt a new division of labor and a higher organization." Instead of relying on delegates, Sumner proposed that "representatives" be selected who, by their knowledge, skills, and commitment to the public interest, could protect it from private interests. He wanted to combine the benefits of expertise with the principle of representation.

> Such men will no longer be democratic delegates but true "representatives"; a body of such men selected from various constituencies would "represent" the nation or the state as no popular majority ever does.... For all practical purposes, they would be the state, would embody its wisdom and its will, and would decide on its action. They would constitute the great council of the nation; they would have to act on their judgment and their discretion and would therefore necessarily be independent. They would be under the observation of the people who would judge by the result ... who were capable of filling the trust laid upon them and who were not. Such representatives would find their reputation and advancement dependent on their success in promoting the permanent welfare of the state; the public interest would be their chief charge as against all private interests."[26]

Finally, Sumner argued that instead of electing officers for a set period, there should be greater flexibility so that when "good government" exists, it can be sustained. Incorporating these modifications into the existing political structure would generate a "code" that supported responsible and disinterested behavior and discouraged "empty vanity and petty ambition."[27]

A THEORIST OF THE "REPUBLIC"

Sumner believed that it was imperative that modern society possess "good government, honorable and efficient administration, business-like permanence, and

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[26] Sumner, "Democracy and Responsible Government," pp. 279-80.

[27] Ibid.

exactitude."[28] For Sumner, the efficiency of government was just as important as the form within which efficiency occurred: "We are more inclined to do here what we should do in any other affair -- seek for competently trained hands into which to commit the charge." He accepted that "we must, of course, get ourselves governed, and we must do it by the methods of self-government." These methods, however, were to be judged in part by their effectiveness: "the question by which all political institutions must be tested is, whether they attain the result with the least possible expense, annoyance, and loss."[29] In this sense, Sumner was a theorist of the "republic" who argued that most people were so attached to democratic dogmas that they mistakenly rejected that which was in their best interests.

Sumner defined "republican government" as a form of self-government "in which the authority of the state is conferred for limited terms upon officers designated by election" whose function is to ensure that civil liberty prevails. A republic has several distinguishing characteristics. First, it possesses an institutional framework that secures civil liberty and "surrounds the individual with safeguards by its permanent constitutional provisions." Second, it "breaks the continuity of power to guard against its abuse." Third, "it abhors as much the irresponsible power of the many as the one." Fourth, it judges the effectiveness of its arrangement and measures by the degree to which they promote good government. Fifth, a republic possessed the flexibility necessary to create and sustain "good government."[30]

Sumner believed that the principles of republican and democratic forms of government were different and often conflicted with one another. Whereas a republic is committed to finding the most effective means of achieving "good government," a

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[28] Sumner, "Politics in America," p. 325.

[29] Sumner, "Elections and Civil Service Reform," 1881, pp. 146-47.

[30] Sumner, "Republican Government," p. 226.

democracy is a set of rigid "dogmas" about political rights and the means by which a government should be organized. The democratic commitment to an electoral process in which parties express the will of the majority obscures the fact that the majority has long been "electing men who systematically surrender public to private interests."[31] Put differently, the uncritical acceptance of democratic dogmas and the "halo of sentiment and humbug which has been thrown around elections" has prevented most Americans from modifying political processes that subvert the principles and institutions on which the public interest depends. In modern politics, the "active reason" had been usurped by dogma. The reason for

> the condemnation of fist-law, slavery, serfage, caste, privilege, and hereditary distribution of political power is that they all violated liberty, i.e. they all allowed one man to bend to his own use and benefit the product of another man's energies. Now, where that is possible liberty is imperfect, even tho [sic.] every man, woman, and baby votes, and votes every day. That it is still the case with us that one man can use another's products is certainly true, so long as we have protective tariffs, unjust tax laws, usury laws, subsidies, and special legislation."[32]

MORAL "CODES OF ACTION"

Sumner argued that morality was best understood as a product of historically specific social conditions derived from concrete efforts to live well in a particular time and place. It consists of rules and standards that emerge in the experience of those who live "in this world such as this world is." In this sense, it had little to do with "absolute and universal ideas, the product of philosophy or revelation." Morality arises from social relations: "there is not a single relation of life which does not exert a

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[31] Sumner, What Social Classes Owe To Each Other (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883), p. 109.

[32] Sumner, "The Theory and Practice of Elections, pp. 134-35.

moral discipline and produce moral education. There is not an experience of life which does not have its effect upon character, that is upon moral being."[33]

Sumner's analysis of the sources and nature of moral processes suggests several points. First, that all individuals are exposed to a complex and overwhelming set of "influences" embedded in the social arrangements and activities of the communities in which they live. Second, that the influence of the "accepted faiths" of a community is as difficult to detect as they are to overcome:

> Every man is subject to these influences of the community and generation in which he lives. No philosophy will enable him to break out of them entirely, and no other influences act so deeply upon the individual character as those which come from the accepted faiths of the community in which he is educated.[34]

Third, that the idea of a "set" of influences implies a structure of different influences with an internal dynamics of change (Sumner did not fully develop the last point until the later part of his life).

THE "CONDITIONS OF LIFE," TRADITIONS, AND INSTITUTIONS

Sumner portrayed the relationship among economic, political, social, and moral developments as complex and often contradictory. The latter is evident in his article on "Socialism" where he distinguished between the material "conditions of life" and the institutionalized practices and arrangements which advance or constrain the possibilities offered by those conditions.[35] The different "organizations of society" (such as slavery, feudalism, or modern society) represented what Sumner called a "instinctive

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[33] Sumner, "Money and Morals," p. 370.

[34] Ibid.," p. 373.

[35] Sumner, "Socialism," Scribner's Monthly 16 (October, 1878): 888.

effort of mankind to adjust itself to the conditions of life." In this sense, "organizations" could be considered evolutionary adaptations. However, we typically find that "old institutions can outlast usefulness, or a revolution in trade and industry has produced a social crisis, or some new combination of forces has violently burst through old traditions."[36]

Sumner's awareness of the tension between the "conditions of life" and the societally specific social practices and institutions led him to two conclusions. First, the history of all societies, this as well as others, cannot be understood as a mechanical accommodation to material conditions. Economic life is in constant flux; institutions and traditions are not. At times, the tension between the two becomes so pronounced that a "social crisis" erupts: "there come times when old institutions and customs must be abolished or remodeled if they are not to become mischievous...." Second, since reform is always possible, it is necessary to keep the possibility alive, so long, that is, as policy remains faithful to the "conditions of life."[37]

CONCLUSION

Sumner's analysis of politics and its problems was more critical and more sociological than intellectual historians have realized. In the 1870's, Sumner faced the fact that although the fate of modernity depended upon politics, the generalization of contract had given rise to a political sphere that was liable to contamination by private interests. He argued that the corruption of the political process was undermining the ability of modern society to reproduce the conditions necessary for its

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[36] Ibid., p. 888. Sumner had read Capital. One wonders if he also read The Communist Manifesto. Either way, the similarity in language is striking.

[37] Sumner,"Theory and Practice of Elections," 1881, p. 109.

further growth, and that this would continue until reformed political arrangements prevented private interests from abusing the authority and power of the modern state. Sumner's realization that social change did not automatically occur led him to analyze two key points: how the "general tendencies" of modern society shaped ideas, values, and morality and the tensions and conflicts produced when archaic institutions block much needed social change. His examination of the defects of the modern polity suggested that contemporary society was moving towards an acute social crisis.

SUMNER'S INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE MODERN CRISIS: 1878-1884

Sumner's work in the late 1870's and early 1880's grappled with the problems of modernity. Modern institutions had created practices unable to reproduce the necessary conditions for the maintenance and growth of society. Certain features of the modern society pitted private interests against the public interest; unprecedented accumulations of wealth generated by the modern economy produced new forms of power and a thirst for luxury; religion, education, and the mass media gave rise to a sensationalist culture. Sumner explored the ramifications of these problems for all sectors of society and argued that their cumulative effect placed an enormous strain on the institutional resources of modern society. Modern society, he said, was in the midst of a severe crisis.

Sumner knew that modern society had unleashed powerful forces that were transforming individual and social life. The application of science to production, the development of transportation and communication, and the unprecedented growth of industrial organization had revolutionized the modern economy. The latter's novelty lay partly in the scale of its operations and partly in its dynamism. The net result was what Sumner termed an entirely "new order of things" in modern society. Though Sumner celebrated these developments, he warned that their benefits were not inevitable. The modern polity, the educational system, religion, and the mass media would have to address the problems generated by this "new order" if there was to be generalized progress. Sumner believed that modern economic developments provided the basis for unprecedented individual and social growth but that the cultural realm actively thwarted it. The breath-taking promise of modern society was still to be fulfilled.

Despite his reputation as an apologist for the unrestrained pursuit of wealth, Sumner's analysis of luxury revealed his growing conviction that modernity not only produced desirable consequences but undesirable extremes -- in this case, luxury. Though he never relinquished his Malthusian-inspired concern about the threat of scarcity, he believed that modernity could not be adequately understood in terms of scarcity alone. It was necessary to emphasize luxury as well. The fact that vast "accumulations of wealth" created different social groupings produced an "aristocracy" of wealth, a privileged few who possessed enormous luxury, and a "thirst for luxury" among those who lacked it.

Sumner's analysis of luxury and the institutional framework within which this development emerged suggested several conclusions. First, the morality corresponding to luxury was a possible consequence of its excesses. Second, though this morality was originally limited to one group, it eventually spread to all groups as an aspect of a larger social transformation of the "tendency of things" in modern society. The social processes which reproduced modern society were altered and, in turn, transformed the social codes that had once corresponded to the modern experience. Third, these social processes had to be reformed if progress was to continue. Fourth, this crisis of modernity was not inevitable. It could have been and still can be avoided by the use of sociology to evaluate problems and devise solutions.

THE SOCIAL GROWTH OF WEALTH

Sumner argued that one of the most significant modern social developments was the "accumulation of wealth" and the encroachment of wealth, as a "social power, on the ground formerly occupied by rank and birth." He believed that the social advantages of contract surpassed by far those of status, but maintained that "the new

masters of society" were in many ways no better than the old. There was, he observed, an "insolence of wealth" which matched the "insolence of rank." In fact, Sumner warned, "A plutocracy might be even far worse than an aristocracy."[1] Despite the undeniable "class vices" associated with aristocracy, Sumner maintained that the "feudal code" had over the course of centuries created a "high type" of character. By contrast, the "mercantile code" had been unable to do so. The feudal aristocracy benefited from a long social development which allowed it to cultivate a moral order corresponding to a stable and at least partly functional material situation. The moral order of their "modern representative," the wealthy class, was not as rooted as the order of feudalism:

> That there is a code and standard of mercantile honor which is quite as pure and grand as any military code, is beyond question, but it has never yet been established and defined by long usage and the concurrent support of a large and influential society.[2]

Therefore, despite his rejection of much of the feudal order, Sumner was convinced that modern "society can do without patricians, but it cannot do without the patrician values."[3] Sumner's analysis provided no ready solutions. All he was able to do was to note the gain which would occur if "the culture of the past" could somehow be transmitted to the "new masters of society." The capacity for this, however, was precisely what Sumner believed modern society did not possess and was unable to acquire.

Sumner thus underscored one of the more problematic modern dilemmas: that the "wealth-power" had been steadily growing while "the moral and social sanctions" by

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[1] Sumner, What Social Classes Owe, p. 103.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. p. 104.

which that power could be regulated have not yet been developed. He argued that the morality which emerged from luxury celebrated excesses of wealth. Yet, the opportunity for the wealth-class to enjoy "sensual luxury" was just one part of the excess. The most important excess was the ability of the "new masters of society" to acquire an unjust and injurious influence over the body politic. The growing strength of the wealth-power enabled the wealthy increasingly to exploit the weaknesses of the modern polity and threatened to produce plutocracy.

> A plutocracy would be a civil organization in which the power resides in wealth, in which a man might have whatever he could buy, in which the rights, interests, and feelings of those who could not pay would be overridden.[4]

Nevertheless, Sumner originally had none of the reservations about the growing "concentrations of wealth" that he had about concentrations of political power. He suggested that the coming years would witness unprecedented "developments of the power of aggregated capital to serve civilization," and stressed that everyone, not just a few, would benefit. He therefore reassured those who had reservations, that as long as economic power remained separate from political power, "the aggregation of large fortunes is not at all a thing to be regretted."[5] That he understood how problematic this was is indicated by his conclusion that "wealth is now becoming a power in the State." Since its restraint "by checks and guarantees" was not evident, Sumner had no choice but to admit that the concentration of wealth enabled its class to gain an inordinate amount of state power and to use it unjustly to promote private interests against the public interest and democracy.

Thus, his original support for accumulations of capital led him, in the context of his analysis of the relationship between power, organization, and polity, to argue for

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Sumner, What, p. 54.

some sort of regulation. He argued that "there is a plain tendency of all civilized societies toward plutocracy," but that this tendency could be modified by an appropriate set of "checks and guarantees."[6] Sumner believed that the "rising thirst for luxury" also required restraints, albeit of a different nature.

THE MODERN "THIRST FOR LUXURY"

Sumner's writings of the late 1870's and the early 1880's reflect his recognition that the operation of the modern economy had done more than produce enormous accumulations of wealth; it had also transformed the very experience of modernity. Until recently, luxury had been possessed by no more than a few. Most, nearly all, had been content to live without it. But in a relatively short time, the awesome productivity of the modern industrial order "taught" everyone to expect wealth and success, even though no more than a few would ever attain it: "In the extension of modern arts and industry the mass of mankind have been taught to expect comfort and ease, if not luxury."[7] Nearly all those who lived in modern society had tasted some luxury and, regardless of class background, were consumed by the desire for more. Sumner therefore argued that it was the very experience of modernity which had caused the modern individual to "suffer from the discontent of an appetite excited by a taste of luxury but held far below satiety."[8]

Sumner maintained that the "taste" and subsequent "thirst for luxury" were pivotal in generating accumulations of wealth: "the power to appreciate a remote future good, in comparison with a present one, is a distinguishing mark of highly civilized men."

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[6] Ibid., pp. 104, 141.

[7] Sumner, Earth Hunger, "Sociological Fallacies," 1884, p. 357.

[8] Sumner, Forgotten Man, "Philosophy of Strikes," 1883, pp. 240-41.

But "if satisfaction does not reach to the pitch of satiety, it does not produce content, but discontent; it is therefore a stimulus to more effort, and is essential to growth."[9] Sumner thus argued that this "thirst" helped to create a distinctively modern social configuration of "power."

Like other social thinkers, Sumner realized that a rise in the standard of living did not automatically improve the spiritual or moral quality of individual or social life: "industry, self-denial, and temperance are the laws of prosperity for men and states." Economic prosperity might be possible without these "industrial virtues" but moral well-being was not: "without them, advance in the arts and wealth means only corruption and decay through luxury and vice."[10]

Sumner believed that the nature and impact of this material development was determined by the broader cultural framework in which it was situated. He warned that if the "mental and moral growth" of individuals did not keep pace with their enhanced desire for and command of material goods, individual discontent and social deterioration would surely occur. Sumner emphasized, however, that the roots of this individual development were social in nature. Individual responsibility existed but was less important than the "public or social aspect" of moral development. He concluded that both the nature and the experience of modernity would be problematic until "the political institutions, the social codes, and the accepted notions which constitute public opinion" develop "in equal measure with the increase of power over nature."[11]

It is impossible to appreciate the depth of Sumner's concern unless we recall three of the essential assumptions of his analysis of modernity: that the general "tendency of things" in modernity generated progress-oriented social codes shaped by

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[9] Ibid., pp. 241, 239.

[10] Sumner, Challenge of Facts, "The Challenge of Facts," 1880's, p. 52.

[11] Sumner, "Philosophy of Strikes," pp. 239-240.

contract, that both this general "tendency" and the codes can be disrupted by particular developments in opposition to the tendency, and that aspects of the modern polity were conducive to such disruption.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MODERN ORDER

Sumner believed that the consequences of the normal "tendency" of contractually organized interests (especially for the wealth-power) to exert a corrupting influence upon social processes were not limited to the political realm. Indeed, the distortions of the modern polity enabled the morality of the wealthy class to modify the morality and social codes corresponding to the more general experience of modern society. He thus came to portray the modern polity as a mechanism by which the morality of luxury transformed the modern moral order as a whole. Education and the media, themselves quintessential products of modernity, also played a crucial role in this development. In other words, the social processes which produced what Sumner referred to as the general "tendencies of things" in modern life were modified by the operation of the agencies by which morality normally develops.

Sumner's polemic against plutocracy led him to declare that the wealth-power played a leading role in creating what he considered to be the "greatest social evil" confronting modern society.

> The greatest social evil with which we have to contend is jobbery. Whatever there is in legislative charters, watering stocks, etc., etc., which is objectional, comes under the head of jobbery. Jobbery is any scheme which aims to gain, not by the legitimate fruits of industry and enterprise, but by extorting from somebody a part of his product under guise of some pretended industrial undertaking.... Jobbery is the vice of plutocracy....[12]

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[12] Sumner, What, p. 141.

Sumner argued that jobbery was inimical to the social codes and morality which shaped individual behavior in regard to the general needs of modern society. In this sense, there were two related aspects of its "social evil." It subverted market forces and wasted and destroyed wealth. But, continued acts of jobbery have additionally problematic cultural and therefore moral effects. Sumner's awareness of what we now call processes of "institutionalization" and the ways in which these processes ramify allowed him to draw conclusions from his critique that were not obvious. What appears to be a narrowly political issue, the plutocratic abuse of state power, and a narrowly economic problem, the disruption of productivity by jobbery, has moral ramifications. The significance of these conclusions can be seen in a number of Sumner's critical studies, particularly in his discussions of paper currency and protective tariffs.

Sumner condemned the use of money which possessed a "fluctuating value." He argued that it allowed for speculation and therefore benefited some at the expense of others. As such, paper currency was an instance of jobbery and illustrated the perniciousness of its effects. Money, as Sumner defined it, was "a medium of exchange" which required "stability of value" to fulfill its designated role. It was possible to use a "value money" which distributed products among all parties involved in economic transactions according to the value of the products. The use of a "value money" would also reinforce the "industrial virtues" essential for the discipline of the market. But, it was also possible to adopt what Sumner called a "fictitious currency." Here, the value of this type of money, of which paper currency is a prototype, depends upon the amount which is issued and therefore varies independent of value. The fact that the amount in circulation is arbitrary, relative to value, violates economic rationality and considerations of equity.[13]

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[13] Sumner, "Money and Morals," p. 373.

Sumner's analysis of paper money suggested that its institutional, cultural, and moral ramifications undermined "individual and national character." When people are continuously exposed to "technical and artificial distinctions which blur over truth and equity and honor" in the public realm, they eventually come to believe that this is an acceptable code of behavior and act accordingly. Sumner argued that "the great circulating falsehood" encouraged people to abandon the "industrial virtues" and to pursue success, regardless of the means by which it was obtained:

> The frauds, false oaths, breaches of trust and pretentious swindles which shock the public mind when they are discovered, are all natural consequences of the great circulating falsehood. If the government or a bank can so violate the distinction between truth and falsehood that it shall have no effect, and that a lie can be made to prosper, why should not every one else do it?"[14]

Sumner argued that plutocratic abuse of state power inevitably had moral effect: as a social process, it generated a moral order which corresponded to the experience of this "relation of life." But the experience of the modern polity was not limited to those who were directly involved in governmental affairs. Rather, the modern polity was a crucial social process which "touched" and influenced all realms of and relations in modern society. The problematic morality and social practices generated by plutocratic abuse of the modern polity were no longer localized; they had become pandemic. In this sense, the modern polity was a negative socializing mechanism which spread a corrupting influence throughout modernity. Although it had both the responsibility and the potential to promote material and social well-being, the corruption of the political realm had done just the opposite: the wealth-power's abuse of the modern polity had made a decisive contribution to the emergent culture of what Sumner called "modern sensationalism."

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[14] Ibid.

"MODERN SENSATIONALISM"

For Sumner, "sensationalism" was a "parasite" which ate away at modern society: "Its motto is that seeming is as good as being. Its intrinsic fault is its hollowness, insincerity, and falsehood.... It resides in the form, not in the substance; in the outward appearance, not in the reality."[15] Politics provided the initial point of entry for this "parasite;" the mass media, religion, and, above all, the process of formal education -- each of which was a distinctively modern development -- furthered its spread.

Sumner had noted, as early as 1876, that "literature has taken an entirely new extension and form." Several years later, in an article about "What Our Boys Are Reading," Sumner observed that the new "form" was not what he had expected: the literature directed to youth was "spiced to the highest degree with sensation."[16] Sumner argued that it was impossible that so much "sensationalism" and "corruption should be afloat and not exert some influence." He made the same point about adult literature, particularly novels which distorted the orientation of personal life by trivializing or romanticizing the most important aspects of modernity.[17] Sumner was especially concerned with "the views of life which these stories inculcate and the code of morals and manners which they teach," and with the effect of these views in other areas of life. For example, he argued that the desire of religious clergy to be popular

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[15] Sumner, Forgotten Man, "Integrity in Education," early 1880's, p. 409.

[16] Sumner, "Politics in America," p. 324; Earth Hunger, "What Our Boys Are Reading," 1880, p. 367.

[17] Sumner, Challenge, "The Predicament of Sociological Study," p. 424. Although Keller suggested that this article was written around 1900, Bannister has argued, and I agree, that it was written around 1883. Bannister points out that this article refers to "survival of the fittest," a phrase that Sumner stopped using after 1883. See Robert Bannister, Social Darwinism, p. 263.

also had moral consequences. Instead of combatting modern sensationalism, under these conditions, religion tended to reinforce it.[18]

For Sumner, the responsibility of religion was to elaborate "true and high convictions" calling for an uncompromising "devout worship of God" and a commitment to "purity of life." Instead, it increasingly adopted methods of appealing to parishioners that aimed to "attract and captivate them and win their applause." He argued that those who boast of preaching "which is in sympathy with the spirit of the age" fail to realize that this preaching reflects and reproduces the "worst faults" of modern society. The "interests" of religious functionaries to acquire "popularity and worldly success" led them to perpetuate the very sensationalism" religion was supposed to overcome. Instead of helping people to transcend and transform "the tide of external and human interest," religious practice increasingly glorified it:

> The institution which ought to be the great landmark of what is permanent and eternal in the midst of changing interests, changing people, and changing times, becomes a mere ornamental appendage dragged hither and thither to grace the triumphs of a mercantile life.[19]

Sumner also suggested that the intensity and demands of modern life tended to make authentic religion increasingly less central to more worldly concerns. And, the use of methods that "prostituted" the responsibilities of religion only furthered its problems:

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[18] Sumner's fullest discussion of this issue was in a sermon in 1870. Although it was roughly one decade before the period of Sumner's work I am examining, both the analysis and the conclusions of this sermon are consistent with the later work and will be treated as such.

[19] Sumner, "Sensationalism in Religion," New York, August 6, 1870 quoted in Harris Starr, William Graham Sumner (New York, Henry Holt, 1925), p. 133]]

> if it depends upon sensational exaggerations and personalities to attract attention, and not upon the truth and sense and thoughtfulness of what it propounds--then it will not be respected and will not deserve to be respected, for it will stand upon the level of the other institutions which have prostituted their high calling for the sake of popularity and worldly success. If it be true that the pulpit is losing influence, then it is mainly due to the fact that so many men have yielded to the seductions of popularity, have abandoned the true field and calling of the pulpit, and have descended into the popular arena to vie with the magazines and the newspapers in their proper functions.[20]

Sumner believed that the educational institutions did no better. The process or "method" by which education was conducted "falls in with the outward phenomena of a sensational era." In acknowledging that "form" has implications for "content," Sumner argued that the most fundamental lesson taught by any educational organization was embodied in the process by which learning occurs. His regard for the influence of social "forms" upon individual and social life encouraged Sumner to oppose the widespread practice of "molding character" by lecturing students. Sumner's appreciation of the independent effects of form, process, and content led him to emphasize that education "shapes character" regardless of the subject matter or aims of teachers.

Sumner argued that the educational realm was strikingly similar to the political in that both nourished a desire for success regardless of the means by which it was attained. In fact, Sumner believed that the fundamental lesson taught by the processes of education in the modern school was to be indifferent to honesty. The means by which this paradoxical result was achieved were two-fold. First, students learn to be indifferent to content when they are forced to engage in a learning process in which "there is no immediate object of pleasure or gain in the lesson to be learned next" or where "the learning of the lesson" often fails to "gratify a taste or fill a desire."[21]

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Sumner, Forgotten Man, "Discipline," 1880's, p. 429.

Second, students must learn to pretend to be interested in the same content toward which they have learned to be indifferent.

This discipline of superficiality begins in the earliest grades and continues until graduation. Nor does it cease in college, for students still remain in a social environment in which education is a "mere matter of routine, learning prescribed lessons, [and] performing enforced tasks." A regime such as this inevitably has moral consequences:

> Young people cannot practice show and pretense and yet be taught to believe that the only important thing is what you are, and not at all what people think about you. They cannot practice the devices which give a semblance of learning, and yet be taught to believe that shams are disgraceful and that the frank honesty which owns the worst is a noble trait. They may learn to be ashamed when caught in a false pretense, but they will not learn shame at deceit.[22]

Here, as in the political arena, students learn that success justifies any action, no matter how morally reprehensible; they also learn to subordinate morality to success and, eventually, to treat success as the standard by which any behavior should be judged. As the question of success becomes the foremost criterion by which actions are judged, morality is ignored or made trivial:

> The real mischief is that men should be produced who have no real education, but only a perverse training in putting forward plausible and meretricious appearances. Such education falls in with the phenomena of a sensational era and strengthens the impressions which a young and inexperienced observer gets from our modern society, that audacity is the chief of talents, that success or failure is the only measure of right or wrong, that the man to be admired is the one who invents clever tricks to circumvent a rival or opponent, or to skip over a troublesome principle."[23]

Sumner attempted to show that all activities and relations have moral repercussions. But he argued that the impact of formalized education is certainly equal

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[22] Sumner, "Integrity in Education," 1880-89, p. 413.

[23] Sumner, "Integrity in Education," p. 411.

to and probably greater than all others: "there is no association of life which exerts greater influence on character than does the school, and its influence comes, too, just at the formative period, when impressions are most easily received and sink deepest." Unfortunately, modern educational practice does not enable students to resist the corrupting tendencies of the modern polity, to learn how to deal with social questions which are as complex as they are misunderstood, or to acquire the "mental and moral growth" to be able to deal with luxury and the thirst for luxury. Because of the insidiousness with which they operate, current educational practice confirms the worst "impressions which a young and inexperienced observer gets from our modern society."[24]

Sumner was concerned, in short, with the problematic aspects of processes which should otherwise have contributed to the positive growth of a distinctively modern culture. He clearly would have rejected the hypothesis that these aspects were the effect of solely cultural causes, though he seemed to hold that culture provided a structural foundation for sensationalism and its distorting ramifications. Indeed, economics was one process which Sumner analyzed for its causal effect on morality, though it was ultimately mediated by culture. The problems that afflicted even ameliorative and potentially progressive institutions were serious and, without some modification of their institutional framework, would become even more so.

SOCIOLOGY: THE "SCIENCE OF LIFE"

Sumner argued that it was imperative to develop a "science of life" if the conditions of social development were to be understood and controlled.

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[24] Ibid., pp. 411-412.

> The need for a science of life in society is urgent, and it is increasing every year. It is a fact which is generally overlooked that the great advance in the sciences and the arts which has taken place during the last century is producing social consequences and giving rise to social problems. We are accustomed to dwell upon the discoveries of science and the development of the arts as simple incidents, complete in themselves, which offer only grounds for congratulation. But the steps which have been won are no means simple events. Each one has consequences which reach beyond the domain of physical power into social and moral relations, and these effects are multiplied and reproduced by combination with each other.[25]

Sumner spoke these words at a gathering of Americans honoring Spencer and, implicitly, the industrial society he praised. Despite the festiveness of the occasion, Sumner invited his audience to examine the "darker side" of recent developments. He began characteristically by noting that modern "conditions of life" had placed "strain" on institutional arrangements in the economic, political, and social realms. These arrangements were undoubtedly progressive in themselves; but, he declared, they were far from perfect. The modern polity was unable to fulfill its crucial integrative role; the transformation of the modern economic order caused vast "upheaval" which pushed groups "against each other in such a way as to produce class hatreds and hostilities." If these conflicts were not regulated by changes in their conditions, social "convulsions" might well destroy modern society.[26]

Sumner pointed out that solutions which had worked in the past did not apply under changed circumstances: "Our traditions about the science and art of living are plainly inadequate. They break to pieces in our hands when we try to apply them to the new cases." Yet, the problem was not that modernity was lacking in answers about the nature and purposes of social life. If anything, there were too many answers. Modernity had generated as many as "half a dozen arbitrary codes of morals, a

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[25] Sumner, Forgotten Man, "Speech at Spencer's Banquet," 1882, p. 402.

[26] Ibid.,pp. 402-4.

heterogeneous tangle of economic doctrines, a score of religious creeds and ecclesiastical traditions, and a confused jumble of humanitarian and sentimental notions which jostle each other in the brains of the men of this generation."[27] It was then no wonder that people were confused: the "social codes" which had once guided individual behavior now made the prospects and consequences of action difficult for individuals to evaluate, thereby distorting the life of society.

Sumner maintained that it was the task of sociology under these conditions to reveal both the nature and potential of modern social life. This required investigation aimed at demystifying and, in effect, eliminating the pervasive but illusory explanations that people accepted as the truth about society. He concluded that only when sociology successfully "dispels illusions about what society is or may be" can it fulfill its mission of providing "knowledge of facts which are the basis of intelligent effort by man to make the best of his circumstances on earth."[28]

The emergence of modern society had generated an entirely new social world: "new interests are brought into existence, and new faiths, ideas, and hopes are engendered in the minds of men." Sumner insisted that it was essential to evaluate these developments: "some of these are doubtless good and sound; others are delusive." Yet, the distinction between the good and delusive is impossible to establish with certainty in advance. In every case, therefore, "a competent criticism is of the first necessity."[29] For this, sociology was uniquely qualified:

> Sociology is the science of life in society. It investigates the forces which come into action whenever a human society exists. It studies the structure and functions of the organs of human society, and its aim is to find the laws in subordination to which human society takes its various forms and social

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[27] Ibid., p. 403.

[28] Sumner, War, "Sociology," p. 178.

[29] Sumner, "Science of Sociology," p. 402.

> institutions grow and change. Its practical utility consists in deriving the rules of right social living from the facts and laws which prevail by nature in the constitution and functions of society. It must come into conflict with all other theories of right living which are founded on authority, tradition, arbitrary invention, or poetic imagination.[30]

Sociology had then a crucial role to play as the "science of life in society." It had to describe the various structures and forms of different societies as well as account for the ways in which institutions and social life are modified. On some level, sociology had the potential to transform the very nature of human history. Sumner argued that a study of history revealed a prolonged "series of struggles, first to find out where we were and what were the conditions of greater ease, and then to devise means to get relief." Yet, since the process by which this occurred was not a self-conscious one -- Sumner called it "instinctual" -- it proceeded by trial and error and thus generated needless suffering. Modern science offered a novel alternative: "it is only in the most recent years that science has undertaken to teach without and in advance of suffering."[31] The difference was not just one of degree but kind.

Sumner believed that the findings of sociology could and should be used as a critical basis for reforming existing social practices and social arrangements. The "rules of right living" which sociology had derived from its systematic study of social organizations were of considerable "practical utility." Since improvement was always possible, the question of human agency was always a vital one -- whether it be in the form of an advance in the arts, sciences, political institutions, or in morals. Sumner argued that sociology was uniquely qualified to help modern society gain "command of

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[30] Sumner, "Sociology," p. 167.

[31] Ibid. p. 179.

all the relations in life."[32] Unfortunately, its potential to improve social life was greater than its ability to do so.

Sociology had not yet developed beyond a most "tentative and inchoate state." It was still in its infancy and could do no more than "affirm with certainty" that social phenomena were lawful and that the "natural laws" of the social order were similar to the laws of physics. Sumner was able to "affirm" this point with even greater certainty when he examined the modern economic order, less able when he addressed that part of the social world which went beyond the economic realm narrowly defined. He knew that material "conditions of life" decisively shaped society. In Sumner's words, industrial and scientific developments have "consequences which reach beyond the domain of physical power into social and moral relations, and these effects are multiplied and reproduced by combination with each other."[33] Yet, Sumner also realized that the historically specific "conditions of life" generate "social forces" which the political and cultural order can deflect or obstruct. The "conditions of life" shape institutions and social codes of societies, but societies have some degree of autonomy. Therefore, the course of their development cannot often be predicted. Indeed, it is precisely these unexpected developments which make the analysis of social life so difficult to accomplish. As Sumner put it, social phenomena typically present themselves to us in rather "complex combinations" and thereby make it difficult to ascertain the causes of a particular social development. Worse still, they

> are often at three or four removes from their causes. Tradition, prejudice, fashion, habit, and other similar obstacles continually warp and deflect the social forces, and they constitute interferences whose magnitude is to be ascertained separately for each case.[34]

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[32] Sumner, "Science of Sociology," p. 403.

[33] Ibid., p. 402.

[34] Sumner, "Sociology," p. 170.

Sumner believed in any case that "it was by no means easy to interpret the phenomena themselves." It is important to note that this statement reflects his frustration at being unable to account for the irrefutable fact that "the political institutions, [the educational institutions, the media] the social codes, and the accepted notions which constitute public opinion" had not developed in "equal measure with the increase of power over nature." Sumner was able to say that tradition and other "obstacles" could impede and even undermine social development, but he was unable to say how or why.

THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF SOCIOLOGY

Despite these limitations, the future direction of the still young discipline was becoming clearer: "although we still look over a wide landscape largely enveloped in midst, we can see where the mist lies and define the general features of the landscape, subject to further corrections."[35] Sumner believed that the growth of sociology had already revealed that it was not productive to study the "industrial organization" in isolation from its larger social matrix. Political economy had to include "organizations" of society other than the strictly economic ones: "it is to the pursuit of sociology and the study of the industrial organization with the other organizations of society that we must look for the more fruitful development of political economy."[36]

Sumner admitted that neither he nor other sociologists possessed the theoretical resources to accomplish this much-needed task. This "confession" was probably prompted by his realization that sociologists were unable to explain the unanticipated

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[35] Ibid., p. 191.

[36] Ibid, pp. 180-181.

"social consequences" and "social problems" to which modernity had given rise. He expressed his hope that the limitation of the new science would be "subject to further corrections."

Sumner did, however, advance a provisional explanation of the difficulties confronting modern society. Its focus, interestingly enough, provided a classic example of what Ogburn would later refer to as "culture-lag." The problem, he suggested, was that "the old codes are breaking down; new ones are not yet made."[37] If he was correct, then existing problems need not have been taken seriously: they would disappear once new "codes" which corresponded to the otherwise progressive "conditions of life" had time to develop. As reassuring as this explanation was, it did not entirely satisfy Sumner.

He believed that whatever had occurred to disrupt the operations of modernity should not in any case be minimized or defined away. Sumner's analysis of modernity indicated that it was not functioning as well as he had previously believed it would. Although he must have been tempted to conclude that the problem was one which would be cured by the further development of modernity, he ultimately rejected this possibility. He suspected that something else was operative, something which he could at best indicate but not yet theorize.

SUMMARY

Sumner came to Yale in the early 1870's, and, as the Chair of the Political and Social Science Department, developed a conception of modernity which emphasized the following points. First, the generalization of the principle of contract had shaped the fabric of modern society. Second, the tension between private and public interest was

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[37] Sumner, "Philosophy of Strikes," p. 240.

a constituent feature of the political sphere. Third, the application of science to the productive process and the development of a modern "industrial organization" had created an unprecedented accumulation of wealth. This wealth had generated a uniquely modern form of luxury as well as a more generalized "thirst for luxury." Fourth, the "new order of things" had neither eliminated classes nor conflicts and "collisions" between them. Fifth, distinctively modern agencies such as education and mass media had emerged to provide an extremely powerful socializing force contributing to the growth of a "sensationalist culture." These socializing agencies disseminated a corrupting social influence which was, even as he wrote, infecting the modern body politic.

Sumner was both a man of his times who wished to influence them and a theorist who wanted to understand the distinctive nature of modernity. He wanted, in short, to influence the basis of deliberation over matters of policy by subjecting the objects of policy to systematic analysis. Sumner was not merely advocating sociology in the early 1880's. He was also doing it. His critique, with its coordination of concepts of practice, organization, institution, and morality, reveals a distinctively sociological methodology consistent with an institutionalist notion of the societal totality.

MODERN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: REASON VERSUS INTEREST, 1886-1889

Sumner's writings of the late 1880's and 1890's explored the limits of human agency in modern society. He focused on the reasoning capacity and institutional framework which enabled modern society to modify laws and institutions within historically imposed limits and on the powerful "tendencies" generated by modern society that subverted its ability to act within and alter these limits. Sumner's well-known contempt for those who exaggerated their ability to introduce reforms at will has blinded most critics to his belief that modernity contained more room for intentional change than past societies, and far more than the modern order had actually achieved. Sumner argued that while past social orders blindly followed customs, reacted mechanically to social conditions, and thus lived "instinctively," the social processes inherent in modernity allowed the "active reason" of the community to create laws and modify institutions according to changed needs, values, and social developments.

Sumner believed that these social processes could be undermined by interest groups mobilized by the modern political economy and encouraged by modern social codes. He therefore qualified his optimism about the resourcefulness and flexibility of modern society by stressing the "tendencies" which undermined these potentials. Sumner emphasized the degree to which economic developments "conditioned" political and social institutions and situated his analysis of modern politics and morality within a detailed examination of the modern economy.

Sumner argued that (1) the structure of the modern economy forces interest groups to promote their economic well-being by defending its conditions, (2) that these struggles are vital to the operation and growth of the modern economy, and (3) that the incessant economic struggles among industrial groups typically spill into the

political arena. Consequently, interest groups have little choice but to strive for state power, despite the fact that the growth of the state is not consistent with the economy on which such groups depend. The economic structure of modern society creates this modern predicament, democracy exacerbates it, and the modern social codes justify it.

The economic analysis which Sumner elaborated in the late 1880's was consistent with his earlier approach in two methodologically key respects. First, he analyzed the practices within a particular domain for the problems they might generate if generalized. Thus, he examined the tendency for interest groups to use whatever means they could to enhance their bargaining position in contractual relations. Second, he explored the consequences that the generalization of given practices might have upon the operation of other institutions -- in this case, the state and social codes.

The terms of Sumner's analysis suggested that the operations of modernity were not reducible to the actions of individuals and therefore that society's progress could not be tied to the evaluation of individuals. Therefore, he argued, the proliferation of corrupt behaviors was not the result of corrupt personalities but of structural locations, opportunities, and pressures existing independently of individuals, their values, and their upbringing. Nor, despite some ambiguity in his formulations, was he claiming that social structure mediated private personal conduct. Like Durkheim, he saw structure as the "cause" of types of conduct in relation to which an individual's acts were relatively unpredictable. Personal conduct was determinate within but not caused by social structure. Corruption, as a type, was determined by the social processes and "codes" and embodied in social structure. The normative order was, therefore, relatively independent of both the individuals who were loosely shaped by it and the material order on which it was contingent. Yet, regardless of whether he considered the corruption of individuals or the plutocratic formations which undermined

modern institutions, Sumner always emphasized that he was discussing "forces and tendencies" which could be corrected by what he referred to as "intelligent and fruitful reform."

Sumner's writings in the 1890's contain his most theoretically sophisticated pre-Folkways discussions of human agency and its limits. He emphasized two related points: that "industrial organization" limited the activities and relations possible within a particular society and that human agents could push against and even "slightly modify" these limits. Logically, such agencies would have to be organized and perhaps representative. Otherwise, their agency would be individualistic and, given his conception of structure, without effective force. Sumner's theory of social structure pointed to the autonomy and latency of what he referred to as the "ethical forces" of modern society, even where he occasionally slipped into an individualistic accent. While this might seem to have foreclosed the possibility of initiated change, Sumner attempted to show that science and education contained resources which could enable modernity to at least partially free itself from the "errors" which needlessly diminished individual and social existence. This reservation of two domains of reason from the determinations of structure allowed him to formulate an interesting hypothesis about the relationship between structure and rationality: normative orders were latent and therefore unconscious, but they could be made conscious and rational by science and education.

The events which accompanied the Spanish-American War enhanced Sumner's already considerable concerns about the ability of modernity to sustain rational reflection, hence to neutralize the self-interested and manipulative activities of interest groups. The question of power and domination came alive in his view and became more significant than ever before. In this regard, he warned that the power of the plutocrats was being used in ways which pressured the American populace to embrace

values, ideas, and social policies which would eventually turn modern society into a plutocracy.

By the end of the 1890's, Sumner had accumulated a number of insights which he could not synthesize. On the one hand, modern society had an unprecedented opportunity to incorporate rational deliberation and reform into its operations, but it had not done so. On the other, economic arrangements "conditioned" social and political developments but did not completely determine them. Sumner believed the "active reason" was fettered by the modern normative order. The latter's development had come to be distorted by powerful interests in ways that corrupted both individuals and social life. Sumner increasingly came to believe that the cultural order had not only become the site of the modern crisis but the source of its solution. His analysis thus encouraged him to explore more systematically the cultural sources and obstacles to social change. In this sense, Folkways was not a new point of departure but represented the fulfillment of his life's project.

REASON, LAW, AND MODERN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Sumner's writings of the late 1880's emphasized the uniqueness of modern "social and civil institutions." These institutions not only guaranteed rights for all, but they institutionalized processes which encouraged the scrutiny, criticism, and reform of these rights and the institutional framework which created them:

> By virtue of its own institutions, it now puts itself on trial and stands open to revision and correction wherever, on sober and rational grounds, revision can be shown to be necessary to guarantee the rights of any one. It is the first organization of human society that has ever tolerated dissent or criticism of itself.[1]

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[1] Sumner, Challenge, "What Makes the Rich Richer and the Poor Poorer," 1887, pp. 76-77.

Sumner maintained that the rights and duties which constituted the modern "social bond" were rationally formulated as well as legally guaranteed. True liberty, as Sumner defined it, was not opposed to law: "it belongs to defined rights, regulated interests, specified duties, all determined in advance, before passions are excited and selfishness engaged." Time and again, Sumner warned that if people were allowed to do what they wanted, some would surely wish to rob others. It is, he said, the responsibility of civil government to prevent this from occurring. In this sense, liberty can only be civil liberty, for it requires that civil institutions both create and enforce "a status--the status of a freeman in a modern jural state. It is a product of institutions; it is embodied in institutions; it is guaranteed by institutions."[2]

Sumner opposed all analyses which made civil liberty an "abstract conception" existing outside of history. He argued that civil liberty not only emerged from the "flux and change of civilization" but was continuously being modified by it. Civil liberty was therefore not just instituted but historically determined. Both the institutions which created it and the notions of freedom which corresponded to them either constantly were or should be adjusted to ever-changing social conditions.

> It is vain now that we attempt anywhere in this domain to reduce the notion of liberty to something positive or hard and fast; it presents itself to us as a set of dissolving views, which are forever changing with the changing aspects of social relations as they go on their course of evolution.[3]

Sumner argued that historical developments posed limits to conduct. Despite these limits, the conduct of actors continuously modified the idea of civil liberty and the institutional framework in which it was embedded. Therefore, he suggested that civil

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[2] Sumner, Earth Hunger, "Liberty and Law," 1889, pp. 165, 160.

[3] Sumner, Earth Hunger, "Liberty and Labor," 1890, p. 183.

liberty was produced, not only by forces external to individuals, but by the self-conscious and purposeful activities of representatively reasonable agents: "laws and institutions must be constantly remolded in the progress of time by the active reason." Actors had to use both "reason" and "conscience" in reformulating accepted principles and practices in the light of changed circumstances and unexpected or problematic developments. The result was that people were constantly reforming institutions and rights and duties, but always within the limits of structure imposed by history. Sumner believed that the role of the state was to provide means by which the "reason and conscience of the community" could be fully developed and expressed:

> The very highest conception of the state is that it is an organization for bringing that judgment to an expression in the constitution and laws. A state, therefore, is good, bad, or indifferent, according to the directness and correctness with which it brings to an expression the best reason and conscience of the people, and embodies their judgment in institutions and laws. The state, therefore, lives by deliberation and discussion, and by tacit or overt expression of the major opinion.[4]

It follows that his concept of human agency could not be reduced to the psychology of individuals, and that what he meant by reason, conscience, deliberation, and action were instrumentalities of socialized agency, no matter how vague that became in his writing.

Sumner stressed two points related to the role of the state and its relation to representative forms of agency: (1) "positive law" ought to be created by the "moral reflection" of the community and (2) this cannot occur unless the state provides a forum for reflecting upon "moral convictions" in the light of all available knowledge. As long as the state ensures the free unfolding of this process of deliberation harmonious relations prevail among moral convictions, socio-economic conditions, and

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[4] Sumner, Earth Hunger, "What is Civil Liberty," 1889, pp. 129-30.

laws. However, when this process is distorted, the resulting "gap" creates tensions and conflicts which, if not corrected, produce a social crisis.

> This is the field of study, debate, and reflection on which moral convictions are constantly being formed, and when they are formed, they find their way into laws, constitutions, and institutions, provided that the political institutions are free, so as to allow this to take place. If not, there is opened a gap between the positive law and the moral convictions of the people, and social convulsions ensue.[5]

Since Sumner recognized both the constancy of change and the necessity for people to orient themselves to change, he argued that it was mistaken to hope that we might one day attain social stability by discovering the right form of government or the final form of social system: "no ground for such a notion can be found in philosophy or history."[6] Continual social change means that the demands upon people to intelligently respond to new conditions will never cease. Specifically, the dynamism of the modern economy entailed changes of both material and social conditions. Modern society was therefore unable to rest upon past achievements: like a runner on a treadmill, it was forced into perpetual motion.

Sumner's view of the modern state implied that politics were increasingly important for stability and the growth. His view of deliberation placed great importance on science and, therefore, on the education of reason, and its application in law. Sumner noted that "questions about social organization have always been discussed by reference to the primitive man, or the man in the state of nature; and so they must be discussed."[7] He repeatedly drew a contrast between the processes of rational deliberation which modernity encouraged and the "instinctiveness" which

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[5] Sumner, Earth Hunger, "Liberty and Discipline," 1890, p. 167.

[6] Sumner, "What is Civil Liberty," p. 129.

[7] Sumner, Earth Hunger, "Who Is Free? Is It The Savage?," 1889, pp. 136-7.

characterized the past. Formerly, people lived "instinctively, under social conditions and customs, and social developments were wrought by a sort of natural process." Modern social life was strikingly different: "now we deliberate and reflect." The "beast-like non-reflection of savages" which submitted to the arbitrary rule of traditions and customs could never fulfill the demands which modern liberty imposed: "intelligent conscience and educated reason are the only things which can maintain liberty, for they will constantly be needed for new cases and new problems."[8] Unfortunately, modern society required more "intelligent conscience and educated reason" than its leading institutions actually supported. Therefore, he argued, the common statement that the modern age is "an age of deliberation" is only true by comparison with earlier periods. The degree to which modern society supported these desiderata was far less than believed: it is "still true of even the most enlightened community which could be found, that the mass of the people in it live by instinct." The generalization of an educated sensibility with the "power of intelligent reflection and rational choice" was therefore imperative.[9]

It is revealing to compare Sumner's position on this issue in the early 1880's with the late 1880's. Sumner argued in a series of articles in the early 1880's that the role of social science was to support the exercise of critical thought and to formulate a "science of life." Although education's role was central in this, only a select few could participate in the actual creation of knowledge. Sumner modified his position on education towards the end of the decade. Then he stressed that the fact that the "moral conviction of the community" played a decisive role in social development implied that the enlightenment would have to be generally available if citizens were to

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[8] Earth Hunger, "The Banquet of Life," 1887, p. 221; "Liberty and Law," p. 164.

[9] Earth Hunger, "Democracy and Modern Problems," 1889, p. 304; "Who Is Free? Is It The Civilized Man?," 1889, p. 143.

be able to contribute to the development of society in terms of its contemporary complexity. Education for modern citizenship had to enhance the intelligence, reasoning ability, and conscience of the community as a whole. This, in turn, entailed a different conception of educational practice, therefore a different set of terms for criticizing prevailing practices.

Sumner suggested that the organization of modern society was so extensive and complex that few could understand how it functioned or what constituted the limits within which purposeful change could be initiated. He argued that, contrary to public opinion, the "moral convictions" of the community as well as the political and institutional embodiments of those convictions were constrained by the same economic conditions that limited options for change:

> people have not learned at all to understand the extent to which political resolutions are controlled by economic conditions, or the extent to which political and social institutions are conditioned in economic facts. It is not too much to say that economic facts are always present and controlling in the apparently arbitrary acts of constitution-makers and legislators. Our whole history must be reconstructed with a view to this fact. If this is once done, we shall understand better the narrow range within which the law-givers, philosophers, constitution-makers, and legislators can work.[10]

Those institutions which are "sound" have evolved through "corrections" which gradually modified them so that they were better suited to new and changing social conditions. "Errors" exist and can be "cured, to some extent, by bitter experience," though many persist despite efforts to correct them. Sumner acknowledged that ignorance contributed to error, but that the foremost source or error was the selfishness of the "interests" which constituted the "new center" of modernity. The ability of the modern legal system to harness the distinctively modern processes of deliberation was imperiled by interest groups in the same way as the educational

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[10] Earth Hunger, "Liberty and Responsibility," 1889, pp. 162-3.

process itself. Much of Sumner's writing in the late 1880's explored the economic and political underpinnings of this "tendency."

THE ECONOMIC "TENDENCIES" OF MODERNITY

Sumner maintained that the modern economy's most distinctive aspect was its dynamism which depended essentially on contract and intergroup conflicts of interest. It was this dynamism which produced an ever-growing accumulation of wealth in the form of an endless stream of new goods and conditions of social change. Sumner praised the energy that the generalization of contractual relations in a modern economy unleashed and the material wealth it created. But, market forces did not automatically account for that accumulation. Neither the formation of contractual relations in a modern economy nor the full development of market forces could occur without the constant "collision of social pressure." Therefore, the formation of contractual relations in a market economy and the struggle of interest groups are inseparable. Together, they constitute the most general causes of the vicissitudes of modernity:

> Supply and demand does not mean that the social forces will operate of themselves; the law, as laid down, assumes that every party will struggle to the utmost for its interests. Buyers and sellers, borrowers and lenders, landlords and tenants, employers and employees, and all other parties to contracts must be expected to develop their interest fully in the competition and struggle of life. It is for the health of the industrial organization that they should do so.[11]

Sumner accepted Adam Smith's assumption that the market mechanism forces people to respond to the ever changing dictates of supply and demand. The laws of the market remain as they were; but the operation of the modern economy has accelerated

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[11] Sumner, Forgotten Man, "Strikes and the Industrial Organization," 1887, p. 252.

the rate of change, creating as emergents of this acceleration, structures that stand out against process. In this spirit, Sumner developed two key points: first, that industries and jobs suddenly appear and just as quickly become archaic, that profits and wages rise only to fall, and that workers and capitalists embrace their good fortune and just as predictably struggle against hard times. Second, that codes and practices harden and become too complex to respond to the old laws of the market.

The "irksomeness of industrial changes as an inevitable attendant of intense industrial activity" exerts a pressure upon different industrial groupings to defend their interests even as their defense becomes increasingly incorporated in social structures at odds with their independence. Sumner did not narrowly define competition in a market economy as the vying of vendors striving to sell similar products. Rather, competition was comprised of the unavoidable exposure of all groups in the market to the structural imperatives which forced them to "collide" with other groups possessing differing and often antagonistic interests. He argued that although the desire of self-interested individuals to secure more wealth appeared to be the motor force behind this clash of interests, the cause was rooted in the relatively systematic arrangement and operation of the modern economy that reflects the acceleration of change that the economy itself had brought about. In Sumner's words, the competitive struggle between different industrial groupings and classes has developed because "industry has been unfettered and has been allowed to shape itself freely. How can it shape itself freely unless it works out the full effect of all the forces that are in it?"[12] The presence of industrial struggles indicates not only that capital and labor have no choice but to respond to changed economic circumstances, but that they are in the process of doing so. In this sense, the industrial struggles which Sumner referred to

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[12] Sumner, War, "Do We Want Industrial Peace?" 1889, p. 236.

as "industrial war" are "in great measure the ... inevitable means by which the redistribution of capital and labor" occurs in a modern economy.[13]

Sumner often claimed that anyone who worked hard could live well. Nevertheless, he recognized that the onward rush of the market engulfed both industries and the economic agents involved therein, forcing everyone, workers as well as capitalists, to struggle against the economic currents. He argued that defenders of the modern economy "boast very often about the modern achievements" but rarely acknowledge that the modern economy produces "social consequences" which are "not all pleasant."

Sumner revealed how this play of achievements and unexpected consequences unfolded. First, although the position and economic well-being of a group was frequently undermined by competition, this was typically preceded by some type of warning -- whether in the form of a decline of the prices of their product, dividends, salary scale, professional income levels, or wages. A person who found him or herself in this position was sure to resent it and to "struggle to the utmost" to resist it.

> He resents this change and resists it as long as he can, and this resistance takes the form of a battle with the members of that social group nearest to his own, to whose voluntary human action he attributes that injury to his interest.... Hence landlords and tenants, borrowers and lenders, producers and consumers, shippers and transporters, employers and employees are pushed against one another in collisions which are nothing but the social manifestations of great changes in the current of trade and in the organization of production.[14]

Tangentially, Sumner's hypothesis that conflict will be most likely and most intense among closely related rather than more distantly related groups is provocative. It suggests limitations on the development of institutions through conflict that some later proponents of "conflict theory" neglected; and it suggests more general limits on the

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[13] Ibid., p. 239.

[14] Ibid., p. 239.

process of rationalization than might otherwise be assumed. For Sumner's theory of reform, this certainly meant greater rather than less gradualism.

Just as it was inevitable that the "great impersonal and automatic forces push up against each other," so too was it the case with the groups that were affected. Although Sumner assumed that the primary cause was the "impersonal and automatic" market, he insisted that the effects, or "social consequences" were quite literally forced upon individuals: "it is men who strive, and suffer, and plan, and fight, and steal, and kill, when the great impersonal and automatic forces push up against each other."[15]

Sumner emphasized the difficulty of specifying just how individuals would act when their interests are "injured." Nonetheless, he was certain that while people will probably "strive" and might even "plan," they were sure to "resist" or, as Sumner put it, to "fight." He cited two compelling reasons why his contemporaries "resist" being subjected to the very market forces on which their well-being depends. One was the historically unprecedented level of economic insecurity at the end of the nineteenth century, and the other was the increased possibility of exploitation in the accelerations of the market.

Sumner was convinced that the present level of insecurity which pervaded modern society was a recent development. The continuity of employment in one's chosen field or occupation which had once been widely assumed, was no longer the case.

> It has become one of the commonest experiences for such a man, no matter what his occupation or social position may be, to find that he must change his occupation, or his investments, or his methods, forfeit his acquired skill, change his abode, acquire new habits, and seek other means of livelihood.[16]

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[15] Earth Hunger, "Democracy and Plutocracy," 1888, p. 286.

[16] Sumner, "Do We Want Industrial Peace?," p. 239.

Despite the fact that this overlooks similar experiences throughout the history of capitalism -- e.g., the enclosures, the freeing of labor, and the replacement of craft by wage and industrial labor -- the statement points to the essential phenomenon, and it is relatively true, that modern conditions create an insecurity that is not limited to a select few: by the end of the century, nearly everyone was vulnerable to the market. Sumner accordingly concluded that industrial progress benefits society as a whole but that many suffer in the process. As a result, Sumner pointed out, a market economy could not guarantee distributive justice, and therefore was an insufficient guarantee of civil liberty. Rather, it could only provide a framework within which groups might win some measure of distributive justice, but only at the expense of the market. In anticipation of progressive liberalism, he concluded that "no doctrine that a true adjustment of interests follows from the free play of interests can be construed to mean that an interest which is neglected will get its rights."[17] But even if a group's rights were not neglected, it still might not receive a just return on effort. The modern industrial organization, as a result of the need for action despite no guarantee of result, possesses a great deal of "elasticity." This "elasticity" permits an "aggressive organ" [read: interest group or class] to "win something at the expense of the others" in the short-run. Such a group can convert this particular failure of distributive justice into a long-term failure as well: "if force enough is brought to bear, a general displacement and readjustment may be brought about."[18] The protection which the market offers against exploitation is, at best, weak, and in any case sufficient only to guarantee a possibility of justice. Thus, what the market provided by way of accumulation, a better life, it denied by the fact that wealth created power

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[17] Sumner, What Social Classes Owe, p. 89.

[18] Sumner, "Strikes and the Industrial Organization," p. 250.

inconsistent with the originally just distribution of benefit by productive effort and shrewd bargaining.

Sumner's analysis of the economic underpinnings of contractual relations suggested that the generalization of contract did not preclude the struggle of interest groups but actually enhanced it. The economic well-being of both individuals and the modern industrial organization requires that people band together in groups to "strengthen" their position: "a man who has a bargain to make will do wisely to strengthen himself by all means in his power for the negotiation." This, Sumner said, is precisely where the operation of modernity is most vulnerable. The "tendency" of interest groups was to strengthen their positions by any means, regardless of legality and regardless of the common interest in the long run. Industrial struggles constantly threatened to overstep their rightful bounds: "the tendency is all the time to go back from the industrial struggle to the military struggle. Every strike reveals it." This statement, of course, reflected Sumner's observations of the explosive labor conflicts which regularly shook the body politic in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But it also reflected his analysis of what was implicit in the modernization of the market. Sumner condemned labor's refusal to act within the bounds of legality, but he insisted that even "better educated people" exhibited this "tendency," though in a different form. Conflict and combination became increasingly generalized by the very laws of market exchange that were once said to encourage individualism and a just distribution of wealth.

> Better educated people, while talking about respect for law, seize upon legislation as the modern mode of pursuing the military struggle under the forms of peace and order -- that is to say, they turn from industrial competition and industrial effort to legislative compulsion, and to arbitrary advantage won and secured through the direction and the power of the state.[19]

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[19] Earth Hunger, "Democracy and Plutocracy," 1888, pp. 286-87.

The operation of the modern economy not only produced "industrial war" but a "modern mode" of "military struggle" -- namely, the conquest of state power and the use of "legislative compulsion." In 1881, Sumner suggested that the relationships of interest groups in the political arena were similar to the relations of parties mobilizing to form a contract. At that time he was unable to push this "analogy" any further. By the end of the decade, he argued that the modern political economy compelled interest groups to advance their ends by increasingly similar means regardless of the social sphere within which they operated. As a result, he could no longer minimize the state and its functions in providing a more or less stable modernization.

THE STATE: "AN INSTRUMENT OF CLASS DOMINATION"

It is important to note that Sumner's reluctance to turn to governmental intervention was rooted in an analysis which was more sophisticated than his critics allow. Sumner's resistance to expanding state activities, thereby interfering with the operation of a competitive market, was based upon an historical analysis of how the state functioned as an instrument of class domination. He emphasized that this was not merely true of traditional states. Despite the replacement of kings by functionaries, the state remained central and had become even more prominent in the modern epoch. Though modern state power was justified in terms of the public interest, it increasingly provided "arbitrary advantages" for particular competitive interest groups.[30] The "old social war" was not over and the "old evils" have not been abolished: "they are all here under new forms." Sumner challenged the wide-spread faith that democracy would someday eliminate economic conflict. Instead, he argued

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[30] Sumner, "Democracy and Plutocracy," pp. 286-87. Sumner provided a fuller treatment of this issue in 1883 in What Social Classes, pp. 30-31.

that "democracy as a political form, instead of settling anything, has set them all loose."[21] Thus, having shown the limits of politics in guiding the state, Sumner was left with science and education, and the possibility of an enlightened social interest. It was in terms of this possibility that he was able to expand his analysis of interests, corruption, plutocracy, reform, and democracy.

INTERESTS: THE "NEW CENTER" OF MODERN SOCIETY

The creation of power within and against society is ultimately due to the "new center" of modern society, "interests." By interests, Sumner meant a value that only some could acquire and that could only be acquired at the expense of another. "Interests" not only organized the social bases from which new organizations emerged, they also shaped the character and purpose, the social relations, of organizational life. This development led Sumner to conclude that the mounting concern about the consequences of individual self-interest was justified but misplaced. As a committed sociologist, Sumner placed less emphasis on individual values than on social relations. The heart of the problem was not that self-interest shapes the actions of individuals but that groups form on the basis of particular interests.

> What then are the centers on which the new organizations form, and what is the character of the new organizations? In our modern society they are sure to be interests, meaning by that, groups of persons united by a desire for the success of the same enterprises, and seeking pecuniary gain from that success.[22]

As interests acquire social expression for which resources have to be indulged, the state becomes an object of conflict. Even a state which sought to manifest "self-

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[21] Earth Hunger, "Social War in Democracy," 1889, p. 316.

[22] Earth Hunger, "The Separation of State and Market," 1889, p. 309.

abnegation" could never be "quietly neutral." It would always have "to defend itself against the forces which tried to direct it, and to push back against the organizations which were trying to drive it onto the undertakings which it disavowed."[23] Thus, while the neutrality of the state was essential for economic and moral development, it was difficult to create and even harder to sustain: the state was continuously pressured by different interest groups which struggled to use its power for their particular ends. The consolidation of the "new centers" encouraged this anti-societal development, and paradoxically, modern social codes justified it.

THE GENERATION OF CORRUPTION

In 1889, Sumner returned to an earlier concern -- namely, the "thirst for luxury." Here, as before, Sumner noted that the "popular doctrines of the last one hundred years have spread the notion that everybody ought to enjoy comfort and luxury -- that luxury is a sort of right." This time, however, Sumner pointed to a new and more problematic aspect of this "notion." He argued that the combined impact of the "increasing thirst for luxury" and the "habit of thinking of it as within the scope of every man's right" fuels "the temptation of dishonest gain" in all transactions.[24] One reason why so many people presently engage in illicit acts is that modern social codes not only accept but justify such behavior. In fact, Sumner observed, someone "on the make" no longer perceives himself as dishonest. Instead, he proudly considers himself to be "a man of the world," merely doing what all would if they had the chance. The cultural obsession with success often leads people to engage in activities which

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[23] Ibid., p. 307.

[24] Earth Hunger, "Definitions of Democracy and Plutocracy," 1888, p. 293.

effectively ignore moral standards of honesty and fairness. This insight had strong implications for Sumner's analysis of corruption and rationality.

Sumner distinguished between the process of group formation and the behaviors of individuals. Insofar as rationality was concerned, Sumner argued that both individuals and specific interest groups had become more technically-oriented in achieving their particular ends. Since this rationalization was in the service of particular ends that could not be shared, it therefore operated at the expense of society. Simply put, the market had enabled the rationality of individuals and interest groups to increase; but social rationality had correspondingly declined. Sumner elaborated this in his discussion of plutocracy.

PLUTOCRACY: THE CONTROLLING FORCE IS WEALTH

Sumner believed that the social environment generated by the political economy and the social codes of modern society offered unprecedented opportunities for the growth of plutocracy. He argued that neither the modern economy nor the modern polity could be treated as self-contained social realms; they had become inseparable. Sumner not only noted but accepted this development. The problem was that industrial development had produced a nexus of wealth and power in joint-stock companies, corporations, franchises, concessions, and public contracts that invited corrupt actions.[25] The modern political economy, in short, enabled individuals and groups to take advantage of complex relations of interest in ways difficult to keep under moral surveillance and difficult to regulate for the greater good. Plutocrats not only have the incentive but the opportunity to buy their way through elections and legislatures:

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[25] Ibid., p. 294.

doing so is "far more profitable, very often, than that of legitimate industry."[26] This did more than enable a privileged few to benefit; its tendency to generalize threatened to corrupt the polity and social codes which sustained societal interests.

Sumner defined a plutocracy as a "political form in which the real controlling force is wealth." While there had been earlier states possessing plutocratic elements in the past, there were few, if any, in which wealth had such "absorbing and controlling power as ... [presently] threatens us." Indeed, if the growth of plutocracy was not somehow checked, it would soon become "infinitely corrupting." Yet, he refused to treat this "social degradation" as an inevitable by-product of modernity: "the venality of the humbler sets of people" and "the greed and arrogance of plutocrats" points to "forces and tendencies," the magnitude of which should not be exaggerated and the possibility of changing should not be denied. Despite these qualifying nuances, Sumner condemned plutocracy

> as the most sordid and debasing form of political energy known to us. In its motive, its processes, its codes, and its sanctions it is infinitely corrupting to all the institutions which ought to preserve and protect society.[27]

As plutocrats increased their control over the modern polity, they threatened the ability of the state to provide for rational deliberation and reform. Since plutocracy represented one of the more powerful modern "forces and tendencies," Sumner felt that there was no guarantee that modern society would effectively overcome the "strain" it confronted:

> liberty of labor is not a social finality. It is not a definitive solution of the social organization, but only alters the forms of the problems.... It sets free some personal interests which were not free before, and in so far it adds to the

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[26] Earth Hunger, "The Conflict of Democracy and Plutocracy," 1889, p. 298.

[27] Sumner, "Democracy and Plutocracy," pp. 293-295.

> internal warfare and confusion of society. It does sharpen and intensify the competition of life. The struggle of the forces rises in intensity, develops greater and greater heat, puts stronger and stronger strain upon political institutions, subjects the sober sense, the high self-control of men to severer tests, demands more intelligent power of criticizing dogmas and projects.[28]

For Sumner, the "tendencies" of the modern economy, polity, and social codes were not encouraging. Society was placed, more than ever, in a vulnerable position in which crisis was an ever present possibility.

"INTELLIGENT AND FRUITFUL REFORM"

Sumner was especially critical of those laws or institutions which favored one group at the expense of others. He pointed out that "there may be obstacles in the political or social organization which prevent the actual moral power of the people from attaining its maximum result in social and material welfare," and that the appearance of such "obstacles" signaled the existence of oppression. He believed that oppression could and should be eliminated: "If the laws and institutions of the society hinder any one from fighting out the battle of life on his or her own behalf to the best of one's ability, especially if they hinder one to the advantage of another, the field of intelligent and fruitful reform is at once marked out."[29] The need for "intelligent" change was not limited to economics and politics but embraced "social codes" and "ethical forces" as well. Sumner believed that it was essential that these modern social developments more effectively represent the social conditions to which they had initially responded. Thus he retained a free market ethics but increasingly shifted toward a qualified endorsement of social intervention. His desire to avoid the

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[28] Sumner, "Liberty and Responsibility," p. 184.

[29] Sumner, Challenge, "The State As An Ethical Person," 1887, p. 202; "What Makes the Rich Richer and the Poor Poorer," p. 69.

problems of too great reliance on the state and planning led him to emphasize the importance of science and education and the power of persuasion and knowledge.

As a former minister, Sumner did not wish to "speak lightly of preaching as a means of awakening the reason and conscience of men to convictions which are universally right and true." Yet, he believed there were limits to which even the most persuasive "preaching" could transform the moral convictions and behaviors of modern individuals. Sumner welcomed any gains which might come from this method, but emphasized that "statesmen" possessed the resources and the responsibility to provide more substantial and far-reaching social change than could be simply advocated:

> The statesman has to accomplish his purposes by adopting measures, and by founding institutions which can set social forces in operation, or prevent their operation. He must have an adequate means or must make the best of a case as he finds it.[30]

Sumner believed that the need for "intelligent and fruitful reform" was as important as it was misunderstood. His desire to account for how the political expression of an educated citizenry could influence the operation of "social forces" in a more universalistic direction informed most of his writings in the 1890's. His primary purpose was to show that reform could be consistent with respect to history, the imperatives of social structure, and relatively free exchange.

"THE LIMITS OF OUR SOCIAL ACTIVITY"

Sumner addressed these issues in his 1894 article on "The Absurd Effort To Make The World Over" and his 1896 articles on "Earth Hunger and the Philosophy of Land Grabbing" and "The Advancing Organization of the United States." These articles

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[30] Sumner, "Democracy and Modern Problems," pp. 303-4.

expanded his earlier discussions of the forces shaping social life and the operational of purposeful change. His frame of reference remained consistent with the notion that the "stage of the industrial organization" determined social life.

> It controls us because we are all in it. It creates the conditions of our existence, sets the limits of our social activity, regulates the bonds of our social relations, determines our conceptions of good and evil, suggests our life-philosophy, molds our inherited political institutions, and reforms our oldest and toughest customs, like marriage and property.[31]

Sumner believed that social development was a joint product of social conditions and human agency. Human agents operated within historical limits but could "modify" their effects. Thus, existing social conditions shaped the modes of our existence and determined the "directions" in which economic and social development could proceed. However, it was possible to modify "the tendencies of some of the forces at work, so that, after a sufficient time, their action may be changed a little and slowly the lines of movement may be modified." Sumner allowed a somewhat larger degree of latitude for human intervention than he had previously, consistent with his view of the urgency of the crisis, but he still insisted that changes could only be "slight" and gradual. This was a fine line to draw, and an impossible one to reconcile fully with his theory of the paradoxes of modernization. Nevertheless, he granted that it was possible for change to occur as long as the proposed reforms corrected harmful practices, were faithful to the existing "tendencies," and did not try to introduce historically untenable and therefore "absurd" reforms.[32] His remarks were clearly directed at those on his right and left. He wanted the former to increase their tolerance for proposals made by reformists without giving in to reformism as such; the latter had to replace their historically "absurd" reforms with policies that respected the limitations of reform.

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[31] War, "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over," 1894, p. 197.

[32] Ibid., p. 209.

Sumner focused on this issue in his 1896 article on "Earth Hunger," though from a different angle. He began by emphasizing that the ratio of people to land was the most "controlling" determinant of social life. However, he added that all industrial and scientific improvements enhanced the product a single acre can yield and thus influenced that ratio. As our knowledge increases about the world we live in we "increase our power to interpose in the play of the forces of nature and to modify it to suit our purposes and preferences. All the developments of our social organization have the same effect."[33] This implied that what Sumner called "ethical forces" were similarly influenced by knowledge and expertise. In this sense, neither the amount of land nor the man-land ratio were a "simple arithmetic quantity." Despite his endorsement of the importance of the "man-land ratio" and his commitment to Malthusianism in principle, Sumner's thought is not a traditional Malthusian position. Sumner used the language but transformed its meaning to suit new sociological facts that had not been available or recognized by the Malthusians. As a result, he was able to argue in favor of development and in favor of an expanding view of the limits of development. What was most important was the need for circumspection and respect for society:

> All plunder and robbery squander the fund which has been produced by society for the support of society. It makes no difference whether the plunder and robbery are legal or illegal in form. Every violation of the security of property and of such rights as are recognized in society has the same effect. All mistakes in legislation, whether sincere and innocent, or dictated by selfish ambition and sordid greed, have the same effect. They rob the people of goods that were fairly theirs upon the stage of civilization on which they stood. All abuses of political power, all perversions of institutions, all party combinations for anti-social ends have the same effect. All false philosophies and mistaken doctrines, although it may take a long time to find out which ones are false, still have the same effect. They make us cast away bread and seize a stone.[34]

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[33] Sumner, Earth Hunger, "Earth Hunger, The Philosophy of Land Grabbing," 1896, p. 32.

[34] Ibid., pp. 35-6.

Sumner did not reify the intentions or the legality of social practices. Rather, he argued that beliefs, practices, and institutions should be evaluated by the degree to which they allowed existing natural and social resources to be fully utilized and developed. His commitment to unleashing these forces was so great that he suggested that even war and revolution were a "comparative good" under certain circumstances.

> All the old institutions which have outlived their usefulness and become a cover for abuses and an excuse for error, so that the wars and revolutions which overthrow them are a comparative good, must also be regarded as clogs which fetter us in our attempts to grasp what our knowledge and labor have brought within our reach.[35]

Sumner argued that the industrial organization, social institutions, and ethical forces inevitably act and react upon each other: "it is only for academical purposes that we try to separate them; in reality they are inextricably interwoven." This insight was present in his earliest writings and did not represent in the later a new point of departure. What is significant, however, is that in the later writings Sumner granted "ethical forces" a greater degree of autonomy and latency. He elaborated two key points about "ethical principles. First, what we refer to as "ethical principles" are only "vague and inconclusive generalizations" which we crystallize into rules for domestic and economic life. Second, we usually acquire these generalizations "unconsciously, by superficial and incompetent reflection on the experiences which family and economic life, acting far above and beyond our criticism or control, have suggested to us."[36]

Sumner's ideas about the development of "social codes" suggested that normative expectations and doctrinal beliefs exist independent of the awareness or intentions of

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[35] Ibid., p. 36.

[36] Ibid., p. 35.

individuals and the conditions of life to which they refer. These "doctrines" not only shape "the reason and conscience" of individuals but often force individuals to engage in actions which violate their will and impede their self-interest.

> History contains instances enough to show us the frightful burden which a doctrine may be. It comes with the prestige of tradition, antiquity, and perhaps a great name, to take away from the living generation the right to do their own thinking and to compel them to sacrifice their lives and happiness against their will and without the consent of their own reason and conscience.[37]

False "doctrines" have "compelled" the "living generation" to act against their best interests in the past and continue to do so in the present. Sumner argued that the "superficial and incompetent reflection" that still pervades modernity can be reduced in the general interest of strengthening society's ability to distinguish truth from error. He argued that this society, like all others, has paid a harsh price for its errors. Science and education, he said, can help to "free" modern society from the errors which it has either inherited or created. They can "save" modernity from the needless suffering which it, like all preceding societies, has generated despite itself. Sumner argued that a "correct apprehension of social facts and laws," and of social processes, can help modern society far more than any discovery about physical nature.[38]

Sumner's efforts to clarify the operation of rationality at the group received its clearest and fullest expression in his analysis of the social roots of "interests," in the "Advancing Organization in the United States." He argued that a sociological account of "interests" required that "social organization" replace the individual as the unit of analysis: interests are determined by the "social organization" and cultural milieu in which individuals live. "The conditions of the existing social organization are

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[37] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

[38] Ibid., pp. 36-7.

controlling facts for the welfare and interests of men."[39] Sumner proposed two related hypotheses about self-interest and rationality. First, both the definition and means of pursuit of self-interest are socially determined. Second, individual rationality and social rationality are not necessarily consistent. Social rationality is contingent upon the institutional framework that produces and then sustains it, while individual rationality is subject to the immediate force of circumstance. Since modernity possesses a level of operation irreducible to individual action, problematic social processes cannot be simply attributed to faulty individuals. The events preceding and following the Spanish-American War fueled Sumner's concerns about the problematic "tendencies" that seemed to flourish in modern society.

PLUTOCRACY VERSUS DEMOCRACY: "THE SOCIAL WAR OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY"

One reason why Sumner so vehemently opposed the war with Spain was that it was "precipitated upon us headlong, without reflection or deliberation, and without any due formulation of public opinion." Worse still, whenever a more reasonable voice attempted to speak up, it was "howled down in a storm of vituperation and cant." It was as though all the organs which shaped public opinion had replaced their responsibility to cultivate rational deliberation with a calculated appeal to the basest of emotions. Sumner believed that modern society would pay a harsh "penalty" for these "corrupt" social processes.

> Everything was done to make us throw away sobriety of thought and calmness of judgment and to inflate all expressions with sensational epithets and turgid phrases. It cannot be denied that everything in regard to the war has been treated in an exalted strain of sentiment and rhetoric very unfavorable to the

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[39] Challenge, "Advancing Organization of the United States," 1896, p. 309.

> truth. At present the whole periodic press of the country seems to be occupied in tickling the national vanity to the utmost by representations about the war which are extravagant and fantastic. There will be a penalty to pay for all this. Nervous and sensational newspapers are just as corrupting, especially to young people, as nervous and sensational novels. The habit of expecting that all mental pabulum shall be highly spiced, and the corresponding loathing for whatever is soberly truthful, undermines character as much as any other vice. Patriotism is being prostituted into a nervous intoxication which is fatal to an apprehension of truth.[40]

The patriotism that was supposed to protect and advance the national interest was doing just the opposite: it pushed people to accept conditions in which "our interests, our institutions, our most sacred traditions, and our best established maxims have been trampled underfoot." Sumner argued that without the "moral courage" to resist the pressure to conform the "modern democratic state" would fail, the blind acceptance of public opinion being the "worst political vice." Unfortunately, both the war and the jingoistic sentiments it unleashed supported the latter tendency: "the press, the platform, and the pulpit have all fallen under this vice, and there is evidence that the university also, which ought to be the last citadel of truth, is succumbing to it likewise."[41] The very socializing agencies which were all that could make modern "moral convictions" more responsive to experience were interfering with the process of deliberation necessary for such responsiveness.

Sumner's observations of other "colonizing" nations convinced him that the United States was not alone in this regard. All such nations think of themselves as "noble" and caring carriers of civilization and self-righteously despise the others as "sordid money-grabbers and heretics." Sumner believed that the United States was similar to other nations in that Americans laughed at <u>their</u> manifestations of national vanity, yet were oblivious to America's. Americans assumed that the countries "we" conquer and

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[40] <u>War</u>, "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," 1898, pp. 300-1.

[41] Ibid., p. 301.

annex will embrace our ways and benefit from them. But, nothing could be further from the truth: they hated our ways and resisted our ideas. All that we pride ourselves on, "our religion, language, institutions, and manners," truly "offend them." They both need and want their own ways and, if we forcibly impose ours, they will surely suffer "social discord in all the great departments of social interest." The "habits and practices" of one society differ from another and, if arbitrarily imposed, will produce untold suffering.[42]

Sumner warned that the "conquest" of the dependent territories was in the interest of the plutocrats in the "social war" they were waging against democracy.

> The great foe of democracy now and in the future is plutocracy. Every year that passes brings out this antagonism more distinctly. It is to be the social war of the twentieth century. In that war militarism, expansion and imperialism will all favor plutocracy. In the first place, war and expansion will favor jobbery, both in the dependencies and at home. In the second place, they will take away the attention of the people from what the plutocrats are doing. In the third place, they will cause large expenditures of the people's money, the return for which will not go into the treasury, but into the hands of a few schemers. In the fourth place, they will call for a large public debt and taxes, and these things especially tend to make men unequal, because any social burdens bear more heavily on the weak than the strong, and so make the weak weaker and the strong stronger. Therefore, expansion and imperialism are a grand onslaught on democracy.[43]

Sumner predicted that the plutocrats would use "expansion and imperialism" and the threat of war to strengthen themselves and to conceal their concerted attack on democratic institutions. The result of this, Sumner noted, would be that the forces of democracy would steadily become weaker while those of the plutocracy would become stronger. Eventually, plutocracy would win the "social war" and rule the body politic. Worse yet, the moral convictions which were supposed to sustain and transform modern institutional life would be contradicted by these practices and thereby undermined.

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[42] Ibid., pp. 304-5.

[43] Ibid., pp. 325-26.

Sumner argued that the "reasoning and moral convictions" of the United States had concluded that it was the right of countries to determine their destiny. Since other "civilized states" believed similarly, this distinctively "modern conception" was embodied in a "code" of international law.

> The code itself is a product of the reasoning and moral convictions of civilized states, and it grows by precedents and usages, as cases arise for the application of the general principles which have been accepted as sound, because they conduce to peace, harmony, and smooth progress of affairs.[44]

Sumner insisted that a society could only discard the precepts and principles on which its social life rested at its own expense:

> If the nation has accepted them, sworn by them, founded its legislation on them, embedded them in the decisions of its courts, and then if it throws them away at six months' warning, you may depend upon it that nation will suffer in its moral and political rectitude a shock of the severest kind.[45]

Sumner believed that neither public opinion nor the social organs which shaped it possessed the resources necessary to ward off the manipulations by the powerful plutocrats. The events which culminated in the Spanish-American War thus reinforced Sumner's already considerable concern about the fate of the "active reason" and "intelligent conscience." Those Sumner had earlier referred to as the "new masters of modern society" had successfully challenged the socializing agencies of reason and conscience, and were steadily imposing themselves on the American populace. The resulting "strain" required "intelligent and fruitful reform," or modernity would be plunged into a social crisis the likes of which had never before been experienced.

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[44] War, "The Proposed Dual Organization of Mankind," 1896, p. 280.

[45] Sumner, "Conquest," p.327.

SUMMARY

Sumner's work of the late 1880's and 1890's attempted to demonstrate why the popular notion that "ethical considerations do, or ought to, regulate legislation and social relations" was incorrect, but why it was an easy error to make. He believed that the "fact" that the "active reason" and "conscience" of the community had to constantly modify laws and institutions in light of new social conditions and knowledge led reformers to conclude mistakenly that any and all reforms were possible: it provided the basis for the delusive belief that social life can and should be reconstructed according to the ideas and visions reformers wish to implement.[46] Sumner maintained that the "industrial organization" determined the form and limits of social life and that science and education could modify social life within these limits. Sumner's analysis of modern society suggested that the institutions responsible for guaranteeing the conditions of rational deliberation and reform had generated "tendencies" counter to sustainable policies of reform.

Since Sumner believed that modern society's knowledge and control of the forces of nature far exceeded its knowledge and control of social forces, he turned his attention to the latter, suggesting that the social processes making deliberative reform possible had to be strengthened. Otherwise they would be unable to withstand the "strain" imposed on them by which interest groups. Sumner argued that the solution of these problems lay in correcting institutional arrangements and the normative orders which supported them. Sumner's life-work thus left him with the need investigate further the sources of the modern moral order. To use Sumner's own language, he wished to strengthen his understanding of the "vague and inconclusive generalizations" which we have acquired "often unconsciously, by superficial and incompetent reflection

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[46] Sumner, "What is Civil Liberty," p. 130.

on the experiences" which the modern order provides. He wanted to understand the source and consequences of the normative orders generated by modernity, the errors of modern society, and the means by which these errors could be eliminated. Simply put, he wanted to explore the extent to which the cultural order allowed for social changes impossible to institute by strictly economic or political devices.

Sumner analysis of the social developments of the late 1890's heightened his sensitivity to the irrational social currents which operated in modern society and moved him one step closer to the writing of Folkways. So did his growing awareness that the "habits and practices" which sustained one society might be inimical to others. Sumner realized that he required a more complex view of the relationship between societal "conditions of life," the system of moral regulation, and the socializing and educational agencies which shape morality. He wanted to account for how powerful classes used force to affect the moral and institutional life of modern society and why ordinary people accepted beliefs and social practices so clearly antagonistic to their well-being. He needed, in a word, to write Folkways.

FOLKWAYS: SUMNER'S MATURE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Folkways was an early twentieth century attempt to address several problems that contemporary theorists still grapple with -- namely, what social processes enables what Sumner called "error" and "force" to become constituent parts of social structures; what social mechanisms lead people to embrace the constraints of their societies against the conditions that make social change possible; under what historical conditions can people transform the structures which burden all thoughts and acts with societally specific limits; how in the midst of an anti-critical social world can critical thought and practice emerge and what are the limits of rational reform; and finally, to what extent is modern society different from past social orders in these respects. Despite his reputation as an advocate of laissez-faire who denounced all reform efforts as "absurd," Sumner's analysis of the mores systematically examined the societally specific relationship between limits and agency. Though most of Folkways focused on pre-industrial societies, some did not. Indeed, an important but ignored aspect of Folkways explored the prospects for human intervention in a modern society that, like all others, was skewed by "error" and "force." In this way, Sumner was sensitive to two issues typically identified with Marxism, that of the role of force and human agency in history.

Folkways's development of two related sociological concepts, the folkways and mores, made what Durkheim called "the social fact" come alive as few other sociologists have done. Sumner suggested that the life conditions of all societies generate customary and traditional practices (folkways) which are directly, though not completely responsive to the life conditions from which they emerge. The folkways, in turn, produce a system of mores (which include a judgment that they promote welfare

and become what we call a moral order) that is capable of reproducing itself relatively independent from the conditions which give rise to it. Sumner maintained that studying the development of the mores out of the folkways, and the relations between them and the life conditions, using whatever empirical field allows this to be done, makes possible an authentic sociological level of analysis. It was this, rather than an indifference to modernity, that prompted Sumner's focus on the primitive. Sumner argued that all societies possess a moral order and that we can only understand the moral order of modernity if we understand the nature of moral orders in general. In this respect, Folkways did not represent a departure from but a culmination of Sumner's life-long commitment to understanding the distinctiveness of modern society.

The fundamental point of Folkways was that culture is relatively autonomous, that the history of society (including the modern one) has not been an adaptation to material conditions. The mores play a pivotal role in the development of all societies: they constitute a "supreme and controlling" social force which molds all social practices and structures. Sumner argued that even though the imperatives of the moral order constituted by the mores may be historically superstructural, functionally they are not: they shape all of social life. Since the mores are somewhat exempt from the normal corrective of material life, there is no guarantee that the mores will either correspond to life conditions or, if they do, that they will change when life conditions are transformed. On the contrary, the mores create less historically apt usages and institutional structures that do not allow humanity to live as well as the "life conditions" would otherwise permit. In this sense, Folkways represents an attempt to analyze the levels of group formation and operation of which groups are more or less rational.

Yet, Sumner stressed that the mores are not just powerful and persistent, but vulnerable and what he termed "variable." He suggested that the mores encouraged a

traditionalizing and reactionary impulse, but one which is much weaker and more readily challenged than some of his polemical statements imply. Sumner's use of the notion of latency enabled him to theorize the social order in terms of the moral order. Sumner argued that the moral order only operates well when it is not subject to reflection, when it is what Sumner referred to as "instinctive" and we now call latent. Therefore, the structural weakness of a cultural formation which operates latently resides in its articulation or, to use his term, in its "formulation." The "unconscious philosophy" of the mores could be disturbed by the development of the moral order, by reflection and "educated skepticism," or by changed life conditions which placed a strain upon traditional mores. Since life conditions were constantly changing, mores were eventually confronted with the flux. Either way, Sumner concluded that the operation of the mores involves, not just a passive acceptance, but an active encounter, the nature of which varies historically.

Sumner's distinction between what he called "crescive" and "enacted" institutions provided a theoretical framework by which he analyzed socio-historical differences and modern developments. Crescive institutions, like the mores they emerge from, are unconsciously and "instinctively" created. Enacted institutions, on the other hand, are more consciously designed: they are products of "rational invention and intention." This conceptualization enabled Sumner to explore the possibility of intentional change and to contrast the degree to which different historical epochs were able to do so. His development of the problematic relationship between mores and the process by which they were reflected upon and "formulated" introduced a notion of change that focused on that contradiction and highlighted the distinctiveness of modern society.

Sumner's work has yet to be appreciated for what it offers: an analysis of the skewed nature of modern development that not only drew upon the American experience, but provided a non-Marxist attempt to grapple with the problem of ideology

and power, two elements that Sumner analyzed as "error" and "force." Despite his well-known contempt for radical theorists, especially Marxists, Sumner's mature work converges upon some of the key concerns that informed the work of his opponents. Intellectual historians have been unable to understand that Sumner's commitment to reform and correction, his interest in what is possible and not just actual, emerged from his conviction that "error" and "force" have been a constant in social development. Too much attention has been paid to Sumner's statement that the "mores can make anything [appear] right" and too little to his attempt to reveal the extent to which "error" and "force" have deformed all societies, including the modern one. For Sumner, the presence of "error" and "force" in all societies meant that reform was not just necessary, but possible. The fact that Sumner repeatedly emphasized the difficulty of promoting intentional social change does not mean that he believed that humans should not attempt to do so. Though intentional change was not readily achieved, it was greatly needed. Furthermore, humanity had no choice: actions were a constituent part of the historical process.

LIFE CONDITIONS, FOLKWAYS, AND MORES

Folkways provided a suggestive analysis of social structure and social change. Some of the most important concepts were life-conditions, folkways, and mores (I will discuss other key concepts such as that which Sumner called the "critical habit" in a later section). Sumner defined life conditions to include, not only the different aspects and resources of the natural environment, but the "state of the arts" and "the industrial organization." He assumed that a constant need for more productivity forced humans to create increasingly complex forms of social cooperation which he referred to as "industrial organization." And, since "the crisis which produces it is constantly

renewed, ... men are forced to raise the organization to greater complexity and more comprehensive power, without limit."[1] Sumner emphasized that life conditions and industrial organization were material and social and constantly changing. The life conditions shaped both the folkways and, to a lesser degree, the mores. The folkways, which were directly linked to life conditions, generated mores that were not as tied to life conditions. The mores developed relatively independently of material conditions, but were also modified by life conditions. Life conditions, therefore, were the primary source of change for folkways and mores.

Folkways are group habits, customary practices which are generated by all social processes. Folkways regulate all activities and thus provide one of the social conditions within which individuals strive to satisfy their needs:

> The body of the folkways constitutes a societal environment. Every one born into it must enter into relations from it, and it is one of the life conditions under which he must work out his career of self-realization.[2]

Folkways attempt to satisfy needs but typically do so imperfectly. This causes pain which, in turn, creates "a strain for improvement" and a "strain for consistency." The former generates "a better adaptation of means to ends;" the latter, which ensures that different social realms (such as forms of industry, family, notions of property, government, and religion) correspond to each other, creates what Sumner called a societal structure:

> The structure thus built up is not physical, but societal and institutional, that is to say, it belongs to a category in which custom produces continuity, coherence, and consistency, so that the word "structure" may properly be applied to the

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[1] Folkways (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1906), p. 16.

[2] Ibid., p. 68.

> fabric of relations and prescribed positions with which societal functions are permanently connected.[3]

The folkways are not completely subject to verification by experience -- "the tradition is its own warrant." Nevertheless, the ways adopted must also be "true" and "right" in relation to what he referred to as the social "facts" generated by the life conditions. Folkways are therefore quite susceptible to the pressure of material developments and are directly, though not completely, responsive to life conditions. The mores, on the other hand, are relatively autonomous, and therefore produce less historically apt conditions.

Sumner's analysis of the mores suggested two key points. First, that the mores placed powerful limits on both individual and social life. Second, despite their strength, the mores are vulnerable and can (and often should) be challenged. Sumner defined the mores to be those folkways which include a judgment that they promote welfare. Mores are folkways which have acquired philosophical and ethical generalizations: "when the elements of truth and right are developed into doctrines of welfare, the folkways are raised to another plane." Mores include the prevailing "ways of doing things to satisfy human needs and desires" and "the faiths, notions, codes, and standards of well living which inhere in those ways, having a genetic connection with them." Since Sumner believed that all social processes have moral consequences, he criticized "modern peoples" for making a mechanistic separation between the two:

> The modern peoples have made morals and morality a separate domain, by the side of religion, philosophy, and politics. In that sense, morals is an impossible and unreal category. It has no existence, and can have none. The word "moral" means what belongs or appertains to the mores. Therefore the category of morals can never be defined without reference to something outside.[4]

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[3] Ibid., pp. 5, 35.

[4] Ibid., pp. 36-37.

Sumner argued that philosophy and ethics are not the primary source of social development. As he put it, they are never primary or "original." Yet, despite Sumner's insistence that philosophical and ethical ideas "are secondary and derived," he believed that they do influence social life and social change: "they are creative or at least regulative." The relationship between "the elements of custom and philosophy" is dialectical: "they reacted upon each other." In this sense, products of societal "mental processes enter into the mores of the age" and influence social life and development.[5]

Sumner maintained that the mores constitute a "supreme and controlling" social force that shapes all social processes: "the integration of the mores upon different life conditions produce societal states of complete and distinct individuality (ethos)." The mores "become the norm for the whole body of usages, manners, ideas, faiths, customs, and institutions which embrace the whole life of a society and characterize an historical epoch." Since the mores shape all practices and institutions, "the scientific discussion of a usage, custom, or institution consists in tracing its relation to the mores."[6]

Sumner argued that the mores were not arbitrarily connected but were systematically related: "we must conceive of the mores as a vast system of usages, covering the whole of life, and serving all its interests." By rewarding certain behaviors with success and penalizing others with failure, the mores create a field of possible and prohibited behaviors which rewarded certain behaviors. The system of the mores thus constitutes "an engine of social selection" that shapes the structure and development of social life but the development thereof. Coercion of the individual is "the mode in which they operate the selection" and in the area of least rationality "the vanities, desire, prejudices, faiths, likes, and dislikes, which pervade a society, coerce

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[5] Ibid., pp. 30, 33.

[6] Ibid., p. 36.

dissenters...." Eventually, the mores "wind strands of influence and control around individuals and demand sacrifices." To ignore or oppose this "coercion to conform" with irrational prescriptions is folly: the individual who dissents in this way is not only acting futilely but "is made to suffer" and "loses important advantages and hurts his interests."[7] This is not because dissent is irrational but because it is difficult. Worse yet, the mores not only constrain the present generation, but future ones:

> The selection which they exert, drawing in some and repelling others, produces results on the societal fabric of a later time. The consequences react on character, moral tone, life philosophy, ethical principles, and ruling sentiments. Thus they affect the mores, or even enter into them. The whole is handed on to the rising generation, to be their outfit of knowledge, faith, and policy, and their rule of duty and well living.[8]

Sumner emphasized that the mores were not "organic or material." Rather, they "belong to a superorganic system of relations, conventions, and institutional arrangements." This meant, as Sumner made clear in an unpublished manuscript on evolution and the mores, that the nature and development of the "superorganic domain" was fundamentally different than the life processes within the organic realm: "the step over from biologic evolution plainly crosses a great gulf into an entirely different order of things." In this spirit, Sumner rejected the assumptions associated with the evolutionary position he supposedly supported: "the notion of a gradual refinement of the mores in time, which is assumed to go on of itself, or by virtue of some inherent tendency in that direction, is entirely unfounded."[9] Or, as he put it in his unpublished manuscript,

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[7] Ibid., p. 79, 174, 200, 192.

[8] Ibid., pp. 201-202.

[9] Folkways, pp. iv, 37, 116.

> where I deny that there is any progress on the superorganic domain, I wish to be understood to deny that superorganic matters are subject to any such stress or strain in any given direction as that which evolutions show us as carrying up organisms from protoza to man.[10]

Traditional interpretations notwithstanding, Sumner's evolutionary outlook did not promise that if we "let things alone," progress will necessarily ensue. On the contrary, he said that "the notion that mores grow either better or worse by virtue of some inherent tendency is to be rejected." Although he believed that the mores possessed "a strain towards consistency" (they operate more efficiently when they were consistent with one another), the results of this "consistency" do not necessarily promote societal welfare. In fact, this consistency was just as likely to produce "aberration and error" as progress. And, if the results of past endeavors were any indication, error was not unusual: "The efforts have been only very imperfectly successful."[11]

Sumner argued that the history of society has never been a rational adaptation to material life. Mores often lead people to act in ways that do not enhance material survival because "dogmas" interfere and "dictate 'duty' and 'right' by authority and as virtue, quite independently of any verification by experience and expediency." As one of the chapter titles in Folkways suggested, "The Mores Can Make Anything Right And Prevent Condemnation Of Anything," though they created a cultural patterning which neither corresponded to life conditions or furthered individual or social welfare. In this spirit, Sumner mentioned the "well-known fact that societies have set codes of honor and standards of it which were arbitrary, irrational, and both individually and socially inexpedient."[12]

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[10] Sumner, "The Application of the Notions of Evolution and Progress on the Superorganic Domain," 1905, p. 23.

[11] Folkways, pp. 102, 606.

[12] Ibid., pp. 606, 463.

Sumner cited witch persecutions as one of the many occasions when the influence of the mores prevented a rational judgment of customary practices: "the mores formed a moral and civil atmosphere through which everything was seen, and rational judgment was made impossible." He emphasized that this development should not be dismissed as an isolated aberration or a problem which was confined to the past. All societies, even the most advanced, confront the same difficulty, though in societally specific forms: "it cannot be doubted that, at any time, all ethical judgments are made through the atmosphere of the mores of the time."[13]

Sumner argued that the cultural process is continuously changing. Despite Sumner's insistence that the mores do not automatically change simply because the life conditions change, his analysis was different than that associated with Ogburn's theory of "cultural lag." Cultural lag theory suggests that culture will eventually change: that it is just a matter of time. Sumner, in sharp contrast, argued that the mores might well lead people to repeatedly engage in behaviors which are inconsistent with material survival. Though the mores are supposed to promote material welfare, they are at least partially immunized from the very forces that normally account for progress--namely, the need to adapt to environment and material life.

"ERROR" AND "FORCE:"
IMPEDIMENTS TO INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL WELFARE

When Sumner discussed mores at the most general level of theoretical abstraction, he felt comfortable defining them as the result of efforts to live well. As soon as he examined concrete historical results, Sumner emphasized that "error" and "force"--what we now refer to as ideology, power, and domination -- have always been a

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[13] Ibid., p. 532.

constituent part of the social process by which mores were created and developed. He argued that even though "error" and "force" were often inseparable in practice, it was important to distinguish them analytically.

Sumner maintained that consciousness is an integral part of the social process. When used correctly, this uniquely human capacity to reflect upon action can enhance social life:

> The correct apprehension of facts and events by the mind, and the correct inferences as to the relations between them, constitute knowledge, and it is chiefly by knowledge that men have become better able to live well on earth. Therefore the alternation between experience or observation and the intellectual processes by which the sense, sequence, interdependence, and rational consequences of acts are ascertained, is undoubtedly the most important process for winning increased power to live well.[14]

The "power of the intelligence" enhances social development but the "penalty of error" is just as great. Unfortunately, this process of alternating observation and deduction has often produced the "most pernicious errors." All societies

> have turned their backs on welfare and reality, in order to pursue beauty, glory, poetry, and dithyrambic rhetoric, pleasure, fame, adventure, and phantasms. Every group, in every age, has had its "ideals" for which it has striven, as if men had blown bubbles into the air, and then, entranced by their beautiful colors, had leaped to catch them.[15]

As a result, all societies have "wasted and dissipated their energies" and no society has realized the potentials inherent in the life conditions. One reason for this was error in the "mental outfit" which society as a whole possessed. The use of "force" in the interests of the "ruling classes" provided yet another.

Sumner suggested that "force" was a constituent part of all social structures.

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[14] Ibid., p. 32.

[15] Ibid.

Furthermore, whenever force shapes a particular social development, it becomes an integral part of the historical process:

> The whole history of mankind is a series of acts which are open to doubt, dispute, and criticism, as to their right and justice, but all subsequent history has been forced to take up the consequences of those acts and go on.

Sumner cited the war of the United States and Mexico as a case in point. Though most people now regard this war as unjustified, the social "consequences" of those acts not only affect those who are presently involved, but subsequent generations as well. Despite his reputation as an apologist for modernity, Sumner argued that

> If we recognize the great extent to which force now enters into all which happens in society, we shall cease to be shocked to learn the extent to which it has been active in the entire history of civilization.[16]

Sumner believed that the ability of human society to coordinate its affairs by organization not only enhances the collective powers of its members, but makes it vulnerable to the machinations of those who command that power: "The historical or selected classes are those which, in history, have controlled the activities and policies of generations." They inevitably do so for their own purposes. They have "put their own interest in the place of group interests, and have used the authority they possessed

to force the societal organization to work and fight for their own interests." The "ruling classes" of all societies have

> selected the group purposes and decided the group policy, use the force of the society itself to coerce all to acquiesce and to work and fight in the determined way without regard to their individual interests. This they do by means of discipline and ritual. In different kinds of mores the force is screened by different devices. It is always present, and brutal, cruel force has entered largely

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[16] Ibid., p. 66.

into the development of all our mores, even those which we think most noble and excellent.[17]

The study of history reveals that ruling classes have repeatedly used force "to warp the mores towards some result which they have selected." Sumner's analysis of the process by which mores are changed focused on two key points. First, ritual provides the means by which the mores are established: "acts which are ordained by authority and are repeated mechanically without intelligence run into ritual." Second, the degree to which a ruling class can "warp" mores depends upon its ability to gradually change existing ritual (rather than dogmas).[18]

Sumner believed that ritual shaped most activities in all societies (including modern society) and that the ability of powerful groups to modify these rituals enabled them to mold everyday life to their advantage. The mores not only made it possible for this to occur, but abetted this development: all mores, past and present, possess "different devices" which "screened" this force. Sumner's discussion of this and related points was, at best, suggestive. Unfortunately, neither he nor later sociologists developed the insights that Sumner's work contains. Still, it is important to note that Sumner concluded that, regardless of time or place, social life has been characterized by "a large element of force in the folkways." Both the presence and the impact of "force" represents yet "another modification of the theory of the folkways as expedient devices, developed in experience, to meet the exigencies of life."[19]

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[17] Ibid., p. 65.

[18] Ibid., pp. 94, 62, 60.

[19] Folkways, pp. 45, 64, 65.

THE MORES: STRONG YET CHALLENGEABLE

Sumner's assumption that social structures were skewed by "error" and "force" shaped his analysis of the limits imposed by the mores and the degree to which they could be modified. For Sumner, individuals inevitably act within a social organization which sets objective limits on conduct. As he put it in an earlier article, "it controls us all because we are all in it. It creates the conditions of our existence, sets the limits of our social activity, [and] regulates the bonds of our social relations."[20] Therefore, social structures not only provide "order and form" to individual and social life, but also create definite boundaries or limits to what is and can be. Sumner's goal was not to glorify or even defend these limits, but to reveal that the limits which characterized both past and present social structures were created by "error" and "force," two historical constants which have been, and still are, destructive of individual and social well-being. Since social structures emerge from the mores, the skewed nature of the mores impose limits that were neither natural, necessary, or immutable. In other words, "life-conditions" typically contain more possibilities than are realized. Sumner argued that it was neither necessary nor desirable to passively accept "a historical process" which "has been full of error, folly, selfishness, violence, and craft."[21] If anything, he wished to understand how and why social processes created and reproduced this deplorable development and the degree to which human intervention could modify them.

Sumner's awareness of the degree to which "error" and "force" shaped the mores of all societies led him to analyze how the mores can be strong yet challengeable. Despite Sumner's emphasis on the relative autonomy of the mores in relation to life

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[20] War, "The Absurd Effort To Make The World Over," 1894, p. 197.

[21] Folkways, pp. 521, 49.

conditions, he argued that their hegemony was weaker and more vulnerable than we might suspect. The fact that the mores operated effectively only when they remained unconscious both made them powerful and jeopardized their power.

Sumner emphasized that individuals tend to become so immersed in the moral web that they are unconscious of its historicity. This is possible, Sumner recognized, only because the external pressures exerted by mores are internalized and thereby become "individual wills." Every human being, regardless of which "society" they are a member of, is born into a world which is for them "natural" and social, physical and symbolic. In the process of learning a language, people acquire distinct and limited ways of thinking; they begin to perceive the world, what is and what could be, through a culturally specific lens. The acquisition of language is the cognitive aspect of a larger development that includes the conative. In this fashion, the social process in which individuals acquire their patterns of thought and modes of behavior also inculcates the appropriate commitments and desires. Sumner thus concluded that individual needs and values emerge from and are reinforced by historically specific social dimensions of everyday life which renders them matters of routine and habit: "the mores are social ritual in which we all participate unconsciously."[22]

Sumner stressed that the latency of the mores "coerced" individuals to act according to their precepts. People learn about the mores as unconsciously as they learn to breathe and in a way that makes it difficult to reflect upon them.

> Each individual is born into them as he is born into the atmosphere, and he does not reflect on them, or criticize them any more than a baby analyzes the atmosphere before he begins to breath it. Each one is subjected to the influence of the mores, and formed by them, before he is capable of reasoning about them.[23]

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[22] Ibid., p. 62.

[23] Ibid., p. 76.

The mores possess an "unconscious philosophy" which society as a whole tends to remain unaware of: "the thinking is already done and is embodied in the mores." In this sense, the mores do not stimulate thought but restrict it: the systematic relations among the mores provide the "mental outfit of the period." The fact that the mores inoculate societal members with a need to cling to what exists, strengthens their "dominion" over individuals and their conservatizing influence.[24]

But, despite Sumner's emphasis upon the conservatizing tendencies of the mores, he also stressed that "no less remarkable than the persistency of the mores is their changeableness and variation." The latency of the mores, Sumner said, did more than enhance their power and enable them to persist; it also made the mores vulnerable to challenge and thus contributed to their variability. Sumner cited von Hartmann's statement that the mores can only sustain their power if they remain societally unconscious:

> Conscious reflection is the worst enemy of the mores, because mores begin unconsciously and pursue unconscious purposes, which are recognized by reflection often only after long and circuitous processes, and because their expediency often depends on the assumption that they will have general acceptance and currency, uninterfered with by reflection.[25]

Sumner's sensitivity to the problematic relationship between mores and reflection enabled him to introduce a notion of change that focused on that contradiction. He argued that "conscious reflection" was the "worst enemy" of the mores and that the development of the mores led to their defeat. The social processes by which mores develop tend to create social practices that threaten the latency the mores need to remain strong. Changed life conditions can have the same result. Either way,

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[24] Ibid., p. 173.

[25] Ibid., pp. 84, 60.

established mores are always confronted with developments that challenge their latency and push them to change.

THE NATURE AND PROMISE OF MODERNITY

Folkways contained Sumner's most sophisticated attempt to compare primitive and modern society and to identify the distinctive features of modernity. On the most general level, Sumner suggested that "institutions and laws are produced out of the mores." Mores were "unformulated and undefined," were characterized by "sentiment and faith," and generated actions that were "unconscious and involuntary." Laws and institutions have a more "rational," "practical," and "positive character."[26] Sumner focused not only on how different institutions and laws emerged from historically specific mores, but also on the degree to which the mores enabled those societies to more self-consciously create "positive enactments" to regulate their activities:

> The mores of different societies, or of different ages, are characterized by greater or less readiness and confidence in regard to the use of positive enactments for the realization of societal purposes.[27]

Sumner suggested that "crescive" institutions and customary law had prevailed until recently. "Crescive" institutions existed in what Sumner referred to as "low civilization" and were unconscious outgrowths of "the instinctive efforts by which the mores are produced." These institutions appeared in societies that were regulated by customs and taboos. Whatever legal regulations existed were in the form of customary laws which did not challenge traditional customs but extended them. The degree of

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[26] Ibid., pp. 53-54.

[27] Ibid., p. 56.

respect for tradition and "reverence for ancestors" in these societies convinced people that it was "wrong to interfere with traditional customs by positive enactment."

Enacted institutions, in sharp contrast, "are products of rational invention and intention" and belong to what Sumner called "high civilization." Here, for the first time, "positive laws" are created: "positive laws are impossible until the stage of verification, reflection, and criticism are reached." Traditions still shape social life, but modern society can question them in a way that past eras could not. The historical development of the mores which promotes a critical scrutiny of the mores enabled modern society to be regulated by "positive laws" and to more fully realize the possibility of intentional change.

Sumner's argued that the collectively self-conscious process by which customary rules are codified into laws and "positive institutions" challenges the dominion of the mores: "it is only in so far as things have been transferred from the mores into laws and positive institutions that there is discussion about them or rationalizing upon them." Since actions shaped by the law and institutions are "formulated" and made explicit, they "are always conscious and voluntary."[28]

The fact that institutions and laws "supercede" mores encourages people to view and judge mores as human creations. This means that institutions and laws are open to criticism and require an explicit justification in a way that folkways and mores do not. And, the same deliberative process which transforms mores into laws that must be enforced invites people to question and resist them. As it becomes "a question of expediency whether to leave a subject under the mores, or to make a police regulation for it, or to put it into the criminal law," the latency of the mores is thwarted.

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[28] Ibid., pp. 55, 70.

Questions are raised and openings for reflection are created where previously there were none.[29]

Sumner portrayed "positive law" as that portion of the mores which reflects and stabilizes the processes of deliberation. This aspect of the mores is not only opposed to the passive acceptance which is typical of most other mores, but also supports the possibility of rejecting the mores. Modern life is covered by two inseparable features-- the passive acceptance of the mores and the active encounter with them. Indeed, Sumner stressed that any situation in which mores are or can be scrutinized subverts their spontaneous and unquestioned operation.

> Acts under the laws and institutions are conscious and voluntary; under the folkways they are always unconscious and involuntary, so that they have the character of natural necessity. Educated skepticism can disturb this spontaneous relation.[30]

Sumner's long-standing search for some type of agency to promote social change in the twentieth century led him to stress the importance of science, education, and law. His analysis of the nature and potential of each can only be understood in terms of their combined impact. Sumner believed that the promise of "positive laws" could not be fulfilled unless the generalization of a critical sensibility and an "educated skepticism" occurred. Modern education therefore played a crucial role in Sumner's analysis of the nature and possibilities of modern society.

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[29] Ibid., p. 58.

[30] Ibid., p. 56.

MODERN EDUCATION'S PURPOSE: REMOLDING THE MORES

Sumner believed that since social change is both necessary and inevitable, "tradition and authority" should not be blindly respected or uncritically obeyed. He argued, as early as 1872, that any social order which indiscriminately "cherishes" tradition will soon "become petrified" and eventually "form a prison-house which must be broken." And this, Sumner declared, was precisely where modern education can make a crucial difference. Modern schooling can and should "become seats of new thought, of criticism of what is traditional, and of new ideas which remold the mores." He acknowledged that schools should be "faithful" in their transmission of the cultural inheritance of the past, but he argued that they must do so in a way that is as critical as it is conservative.[31]

> The young men are only too ready to find fault with what they find existing and traditional, and the students of all countries have been eager revolutionists. Of course they make mistakes and do harm, but the alternative is the reign of old abuse and consecrated error. The folkways need constant rejuvenation and refreshment if they are to be well fitted to present cases, and it is far better that they be revolutionized than that they be subjected to traditional changelessness.[32]

Sumner believed that the folkways and mores needed "constant rejuvenation," and that humans could help this process along. He argued that "all the experience of life is educating" people and that to the extent that we understand "what the mores are, and that the contact with one's fellows is all the time transmitting them, we can better understand, and perhaps regulate to some extent, this education."[33]

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[31] Forgotten Man, "Memorial Day Address," 1872, p. 353; Folkways, pp. 634-35.

[32] Folkways, pp. 634-35.

[33] Ibid., p. 638.

Sumner therefore cannot be said to have denied the possibility of intentional change, even though he repeatedly emphasized the limitations and difficulties inherent to this enterprise. He said that "if men begin to study and think, they move away from tradition and authority,"[34] and that this movement is part of whatever rational development is possible for tradition itself:

> Progress has been made, in thinking and acting, only by modifying tradition. If we seek to study the methods and conditions of progress, we must study the reaction against tradition of independent minds which form their own judgments.[35]

The need to negotiate the line between criticism and tradition led him to emphasize the necessity for discipline, openness, and intellectual and emotional independence, three traits for which new educational practices are relevant.

"THE POWER TO CRITICIZE IS THE ONE WHICH EDUCATION SHOULD CHIEFLY TRAIN"

Sumner argued that the foremost responsibility of educators was to help students acquire the critical ability, "mental discipline," and emotional independence necessary for them to form rational judgments about the values, "codes," and social arrangements which governed their lives. Without this critical ability, both individual and social life would deteriorate: "free and rational criticism of traditional mores is essential to societal welfare." This is why Sumner insisted that "The power of criticism is the one which education should chiefly train." He asserted that "the critical faculty" is not innate and that it does not develop automatically. It is, Sumner emphasized, "a mental

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[34] Forgotten Man, "Discipline," p. 435.

[35] "Mores and Progress," c. 1900, p. 64.

habit and power" which is "a product of education and training."[36] Since education was a collective enterprise, the individual traits that enabled the critical habit to flourish were a social product and the causal agency was society itself.

For Sumner, learning should be a critical enterprise which enables students to examine the relationships between seemingly discrete facts, ideas and the larger, ever-changing whole of which they are parts. He insisted that the investigation of the problematic aspects of social life should be the core of education, rather than the artificially bounded curriculum created and sanctioned by academia. As Sumner put it, "what is wanted is a history of the mores."[37]

THE FOCUS OF MODERN EDUCATION

Critical education requires a focus on history, especially the conditions under which peoples have accepted and resisted the social imperatives by which their lives were constrained and distorted. Such a history would show that error and force rule in the present as they have in the past. Sumner thus suggested that

> It is one of the chief useful purposes of a study of the mores to learn to discern in them the operation of traditional error, prevailing dogmas, logical fallacy, delusion, and current false estimates of goods worth striving for."[38]

The distinguishing characteristic of this critical "habit" was that it questioned and tested all ideas, no matter how sacred or valued; it relentlessly pursued what Sumner referred to as "notions" until their "connection with reality" was uncovered. The greatest achievement of this "habit" has been to separate truth from falsity and

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[36] Folkways, pp. 24, 633, 95, 24.

[37] Ibid., p. 638.

[38] Folkways, pp. 64-65, 33.

thereby improve the prospects for natural and social development. The commitment to understanding an ever-changing world was built upon and encouraged the "thirst for reality." Without it's further development, humanity could not flourish and might not even survive.[39]

Sumner realized that the modern temper congratulated itself for accepting only reasonable beliefs and practices: an unthinking compliance with traditions was supposedly limited to the past. He argued that the assumption that citizens of modern society "criticize all traditions" was typically violated in practice: "if we take up cases of things which are still entirely or almost entirely in the mores, we shall see that it is not so."[40] As Sumner put it in a speech on "The Scientific Attitude of Mind" in 1905,

> I have no doubt that, in your lifetime, you will see questions arise out of popular notions and faiths, which will call for critical thinking such as has never been required before, especially as to social relations, political institutions, and economic interests.[41]

All societies have pursued enticing but harmful "ideals." This, Sumner observed, is why the study of history, past and present, presents such a stark "picture of the devastation and waste of human energy and of the wreck of human hopes." The only means of "salvation for the human race from woe and misery," was found in "knowledge and in training to use knowledge."[42] He stressed that this knowledge should be possessed by everyone, not monopolized by a select few.

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[39] Earth Hunger, "Purposes and Consequences," 1900-1906, p. 72.

[40] Ibid., p. 76.

[41] Earth Hunger, "Scientific Attitude of Mind," 1905, p. 24.

[42] Sumner, "Purposes and Consequences," p. 72.

Regardless of the subject, the critical habit should be taught. Any teacher who insists upon "accuracy and a rational control of all processes and methods, and who holds everything open to unlimited verification and revision is cultivating that method as a habit in the pupils." Like Dewey, Sumner argued that this method should pervade all educational activities. For Sumner, "good learners" were those who possessed the ability and the confidence to uncover the secrets concealed beneath the appearances generated by social life, for knowledge of social life "does not lie on the surface." Such students must be prepared to tolerate the ambiguous and apparently contradictory aspects of life; they must be taught to expect and accept that both the social world and our knowledge about it is in flux, that many of our assumptions and most of our treasured beliefs will soon become outmoded, and finally, that this impermanence is not something to be denied or resolved but is a condition of progress. Sumner therefore concluded that as important as the ability to verify and revise was, without the psychological strength to tolerate change and uncertainty, the critical potential could never be realized. Sumner invited schools to encourage and reward students who were able to "hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain" and thereby "wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other."[43]

The critical spirit had yet another obstacle to overcome: people tend to conform to the beliefs and practices of the groups they belong to because of the enormous pressure to adopt them. As Sumner put it, it is "the power of the crowd over the individual which is constant."[44]

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[43] Folkways, p. 633.

[44] Ibid., p. 220.

TEACHING RESISTANCE TO SOCIAL PRESSURE

Sumner argued that education needs to encourage a tolerance for deviant thought.[45] Schooling should nourish the determination and capacity of students to resist demands for conformity. "A good education," Sumner declared, would

> teach its pupils to resist the magnetism of a crowd and the seduction of popularity. ... Education ought to train us so that when we are in a crowd which is being swept away by a motive, we should refuse to join, and should instead go away to think over the probable consequences. In like manner, popularity, which seems now to be the grand standard of action, is always to be distrusted. ...It is very smooth and easy to run with the current and it involves no responsibility for the consequences. Who then will consider the consequences? They will come. All our study, science, and education are turned to scorn and ridicule if popularity is a proper and adequate motive of action.[46]

Sumner seems to rely on a distinction between the crowd and more sober social formations in order to define the conditions under which discipline and openness are possible. Education shares with the crowd a certain resistance to received constraints. But it operates as an institutional feature of daily life which respects the need to negotiate the relation of criticism to tradition.

Sumner believed it was imperative that education instill and reinforce a sense of "honor" sufficient to counter the lure of "popularity." "Honor" is the most fundamental moral condition of "disciplined" criticism, and it is a trait that only a critical education can provide. Honor provides the principle and not an unchanging universal standard because "in every environment there is a standard of honor."[47] People should be taught how to discover that standard in any endeavor.

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[45] Ibid., p. 24.

[46] Earth Hunger, "Purposes and Consequences," pp. 72-73.

[47] Folkways, p. 463.

> Honor is a tribunal within one's self whose code is simply the best truth one knows. There are no advocates, no witnesses, and no technicalities. To feel one's self condemned by that tribunal is to feel at discord with one's self and to sustain a wound which rankles longer and stings more deeply than any wound in the body. It is the highest achievement of educational discipline to produce this sense of honor in minds of young men [sic.], which gives them a guide in the midst of temptation and at a time when all codes and standards seem to be matter of opinion.[48]

Sumner argued that the distinguishing characteristic of an effective system of education is that it rewards individual responsibility. He ridiculed the prevailing attempt to cultivate character by exposing students to the traditional textbooks or lectures on "moral science." This, he scornfully observed, was destined for failure:

> The education which forms character and produces faith in sound principles is ... borne on the mores. It is taken in from the habits and atmosphere of a school, not from the school text-books.[49]

Sumner emphasized the profound limitations of "book learning" in regard to feelings: "book learning is addressed to the intellect, not to the feelings, but the feelings are the springs of action." He expanded upon this in terms of three propositions: learning is never simply the acquisition of knowledge; teachers never directly deposit knowledge into students; and a student does not enter the classroom as a "tabula rasa." Rather than being empty vessels, students have already been exposed to specific ways of life and have become committed to certain views of life. Education inevitably intervenes in lives already in process.[50]

Sumner argued that new information alone cannot transform students. It has to be integrated into the classroom experience in a way that allows students to internalize the relationship between an open-minded adherence to traditional discipline and a

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[48] Forgotten Man, "Discipline," p. 437.

[49] Folkways, p. 629.

[50] Ibid.

willingness to criticize it. The lecture form subverts this relationship in favor of a too rapid and impersonal imposition of content. An effective and critical "education takes time." If students are to understand and to develop a sense of responsibility for the process as well as the result, they must have repeated opportunities to experience real responsibility and to "feel" what it means to be responsible so that the cumulative impact of this experience can be assimilated. It is only when the critical habit is integrated into the class routines and practices that students will eventually acquire it as their own. This is true as well for the teaching of "citizen education."[51]

Most educators of Sumner's era believed that schooling should promote obedience, conformity, and adjustment. For example, Edward Ross, a sociologist who played a leading role in the progressive movement, noted that schooling enhanced "social control" to the benefit of society because it provided an invisible and "inexpensive form of police." Similarly, in 1891, the Commissioner of Education of Massachusetts, William Torrey Harris, "frankly admitted that a major purpose of schools was to teach respect for authority;" he said that "forming the 'habits of punctuality, silence, and industry' was more important than understanding reasons for good behavior."[52] Sumner's position was diametrically opposed to the idea that a repressive social control was the primary function of schools.

For Sumner, the goal of citizen education should not be to fit students into the body politic. Rather, education should help them cultivate the will, intelligence, and emotional resources necessary to transcend and transform the social world which distorts their thought and diminishes their lives. Good citizens must be able to criticize the shortcomings of politicians and policies; they must possess the wit and

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[51] Ibid., pp. 638, 51.

[52] Elizabeth Valence, "Hiding the Hidden Curriculum," Curriculum Theory Network 4 (December, 1985): 142.

determination to resist the pressures to adhere to a party line or a popular belief. Therefore, schools must help people to develop the "moral courage" necessary for the practice of criticism. This is a different conception of citizenship than is often attributed to Sumner. I have suggested that his rejection of the social control model of education is part of an understanding of at least one democratic feature of social life that can contribute to making the changes modern society needs to free itself from a system of mores that is not self-critical.

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF RATIONAL REFORM

One of Sumner's foremost concerns in Folkways was to identify the possibilities and limits of rational reform in modern society. He emphasized that the conditions of such reform may be difficult to find. The limits are theoretical or logical while the conditions are historical and empirical. Sumner distinguished between several different types of reforms. One uses social policy to arbitrarily change social life in accordance with certain "ideals" that have no connection with the prevailing life conditions or mores. Another consists of efforts to avert or eliminate "bad mores." Yet another involves those attempts to support the emergent "tendencies" which the mores contain but have not yet consolidated.

Sumner's reputation as a dogmatic opponent of reform is based upon his opposition to reform as an a priori abstraction. Sumner challenged that type of reform which was shaped by what he considered to be an idealistic conception of what a good or just society should be. He suggested these reformers misunderstood the nature of social life and social change, that they "absurdly" tried to re-make the social world regardless of the degree to which social development made their proposed reforms possible. He repeatedly pointed out the dangers inherent in the efforts of those

reformers who wished "to subject society to another set of arbitrary interferences, dictated by a new set of dogmatic prepossessions that would only be a continuation of old methods and errors."

But, it is important to note that Sumner did not suggest that all reform efforts possessed these defects: "the case is somewhat different when attempts are made by positive efforts to prevent the operation of bad mores, or to abolish them." Sumner was convinced that "bad mores" existed and that social policy could and should eliminate them. He argued that "it is possible to arrest or avert such an aberration in the mores at its beginning or in its early stages" and that, despite the difficulties inherent in such an enterprise, well-conceived efforts should be encouraged.[53]

Sumner's discussion of "the art of societal administration" emphasized that "it is not to be inferred that reform and correction are hopeless." For reforms to be successful they must meet several pre-conditions. First, they must be based upon an understanding of the mores. Second, they must respect that this endeavor is possible only if the mores "are ready for it." A comprehensive understanding of the "forces" in and "tendencies" of the mores was therefore a prerequisite for productive reform:

> The statesman and social philosopher can act with such influences, sum up the forces which make them, and greatly help the result. The inference is that intelligent art can be introduced here as elsewhere, but that it is necessary to understand the mores and to be able to discern the elements in them, just as it is always necessary for good art to understand the facts of nature with which it will have to deal. It belongs to the work of publicists and statesmen to gauge the forces in the mores and to perceive their tendencies. The great men of a great epoch are those who have understood new currents in the mores. The great reformers of the sixteenth century, the great leaders of modern revolutions, were, as we can easily see, produced out of a protest or revulsion which had long been forming under and within the existing system.[54]

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[53] Ibid., pp. 98-99, 102.

[54] Ibid., pp. 117-18.

Sumner believed that the existence of "old mores" (which no longer correspond to changed life conditions) or "bad mores" (which never have corresponded) creates the need and opportunity for efficacious reform to occur. Changed life conditions create new possibilities which existing mores constrain. Transformed life conditions and the emergent "tendencies" developing within the existing system nourishes a new sensibility which social policy can draw on and strengthen. Leadership and legislation are effective when they "voice the conviction which have become established and because they propose measures which will realize interests of which the society has become conscious."[55]

Sumner argued that although the folkways and the mores grow as if by the play of "internal life energy," these seemingly natural products can be modified by the purposeful efforts of groups. However, the degree of change is necessarily limited. [[iv]] Even though social development has the appearance of what Sumner referred to as a "nature process," human "will" and action are an aspect of this process and can influence it within limits:

> The evolution, although it has the character of a nature process, always must issue by and through men whose passions, follies, and will are a part of it but are also always dominated by it. The interaction defies our analysis, but it does not discourage our reason and conscience from their play on the situation, if we are content to know that their function must be humble.[56]

Sumner's evolutionary perspective sensitized him to two related points. First, both the natural and social environments were in constant flux. Second, the inevitability of change meant that the choices humans made had a decisive impact on social developments. "Society cannot stand still, and its movement will run the course set by the forces which produce it. It must be accepted and profit must be drawn from

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[55] Ibid., p. 118.

[56] Ibid., pp. iv, 118.

it, as best possible." He insisted that people and their efforts to live well were an integral part of these "forces." This, of course, is not to say that human agency freely or entirely created the human saga. The mores, Sumner said, inevitably "surround life with limits within which we may and beyond which we may not pursue our interests."[57] But, how do these mores arise and change? Sumner repeatedly emphasized that it is human activity which both produces and transforms the mores, though human action is limited by the historical conditions within which it occurs. Objective conditions surround and circumscribe what can be done. As he had earlier observed, "it sets the limits of our social activity."

Sumner realized that although the social world was ultimately derived from the actions of (groups of) individuals, it inevitably possessed a form and a momentum which was uniquely its own. In this sense, society was made by individuals and made them as well. The relationship between social structures and group activities was not mechanistic but dialectical: "the group is at once makers and made." Therefore, although no one individual can make or modify the mores, social groupings can, but within limits set by the mores themselves.[58]

Sumner emphasized that the distinctiveness of modern society lies in the fact that its social development generated (1) "enacted institutions," (2) a "societal administration," (3) a "science of society" to guide it, and (4) an educational system that can promote "the critical habit of thought, [which] if usual in a society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life."[59] Sumner, however, did not suggest that modern society would ever become free of the mores and the limits they imposed. Rather, he argued that a progressive society was

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[57] Ibid., pp. 164, 521.

[58] Ibid., p. 477.

[59] Ibid., pp. 118, 633.

conscious of the limits on present activities and respected that change could only occur under certain conditions.

> The enterprise is possible only if the mores are ready for it. The conditions of success lie in the mores. The methods must conform to the mores.[60]

Like other classical sociologists, he wanted sociology, the "science of society," to provide the standards by which the conscious application of reason to legislative reform regulated the modern social order. Though he argued that the limits upon this endeavor were far greater than most sociologists would accept, Sumner believed that when policy was informed by "the science of society," the "art of societal administration" provided one of the foremost means by which modern society could enhance its development: "it would be a mighty achievement of the science of society if it could lead up to an art of societal administration which should be intelligent, effective, and scientific." He argued that the development of the still nascent "science of society" was necessary if "the art of societal administration" was to improve social life and more effectively promote social change. Intentional change was not readily created in modern society, but it could be, and far more than present accomplishments suggested.

CONCLUSION

Folkways is an important book, not because it studied primitive societies, but because it elaborated a normative theory of social structure which embodied one of the first major instances of an authentically sociological analysis. This chapter has focused on Sumner's discussion of the vast power of the mores and the equally compelling

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[60] Ibid., p. 113.

evidence for agency and change. I have suggested that the relative autonomy of the mores provided the key to Sumner's theory of change. His conceptualization of the mores and the moral order enabled Sumner to build in the possibility of an immanent force of change.

Sumner was not the only sociologist to make a distinction between "unconscious" and "formulated" social phenomena; Lester Ward's analysis of the "genetic" and the "telic" for example, made a similar point. But Sumner's analysis was powerful in ways that others were not: he provided concepts that can be used to draw upon the American experience to understand modernity's distinctiveness. Folkways underscored the tension between the latency of the modern moral order and the rationally enacted institutions (like education) that challenged the dominion of the mores. The modern society is unique in that the operation of science, education, and law confronts people with a discrepancy between the apparent finality of the mores and the recognition that the mores are human creations which can be questioned, opposed, and changed. Folkways suggested that the "enacted institutions," "positive law," and "educated skepticism" of modern society presented historical openings which were not realized. It is important to note that Sumner emphasized that intentional change was difficult to achieve, but that it was possible to do so within historically circumscribed limits.

Like many twentieth century theorists, Sumner argued that rationality, organized change, and critical thinking are never free from the counter-forces which promote irrationality. Sumner therefore argued that people's thoughts and conduct thoughts and behaviors will almost always have a non-rational component derived from the prescriptions and proscriptions of the moral order and not strictly speaking from the life conditions themselves. It is difficult, he said, nearly impossible in fact, for people to free themselves from the influence of the mores and get an "outside standpoint" and

an "attitude of neutral independence."[61] This is not only true for individuals but for society as a whole. And modern society, he said, despite its commitment to technical rationality, was not free of these problems: "error" and "force" were an integral part of the mores and social life itself. Sumner's emphasis upon the possibilities that a "scientific world view," the "art of societal administration" and modern education contained reflects his search for some modernistic agency to keep alive the possibility of criticism and change in the midst of the crisis of modernity.

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[61] Ibid., pp. 97-98.

SUMNER'S MATURE ANALYSIS OF THE MODERN CRISIS

The problems Sumner identified and the solutions he proposed in the first decade of this century suggest that his reputation as an opponent of Progressive social reform is mistaken. Like most Progressives, he criticized concentrations of wealth, condemned corruptions of political power, and wanted to use the instrumentalities of science, education, and law to support reform and regulate social change. There are, however, important differences separating Sumner from the Progressive Movement, most notably his belief that power operated at the center of social life and that corruption now shaped modern society. He argued that "mammoth" concentrations of wealth provide the resources and permissive laws supply the opportunities for a "small, controlling oligarchy" to establish an undemocratic "form of organization" in all social realms. The "social power" possessed by owners of "mammoth accumulations of property" consolidates their economic and political dominance; it also shapes the mores and through them, all institutionalized practices. Despite his reputation as an apologist for the power and privileges of the capitalist class, Sumner insisted that "existence at the terms of their indulgence is not the full measure of social freedom."[1]

Sumner used terms such as "corrupt" and "degraded" to describe both the social processes shaping modern mores and the mores themselves. Current economic and political arrangements, he said, establish the opportunity and incentive for the abuse of power. A distinctively modern "ferment" leads all groups, regardless of class standing, to desire wealth and success. Newly established mores produce a "cult of success." The mores include prevailing practices, "the ways of doing things," and also the "faiths,

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[1] Sumner's unpublished article on the"Concentration of Wealth," 1909, is presented in Bruce Curtis, "William Graham Sumner 'On the Concentration of Wealth,'" Journal of American History 55 (March, 1969), p. 828.

notions, codes, and standards of well living which inhere in those ways."[2] Sumner argued that the ascendancy of "commercialism" generates an ethos whose "faiths" establish a new sense of the sacred: to pursue wealth and status without pause; to do so without question, in the manner of a sacrament; and to pay as little heed to any legal prohibition or moral precept which might interfere with the pursuit of wealth in this sacralized manner.

Sumner's mature analysis of the economy, the political realm, and the modern mores that give rise to a distinctively modern culture is more critical and far more sociological than that which informed the Progressive Movement. Indeed, I have suggested that his analysis of how economic consolidation and the corruption of political processes distorts all realms of society has no equal among proponents of the "liberal tradition." Sumner not only points out the depth of the modern crisis, but the difficulty of overcoming it. In this regard, he emphasized that the vast legal, scientific, and educational resources that support the progressive development of the modern moral order cannot guarantee effective and sustainable policies of reform: interests control all realms of social life, even the agencies that are supposed to secure conditions of reform, and these interests use their "social power" to preserve the conditions that policies of reform hope to eliminate.

CONFRONTING MODERNITY ON ITS OWN TERMS

Sumner's early efforts to analyze modern society were inspired by classical political economy, but his mature concept of social structure was not. Proponents of political economy assumed that even a fully developed market economy would be, to use Polanyi's apt phrase, "embedded" in a legal and moral framework that channels the

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[2] Folkways, p. 59.

operation of the market and the behaviors of individuals. Sumner did not assume the existence of this framework.

Sumner confronted modern society on its own terms. He argued that each "societal state" (what we call social formation) gives rise to distinct legal institutions, folkways, and mores.[3] Sumner concluded that the highly valued ideals provided by classical culture and religion could not survive in a modern social environment. As "ideal good" lost importance and "material good" controlled, "the tests of value" in modern society become "more and more frankly commercial" and eventually "spread everywhere, in spite of all protests and denials."[4] Modern society thus creates "the dominion of materialistic standards and ideals" and "commercialism." Folkways suggests that modern culture degrades individual and social life.

MODERN MORES: THE STRUGGLE FOR COMFORT AND LUXURY

Sumner's mature work assumed that modern society's awesome productivity eliminates the struggle for sheer survival: "in modern times, the struggle for comfort has taken the place of the struggle for existence, and then ... the struggle for luxury has taken the place of the struggle for comfort."[5] Though modern "life-conditions" provide opportunities to obtain vast wealth, it is the particular cast of modern mores that drives people to obsessively want more wealth. Therefore, Sumner argued, this dynamic is as much a product of culture as technology.

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[3] War, "Mores of the Present and the Future," 1909, p. 155.

[4] Ibid., p. 158.

[5] Sumner, "The Application of the Notions of Evolution and Progress on the Superorganic Domain," 1905, p. 57.

Sumner emphasized that modern mores are shaped by the life conditions they refer to.

> The effect of the creation of an immense stock of movable capital, of the opportunities in commerce and industry offered to men of talent, of the immense aid of science to industry, of the opening of new continents ... has been to produce modern mores. All our popular faiths, hopes, enjoyments, and powers are due to these great changes in the conditions of life.[6]

The transformation of the mores by these new "conditions of life" not only establishes "new ideas, standards, codes, philosophies, and religions," but a novel social "ferment."[7]

All societies need to have what Sumner called a "ferment" in them. In some societies, war provides this ferment; in others, religion. In modern society, it is the pursuit of wealth and success. As Sumner put it, "in the modern world the ferment is furnished by economic opportunity and the hope of luxury."[8]

Combining this modern "ferment" with tremendous technological and organizational produces an unprecedented "increase of luxury in the ways of living." "This," Sumner wryly observed, "has seemed to be a good." That is to say, "it has seemed like the successful accomplishment of what man must do to win and enjoy power over nature." However, what appears to be the successful fulfillment of the American Dream produced an unexpected result: the spread of "luxury has brought vice and ill, and has wrought decay and ruin."[9] Sumner's discussion of the social consequences of luxury and "commercialism" drew on his analysis of folkways, mores, and concentrations of economic, political, and "social power." Therefore, though he argued that luxury

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[6] Folkways, p. 163.

[7] Ibid.

[8] War, "War," 1903, p. 33.

[9] Folkways, p. 609.

produced "vice," "decay," and "ruin," he rooted these apparent moralizations in an analysis of modern mores that operated at the level of totality.

THE STANDARD OF LIVING: "A FOOLISH AND CONTEMPTIBLE OSTENTATION"

Sumner believed that the "standard of living" was the "purest" of all the mores in modern society. He defined the standard of living as the "measure of decency and suitability in material comfort (diet, dress, dwelling, etc.) which is traditional and habitual in a sub-group."[10] These two terms, "decency and suitability," are crucial to Sumner's understanding of the standard of living and his analysis of modern mores. These standards are shaped by culturally specific status symbols and therefore have little to do with physical needs and even less to do with sheer physical survival.

Sumner recognized that the "standard of living" has social roots, but warned individuals not to cultivate this social standard of comfort because it demands "foolish expense and contemptible ostentation." This, Sumner said, is far easier to say than do. The standards and codes of respect supported by the "class mores" also "get inside of the minds and hearts of members of the class."[11] This dynamic ensures that virtually everyone succumbs to "class demands" to accumulate more wealth. Just as moths are drawn to a bright flame, virtually all modern individuals yearn for more wealth. The problem cannot be mechanistically reduced to an increase in luxury: infinite desire is the product of modern culture. In fact, this apparently insatiable quest for more and more goods is the social expression of an inherently modern nightmare: the debilitating fear of loss, not so much of material goods, but of social status.

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[10] Ibid., p. 171.

[11] Ibid.

This insight, of course, is not Sumner's alone. As Sheldon Wolin has revealed, liberal social theorists (such as John Locke and Adam Smith) long ago recognized that it is not economic loss or suffering alone which fuels this anxiety. Rather, it is the precipitous decline in social status which afflicts those who fail to accumulate further. The modern individual, Wolin noted, is "not so much obsessed by the quest for gain as frightened by the ever-present prospect of loss." In this sense, Wolin added, "it was not economic loss in a pure sense which created apprehension, but rather the decline in social status attendant upon economic loss."[12] Sumner concurred.

Sumner recognized that the possession of wealth provides a passport to the comforts of life and a buffer against unforeseen contingencies. But, he argued, though the drive for material security is compelling, it is not the most important part of the quest for wealth. Something else is at stake; something even more difficult to assuage: the social need for "respectability." The reason that "class standards" are so difficult to ignore is that they are upheld by the fear of social disapproval if one deviates from what is considered to be "class respectability."[13] This fear, he observed, is so pervasive and powerful that it spins a web from which few can escape. All but the most exceptional individuals desperately wish to obtain the approval and avoid the opprobrium of their peers.

The source of this problem is not rooted in individual psychology, but in the mores themselves.

> Discontent, anxiety, care for appearances, desire to impose by display, envy, and mean social ambition characterize the mores, together with energy and enterprise.

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[12] Sheldon Wolin, Politics and Vision (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1960), pp. 328-329.

[13] Folkways, p. 171.

> Envy and discontent are amongst the very strongest traits of modern society. Very often they are only manifestations of irritated vanity.[14]

Sumner's understanding that social structures support certain types of conduct enabled him to analyze seemingly moralistic issues such as "envy" and "irritated vanity" as characteristics of modern mores. He believed that modern mores penetrate the core of modern society, producing "class standards" and "class demands" that shape the character of groups and the quality of social life.

MODERNITY'S ANTAGONISTIC VALUE ORIENTATIONS

Sumner analyzed seemingly individual traits as consequences of modern social processes. This allowed him to address a distinctively modern problem -- namely, the antagonism between a "virtue" or an "ethical policy" and a "success policy."

> The traditional doctrines of philosophy and ethics are not by any means adjusted smoothly to each other or to modern notions. We live in a war of two antagonistic ethical philosophies: the ethical policy taught in the books and the schools, and the success policy. The same man acts at one time by the school ethics, disregarding consequences, at another time by the success policy, in which the consequences dictate the conduct; or we talk the former and act by the latter.[15]

Even though the "strain for consistency" pushes different mores to adjust to one another, modern society contains "antagonistic" philosophies that produce conflicting value orientations and behaviors. Despite their idealistic and ethical overtones, religion and philosophy have to "compromise with [social] facts." Since mores emerge from complex and often divergent social processes, the "compromises" are frequently

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[14] Ibid., p. 165.

[15] Ibid., p. 33.

"imperfect and only partly effected." Thus, there have been and still are "contradictions in the mores."[16]

Folkways examined the source and consequences of the antagonistic value orientations that co-exist in modern society. The principles of the"ethical policy" produced by traditional moral codes that emerged long before the modern epoch still speak to the modern sensibility: "ethical principles have been determined which no civilized man would now repudiate (truthfulness, love, honor, altruism). However, new "philosophies" and codes that promote "interest" and justify "expediency" have recently emerged. These new philosophies and the conduct they support "war" with the orientations and practices associated with the "ethical" philosophy's more traditionally based orientations and practices. Though the "war" between the "ethical" and the "success policy" is intrinsic to modernity, the "success policy" has won a commanding position in all social realms. In fact, the spread of the "cult of success" creates a "disease of the mores" that "penetrates and spoils every institution" and thus "affects everyone."[17]

Sumner situated the "disease of the mores" within his broader analysis of the modern political economy, thus linking the corruption of modern mores to the social processes and policies established by "mammoth" concentrations of economic and political power. Therefore, Sumner's theoretical writings and his more topical concerns and Progressive-oriented desire to shape policy are intimately related and ultimately inseparable.

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[16] Ibid., 161.

[17] Ibid., pp. 33, 171.

THE "CONCENTRATION OF WEALTH" AND THE MODERN POLITICAL ECONOMY

Sumner's late writings assumed two key socio-economic developments: that "movable capital has been made mobile by the joint-stock device" and that "modern financiers, masters of industry, merchants, and transporters" have replaced "the social power of landed property" as the new holders of political and "social power" in modern society.[18] Enormous accumulations of corporate wealth provide corporations with a degree of power previously limited to monarchs and autocrats:

> Already huge accumulations of property by corporate consolidations, accumulations such as the world has never before seen, are subject to a single control. A single corporation determines the destinies of more human beings than the King of Denmark or the Queen of Holland.[19]

Sumner concluded that laws which allow a few to control "huge accumulations of property" support market conditions that thwart efforts of individuals to determine their "destinies" in the market. The operation of the market establishes an arbitrary and oppressive "social power" that undermines the former unity of "private right and distributive justice" it was once said to support. His assumption that "the purpose of democratic government" is to sustain policies that "secure equal opportunities to each of its citizens" remained the same. But Sumner now believed that the enormous "accumulations of property by corporate consolidations" produces "a new form of organization ... which is not democratic in its purpose," operation, or results. Corporations remain private, but their inordinate economic, civil, and political power establishes them as the leading and most problematic "central authority."

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[18] Folkways, p. 162.

[19] Sumner 'On the Concentration of Wealth," p. 828.

> The "cost of living," instead of being an expression of the needs and resources of society adjusting themselves through multitudinous transactions in a resultant, is fixed by central authorities; they limit the output and control the prices of crackers, hams, sugar, salt, kerosene, chewing gum, matches, glue, soil and sewer pipe, radiators, sewing machines, etc. Competition with them offers little hope of success; existence at the terms of their indulgence is not the full measure of social freedom.[20]

The emergence of huge concentrations of corporate holdings provides a few "centralized authorities" with the power to arbitrarily impose their will on a suffering majority. For Sumner, competitive markets provide the best social mechanism for coordinating the use of natural resources and human energies. However, the outcome of markets that are monopolistic are not beneficial. Therefore, Sumner opposed monopoly but not private property. Like most Progressives, he supported reforms that accepted private property and corporations as "a fundamental element of modern civilization." Sumner's belief that aggregations of power should not be exempt from challenge or reform assumes social development creates the need and opportunity for efficacious reform. Towards the end of his life, he called for state intervention to restore the competitive economic conditions he believed best promotes societal interests. His fundamental assumptions remained the same, but he concluded that their application to changed conditions required different policies. After all, "what we are accustomed to call 'competition' is the rivalry of equals: the rivalry of unequals is destruction."[21] Sumner proposed reforms that would abolish the conditions that sustain this "destruction.

Monopolistic conditions, Sumner said, not only impose economic suffering upon small businesses and consumers, they also have political and social ramifications. Since economic power has "political convertibility," control of untold accumulations of wealth

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[20] Ibid., pp. 830-31.

[21] Ibid.

establishes "latent, ramified, and enduring political power," thus enabling a "small controlling oligarchy" to dictate policy: "it is either a branch of government or it is the government itself." Sumner's description of this development is reminiscent of Marx and Engel's discussion in the Communist Manifesto:

> A state of affairs, for example, in which the state keeps the peace, controls the army and navy and guarantees the right of property, while the means of subsistence are controlled by the representatives of a few monopolies, is but a brief stage in a rapid progression. While this situation lasts, if the right of property be not invaded the powers are in fact the small controlling oligarchy, a House of Lords for whose protection government plays policeman. The Nation may in form control the army and navy, but only by permission of the standing committees of the upper house on steel, powder, petroleum and other supplies.[22]

THE CORRUPTION OF STATE POWER

The state has been an "organization of force" from its inception and, Sumner said, despite the modern state's progressive aspects, its operation has not differed in this regard. The history of all modern states in 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.[23]

This "corruption of state power" destroys democracy and the institutional framework that sustains it. As Sumner bluntly put it in an article on "Economics and Politics,"

> We may already see the corruption coming. We are, in fact, already governed by individuals and oligarchies; in every state of the Union the half-dozen men can be named who decide what may be done and what may not be done. The same is

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[22] Ibid., p. 831.

[23] Folkways, pp. 169-170.

true in Washington.... We have no democracy now; all the institutions are broken down; they are turned into oligarchies.[24]

THE "PECUNIARY EFFECT" ON EDUCATION

Sumner argued that education is trapped in a web which powerful groups weave around the economic and political realm. Sumner noted that virtually all subjects taught in school have either direct or indirect economic implications: in one way or another, they have a "pecuniary effect." This being the case, the content of education always has the potential to threaten "to come into conflict with interest." Powerful interest groups use their considerable influence to avert such an eventuality. The net result is that schools are typically organized so that "our children shall be taught just one thing which is 'right' in the view and interest of those who are in control, and nothing else." Sumner maintained that school boards and trustees played a leading role in this development. School boards are dominated by wealthy individuals and party politicians who possess the desire and the power to determine the curriculum and the methods by which it is taught. Insofar as content was concerned, school boards enforce a narrow-minded "orthodoxy" on all subjects (most notably history, political science, political economy, and sociology). As to the method, "the orthodox answers" required by the school boards and trustees contain a hidden lesson: "they teach that there are absolute and universal facts of knowledge, whereas we ought to teach that all our knowledge is subject to unlimited verification and revision."[25]

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[24] Earth Hunger, "Economics and Politics," 1905, p. 329.

[25] Folkways, p. 632.

THE "CULT OF SUCCESS"

Sumner's 1909 article "On the Concentration of Wealth" suggests that the consolidation of economic and political power imposes a dependency of the many on the few. Sumner's concern went beyond the related problems of "control," "political corruption," and "democracy." Abuse of state power, he said, corrupts the social processes that reproduce modern society:

> the corrupt use of legislation and political power has affected the mores. Every one must have his little sphere of plunder and especial advantage. This conviction and taste becomes so current that it affects all new legislation. The legislators do not doubt that it is reasonable and right to enact laws which provide favor for special interests, or to practice legislative strikes on insurance companies, railroads, telephone companies, etc. They laugh at remonstrance as out of date and "unpractical." The administrators of life-insurance companies, savings banks, trusts, etc., proceed on the belief that men in positions of power and control will use their positions for their own advantage. They think that it is only common sense. "What else are we here for?"[26]

The resulting normative orientation assumes that all "positions of power and control" provide resources for personal advantage and lends itself to the formation of a distinctively modern "cult of success."

Since the "corrupt use of legislation and political power" affects the mores, it shapes the social processes and experience of modernity and influences everyone. Sumner opposed the ever increasing importance of the "code of commercialism -- that all will act from gain ... when the occasion arises." Unfortunately, the "occasion" to do so has multiplied exponentially and standards justifying these behaviors have grown as much, if not more. Combining the rising "thirst for luxury" and the popular conviction that it is everyone's right leads the mores to support "the temptation of

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[26] Ibid., p. 170.

dishonest gain." As a feature of the mores, dishonest conduct is accepted as a routine practice that everyone engages in as much as they can.[27]

The emphasis of modern mores on acquiring success, money, and social status produces a "cult of success." Though he referred to this social development as an "experiment," Sumner left no doubts about its outcome:

> This deep depravation of all social interests by the elevation of success to a motive which justified itself has the character of an experiment. Amongst ourselves now, in politics, finance, and industry, we see the man-who-can-do-things elevated to a social hero whose success overrides all other considerations. Where that code is adopted, it calls for arbitrary definitions, false conventions, and untruthful character.[28]

Sumner's analysis of the social consequences of the "cult of success" was similar to Durkheim's indictment of the injurious ramifications of "the unleashing of economic interests." Like Sumner, Durkheim argued that "interest has come to be the god of mankind, and this god has demanded all the virtues as a sacrifice."[29] Similarly, though Sumner rejected the value of most of Marx's Capital, he did not apparently disagree with Marx's insistence that, at least for the capitalist class, "accumulation" was the new religion -- or, in Marx's memorable phrase, "the Moses and the prophets." Although Sumner might have expanded this statement to include non-capitalist classes as well, he would not have challenged it. Despite the considerable differences which separate these theorists, they all agree that success was the foremost religion of modernity and that modernity's ungoverned acquisitiveness did not promote the social welfare ofsociety.

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[27] Earth Hunger, "Democracy and Plutocracy," 1889, p. 293.

[28] Folkways, p. 652.

[29] Durkheim quoted in Wolin, Politics and Vision, p. 404.

Sumner believed that the problem of corruption is not readily eliminated because it resides in the mores shaping the core of modern society. "We hear of plutocracy and tainted money, of the power of wealth, and the wickedness of corporations," but the "disease is less specific. It is constitutional." Indeed, the "disease" infecting the mores has three extremely far-reaching dimensions. First, it is a disease of public opinion which produces injurious and markedly unhealthy "standards, codes, ideas of truth and right, and of things worth fighting for and means of success." Second, the disease is pandemic and thus "affects everybody." Lastly, it is not just limited to ideas but includes social practices and institutions. And since "it penetrates and spoils every institution," this "disease" affects all features of individual and social life.[30]

Sumner's use of the term "disease" suggests that a "virus" has spread throughout the modern system and that the spread of this "virus" depends on the vulnerability of the mores to that growth. In this regard, Sumner drew on his earlier analysis of the social mechanisms that support a "sensationalist culture" to demonstrate the corruptible features of modernity. But, Sumner refused to treat this as inevitable. Though vast concentrations of power are corrupting modern social processes and making efficacious policies of reform difficult to implement, Sumner still spoke of this social development as a "tendency" that could be modified.

CONCLUSION

Sumner's 1909 article "On the Concentration of Wealth" establishes that his condemnation of vast accumulations of wealth, corporate power, and corruption of modern political life corresponded to the Progressive current he reputedly opposed. Despite the similarity of concerns, Sumner's analysis represents one of the more

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[30] Folkways, p.171.

radical, non-Marxist critiques of emergent corporate capitalism in regard to two key issues: the vulnerability of modern mores to the corrupting social processes supported by concentrations of economic and political power and the ability of powerful interests to dominate modern social conditions as well as the socializing and administrative agencies that attempt to reform them. On the one hand, he analyzed the ramifications for all social realms of concentrations of wealth and political power, and on the other hand, he showed that the modern moral order no longer corresponded to the material conditions they originally referred to. It is the critical pessimism of his analysis, not the degree of Sumner's progressive liberalism, that distinguishes Sumner from the Progressive Movement and makes him one of the major social critics of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

The fulfillment of Sumner's thought in the last decade of his life reveals how an essentially liberal perspective can support a critical examination of modern industrial society. Despite Sumner's reputation as a critic of progressive liberalism, his work embodies the critical thrust inherent in liberalism and gave it richer voice than most of his contemporaries. His assumption that the constancy of change requires the continuous modification of social structures emerged from a view of science, education, law, and democracy that was compatible with progressive liberalism. Science should teach that "all our knowledge is subject to unlimited verification and revision." Educators should introduce "processes and methods" enabling schools "to become seats of new thought, of criticism of what is traditional, and of new ideas which remold the mores."[1] His emphasis on the importance of educational "method" and recognition that "form" has implications for "content" suggests he was both a modern intellectual and an unrecognized part of the liberal tradition. Finally, Sumner expressed the typically liberal belief that the state should provide a forum for "the active reason" of the community to codify laws that balance the retention of the old with the imposition of the new. His analysis of the social processes supporting the "critical habit" and a modern form of civic virtue provides an often impassioned statement of the need for democracy to be based upon the participation of knowledgeable citizens in a responsive public sphere.

Sumner's call for the generalization of the critical habit and his insistence that all ideas be subject to critical reflection embodies two principles basic to liberalism and the promise of modernity: first, it champions democracy as a social form shaped by the participation and "moral convictions" of people; second, it gives expression to the

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[1] Folkways, p. 634.

quintessentially modern belief that science, education, and law provide the basis for societal self-criticism that can cultivate the possibilities of social life within the limits imposed by history. But, he argued, the vast potential of the modern order has not been fulfilled.

Sumner claimed that the modern moral order generated to deal with the progress of humanity has its own self-defeating attributes. Though he initially emphasized the progressive features of the modern economy, Sumner later argued that its further development undermined the conditions supporting the progressive principles that originally created this "new order of things." In this spirit, he analyzed the economic, political, and cultural developments addressed by most twentieth century critics of late capitalist society. Here, as elsewhere, Sumner's analysis of the relationship between a social development and its conditions established that all results achieved in human affairs undermine the circumstances that initially produced them. The problem was not that the cultural patterning and moral norms did not match certain standards, but that the moral order could not reliably reproduce itself.

Sumner's discussion of "error," "force," and agency pushes us to recognize them as theoretically significant aspects of the modern moral order and of moral orders in general. His analysis of the relative autonomy of the moral order established that "error" and "force" are constituent features of social development, not just causal factors operating at the boundaries. His theory of social change roots the tensions and contradictions making change possible in the operation and development of the modern system as a whole. Given his emphasis upon the importance of life conditions, Sumner not surprisingly focused on the issue of the state and administration. Given his preoccupation with the spontaneity and latency of the moral order, he predictably worked his way back to the problem of critical reflection inherent to the codification of the moral order. Though he was unable to regulate these two routes, his refusal to

relinquish either suggests he recognized the significance of each. Sumner, despite rhetorical statements to the contrary, did qualify his position on the relative autonomy of the mores. The mores are partially immunized from the need to adapt to material environment, but they must confront material processes at some point in time. If the mores "fetter" the material base and do not effectively regulate life conditions, a crisis emerges. His desire to support the potential of life conditions led him to suggest that reform and, at times, revolution may provide the most effective resolution of crisis.

Sumner's emphasis on the possible tensions between the material and the moral order and the language he used to describe it corresponds to Marx's analysis and opposes the straight-forward determinism associated with the social evolutionism and the mechanical Marxism of his era. Indeed, Sumner's analysis of capitalism's historically progressive achievements and its inability to sustain the conditions that originally supported them is remarkably similar to that found in the Communist Manifesto. Like Marx and Engels, Sumner not only celebrated modernity's unprecedented productivity, but its ability to generate social conditions and relations that support a new and potentially more humane form of existence. Sumner, like Marx and Engels, argued that capitalism unleashed forces undermining the conditions necessary to reproduce it. Despite Sumner's theoretical acceptance that revolutionary transformation might be necessary at time, his theory was drawn to the cultural sources of social change.

Sumner's analysis of modernity was pessimistic but not fatalistic. He always stressed that he was discussing "openings" that are "full of chances" and "tendencies" whose effects can be modified. In this spirit, he argued that

> there has been within the last year or two a very great revolt in the public mind against graft and political and business corruption. How far will this go? We do not know, but it is ... an opening in the public mind that is full

> of chances. It may go very far; it may have very great effects; it is certainly something to be noticed and taken advantage of."[2]

Change was always possible, though just where and when it would emerge was unpredictable. Sumner's work thus illustrates the pessimism of the mind and the optimism of the spirit. By keeping the specter of crisis alive in all his writings, he suggests that social developments are more liable to be distorted than corrected. Nevertheless, his concern for what is possible and not just actual continually led him to explore how progress might be secured and what types of intervention might sustain it. Sumner's work suggests that even though initiated change is difficult to create and impossible to guarantee, the social processes that sustain problematic conditions can provide resources that support reform. In other words, his analysis of the modern crisis concluded that change was possible. His optimism was reserved for the possibility of change, not its inevitability.

Sumner's analysis of the processes by which moral orders are established and his insistence that all "ways of doing things" possess "faiths, notion, codes, and standards of well living" anticipated several insights that have become fundamental to the later development of sociology: that social life is an indissoluble social process, that all societies possess a social fabric that is essentially cultural, and that one aspect of this fabric is moral. Sumner's realization that morality is an intrinsic part of all social relationships, technical activities, and social processes enabled him to analyze a level of normative development which not only achieves autonomy from the society which produces it but shapes the development of the entire society. He provided a sociological analysis of the tension between tradition, criticism, and change which recognized that even the most technically rational society was burdened by the latency of the moral order and the use of "force" by particular interests.

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[2] Forgotten Man, "Protectionism Twenty Years After," 1906, pp. 136-137.

There are several reasons why Sumner's work was pushed outside the sociological mainstream, despite its richness of theoretical insight. First, his polemical and dogmatic writing style led most readers to treat his work as mere ideology. Second, his focus on topical issues led most scholars to minimize his theoretical contributions. Third, Sumner's initial indifference to the theoretical issues he addressed obscured the concepts he used and left a number of ungoverned assertions and unanswered questions in his work. It was not until Folkways that he provided a systematic theoretical treatment of the issues he addressed and the concepts he developed in his study of modernity.

When a more self-consciously theoretical sociology emerged in the United States in the 1930's as an extension of the European literature, it was different than it might have been. Indeed, if there had been a truly cumulative theoretical development of the theoretical problems that Sumner had addressed several decades before Parsons, it would be possible to imagine a theorist similar to Parsons, but with a more critical emphasis upon "error" and "force." This dissertation has shown that Sumner's critical analysis of modern society deserves serious consideration by contemporary sociologists.

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