

ON LIBERTY,
SOCIETY,
AND POLITICS



WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMNER

ON LIBERTY, SOCIETY, AND POLITICS

The Essential Essays of
William Graham Sumner

EDITED BY

ROBERT C. BANNISTER



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Foreword

William Graham Sumner, as his contemporaries testified, was someone you liked a lot or not at all. During his four decades at Yale, undergraduates thronged to his classes. “In my estimation, he was the greatest teacher I have ever known,” one of his early students wrote when Sumner died in 1910. Even the radical economist Thorstein Veblen, who attended Yale for graduate studies in the early 1880s, reported that he was “particularly” pleased with Sumner. In the following decades, a loyal band of Sumnerites, led by his protégé Albert G. Keller, kept alive a “Sumner Club” to promote his teachings.

Others were less charitable. Commenting on an anonymous review in the *Nation*, one angry reader guessed that Sumner must have been the author since no one else was “capable of so bigoted a hatred.” When he opposed Free Silver in the mid-1890s, one westerner wondered how “such an arrogant jackass . . . can occupy a chair in a college at Yale.” When Sumner’s *Folkways* appeared in 1906, a disgruntled reader likened it to “a card index.” “Now and then are interspersed some general conclusions,” he added, “which shock without convincing.”

Inevitably, much of the debate about Sumner turned on his politics. To his defenders, he provided an arsenal of arguments against the encroachment of government. To his critics, he was, at worst, a “business hireling” and, at best, the confused spokesman of an older middle class whose day was done. Often conflating the two charges, historians pictured him as the leading “social Darwinist” of his generation, a theorist who appropriated the rhetoric of evolutionism to defend the worst excesses of unregulated capitalism. Despite challenges to this view during the past two decades, he remains the late nineteenth-century thinker American history textbooks most like to hate. Sumner’s blunt, uncompromising, and often provocative manner was partly to blame for this situation. “Bluff Billy,” as he was called, did not suffer fools easily.

There were other factors at work that contributed to this view of Sumner, not all of which were of his own making. Many critics quoted a few phrases concerning “fittest” and “unfittest” as the sum of his social thought. Focusing on his views of government and the economy, most historians and critics failed to place his work within the broader context of the effort of several generations of American intellectuals to ground

morals and public policy in science rather than in Protestant Christianity. As a member of the “generation of 1840” who initiated this movement, Sumner shared in this enterprise with the sociologist Lester Ward and the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., among others, even though he did not share their politics. As these intellectuals debated the meaning of science, the charge of misapplied Darwinism (including the epithet “social Darwinist”), as I have argued in *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth* (1979), was essentially a battle strategy of the opponents of this movement, more caricature than accurate characterization. Critics also assumed that Sumner’s ideas remained static throughout his career. Quotations from lectures of the 1870s or from *Folkways* became interchangeable evidence of a monolithic ideology.

The image of Sumner that emerges from these criticisms seriously misrepresents him. He launched his career in a decade with more than its share of corruption and fraud, including the scandals of the Grant presidency and New York’s Tweed Ring, the financial buccaneering of Jay Gould, the “corrupt bargain” that gave Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency in 1876. Yet he was as critical of these developments as were the self-styled “reformers” whose proposals, in his view, only compounded the problems. During the 1880s and 1890s, he continued to defend free markets, individual enterprise, and the accumulation of capital. However, he was acutely aware of mounting problems, from the rise of plutocracy (defined broadly as the influence of wealth on politics) to the excesses of consumerism and of democracy. The United States was entering its “glory days,” he lamented shortly before his death, referring to the “corruption and extravagance which ultimately have ruined all the republics of the past.” In sounding these warnings, he seemed to his admirers to be the epitome of the “old Roman,” a defender of the republican tradition of the founders, not the business “hireling” or the spirit of individualism past.

Sumner’s “conservatism” was accordingly complex. As he moved from clergyman to sociologist, he struggled to reconcile two contradictory impulses: a desire for organic community, historical continuity, and traditional values as antidote to unfettered individualism and materialistic progress; and a commitment to individual freedom that he believed would fuel this progress. Complicating this dilemma was the specter of cultural relativism wherein all truth appeared relative to conditions. In freeing the individual from past custom and tradition, cultural relativism appeared to rule out any common standard for individual behavior or public policy. In his early sermons, Sumner con-

fronted these issues in repeated attempts to balance “tradition” and “progress.” In *Folkways*, he discussed them in terms of the relation between the “mores” and “science,” the former being the encoded customs and traditions that shape all human activity, and the latter being the objective attitude that allows limited escape from those customs and traditions.

In this quest, Sumner’s conception of science was crucial. Since the eighteenth century, science had been seen as a means of freeing humanity from the burdens of the past, while providing for one or another type of social engineering. Inspired by Darwin, many of Sumner’s contemporaries found in evolution the basis for an instrumental view of reason that justified governmental activism and a relativism that rejected established institutions and beliefs. Sumner, in contrast, distinguished the “methods” of science from its “speculations,” viewing the former in terms of the narrowly inductive procedures of what American intellectuals of his generation termed “Baconian” science (dubiously claiming lineage from the celebrated seventeenth-century English scientist Francis Bacon). Science, so viewed, was not some “ism,” but a matter-of-factness that stressed classification over hypothesis.

Although on the surface Sumner shared his generation’s faith in science, he diverged from a majority of his fellow social scientists by rejecting the notion that science taught that truth is merely a consensus of trained observers. Sumner’s “expert” was not a credentialed member of a social scientific community that drew up social blueprints to meet changing conditions—the model that was increasingly used in American sociology in the decades after Sumner’s death. Rather, Sumner’s expert was the tough-minded individual who viewed current mores objectively in the light of history. In grasping the essence behind appearance, science, in Sumner’s view, provided an absolute standard for individual behavior and social policy, and hence an escape from a debilitating relativism and moral anarchy.

While Sumner defended private property, individual enterprise, and *laissez-faire*, he was not an uncritical apologist for American business. Rather, he joined a tradition of American thinkers who championed republicanism against democracy, hard work and self-denial over material luxury, and public good over individual gratification. Unlike the founding fathers, Sumner did not ground his conservatism in the classical republicanism of Greece or Rome, but in scientific method and an ethos of professionalism that sought the equivalents of public virtue in discipline, denial, and detachment. Although some contradictions

remained, he took more seriously than many of his contemporaries the problems of change vs. tradition and cultural relativism vs. common standards that continue to dominate our discourse more than a century later.

Youth and Education

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, on October 30, 1840, Sumner was the son of recent English immigrants. A mechanic by training, his father Thomas left the low wages and unemployment of Lancashire just in time to feel the sting of the American depression of 1837. He was distantly related by marriage to a prominent free-trader and temperance advocate, whose causes he made his own. However, as his son later recalled, he was also contemptuous of “demagogical arguments,” “the notions of labor agitators,” and “the entire gospel of gush.” After losing an eye in an industrial accident and his health to a lifetime of toil, Thomas died in 1881 almost as poor as he was when he arrived in the New World, remembered only as the “forgotten man” of his son’s best-known essay.

As a youth, Sumner enjoyed neither the security of place nor the comforts of the emotional life. After surveying prospects from New York to Ohio, his father moved the family to New Haven and then to Hartford. The death of his mother Sarah in 1848 placed eight-year-old William and his younger brother, Joseph Graham, in the custody of a stepmother whose concern with economy at the expense of affection grieved even her taciturn husband. Still grief-stricken, the brothers even plotted to kill their stepmother, which may have been the last time they thoroughly agreed on anything. Although Sumner never referred to his youthful deprivations and, indeed, rarely mentioned his childhood, these experiences left him with a keen sense of the separation between the inner and outer life, between private and public spheres, and between sentiment and fact. As an adult, Sumner’s sternness was legendary. Nevertheless, a tenderness also surfaced with surprising intensity in love letters he wrote to his fiancée and, later, in his fondness for children, an indulgence he once desired from his parents but never received.

Excessively serious, even a bit of a prig, young Sumner compensated for what he was missing at home by throwing himself into his schoolwork. After rigorous training in the public school in Hartford, with the help of money his father made in one of his rare successful ventures, Sumner entered Yale in 1859. There he plodded through the ironclad curriculum that the Yale faculty report of 1828 had prescribed for all of

antebellum America: two years of the classics, a third that added physics and some astronomy and chemistry, and a fourth that included lectures in history, politics, and international law. Outside the classroom, Sumner discovered a more vital Yale—in eating clubs, in the Brothers in Unity debating society, in sports (where he was a keen follower of the Yale “Navy”), and finally in Skull and Bones, whose coveted election he received in the spring of his junior year. Fueling this vitality was a markedly changed student body as sons of business magnates from New York, Chicago, and other cities swelled classes previously drawn mostly from New England and settlements of New Englanders throughout the Midwest. Sumner’s friend Henry Holt dated the change precisely to 1856 when the first group of New Yorkers entered Yale, bringing with them a “revolutionary quantity of new clothes.”

Yale gave Sumner a new identity, replacing the dour William with the more congenial “Graeme,” as his fellow Bones men came to call him. Yale also provided Sumner with connections who supplied him with the funds for several years of European study. A fellow Bones man then put Sumner’s name forward for a tutorship at Yale, a position he occupied upon his return from Europe.

For the ambitious Yale man, the Civil War was largely an inconvenience. Although some of Sumner’s classmates marched in torchlight parades for Abraham Lincoln and responded to the call to enlist after Sumner, enthusiasm soon waned. Less than a third of the class of 1863, including nongraduates, saw any military service. Although Sumner later portrayed the war as a victory for the forces of modernity, he was less optimistic at the time. Distrusting northern leaders, he feared that Lincoln’s emergency war measures threatened to create a dictatorship. Within his own family, his postwar lack of enthusiasm for suffrage for the freedmen estranged him from his brother Joe (later a clerk at the New Orleans office of the Freedmen’s Bureau), and even brought a reprimand from his father. Feeling no guilt for his failure to enlist, he scurried frantically to salvage his European studies, while his father used a \$300 loan from a brother of a friend of Sumner’s to arrange a substitute after Sumner was drafted in July 1863. Although one candidate Thomas found “skedaddled” out a hotel window with the money, the government accepted the transaction as meeting the legal requirement. Thus, as Sumner’s biographer Donald Bellomy has commented, “No one died (or lived) in Sumner’s place.”

Although marriage lay in the future, Sumner’s interest in the opposite sex also developed during his college years. He knew he was no ladies’ man. “I am not the sort of man women love,” he once confessed, but

this realization did not keep him from trying. At several parties, he became jealous when a classmate bested him for the favors of Jeannie Elliott, a pretty relative of a locally prominent family. By the spring of his senior year, he became deeply involved with a young woman from Hartford, only to be devastated when she died shortly before his graduation.

Happily, in the summer of 1869, after several years of studying abroad and another three as classics tutor at Yale, Sumner again met Jeannie Elliott while vacationing in the Catskills. Until their marriage in April 1871, he poured out his yearnings and hopes in letter after letter. When he announced his engagement, friends looked on in disbelief at a Sumner they had not previously known. One colleague wrote, "I still find it difficult to associate so much emotion as an engagement involves with a being whose composition I have hitherto supposed to consist only of pure thought." By this time, still another Sumner had emerged as Episcopalian clergyman, a career for which he had been preparing more or less since entering Yale.

As Sumner entered his twenties, he was headed for success. However, the story of his youth had not quite followed the usual Horatio Alger plot. Although he was the upwardly mobile son of a recent immigrant, he did not pretend or wish to be the legendary self-made man. In a letter to his fiancée, written soon after he left New Haven for New York, he said that many people would say that "I have 'succeeded' & say that I have 'made my way up,'" but they would be wrong. He had never set out to "rise in the world," he added, echoing Alger's recently published *Ragged Dick* (1868). He later told his students, "the 'self-made man' is, by definition, the first bungling essay of a bad workman."

Nor, given his many debts to community and friends, had his youth provided a homily on "individualism" in the way some nineteenth-century Americans used the term. "Individualism," he told his congregation a few years later, reduces a man to the status of the "wild beast," destroying the "union and organization" that make society possible. In later years, he continued to inveigh against the man "on the make." Sumner's individualism was not a creed of "go-it-alone and devil-take-the hindmost." Rather, it was a code of discipline, duty, and responsibility within the confines of external restraints, whether imposed by Providence, one's profession, or the social norms he later termed "mores." Philosophically, Sumner tried to address the limits of free will, and he wrestled with this issue throughout his career with mixed success. In his personal life, it took the form of a professionalism that linked

individual advancement with self-discipline and hard work. For society, it meant finding and obeying the “laws” that alone make freedom possible.

Preacher

In the spring of 1869, Sumner left Yale and plunged into Anglican church politics, first as editor of *The Living Church* and assistant pastor in New York and New Haven and then as minister of The Church of the Redeemer in Morristown, New Jersey, from 1870 to 1872. At the time, the Episcopalians were torn between a High Church and a Low Church group, the one stressing dogma and tradition, the other emphasizing evangelical conversion. Sumner identified with a third and moderate Broad Church faction that was more open to reason and science. The Broad Church creed was summed up in the title of his journal, *The Living Church*—“living,” because it addressed the most vital issues then confronting Christianity, and “church” because the issues could be resolved within this historically evolved institution.

By the late 1860s, Sumner’s religious ideas were still in flux. Converted from his parent’s Anglicanism to Congregationalism in his youth, he later had come to feel less sympathy with the lingering revivalism of his own congregation than with the anti-revivalist views of Hartford’s most famous Congregationalist, Horace Bushnell. While studying in Germany, he had dabbled briefly with the rationalism of the “higher criticism” (the study of biblical writings to determine their literary history and the purpose and meaning of the authors) before being returned to “common sense” by the Oxford Anglicans. At Oxford, he also discovered Richard Hooker’s *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1597–1662), a treatise that combined an attack on excessive reverence for a literal interpretation of the Bible with a celebration of constitutional order and historical continuity. Peer pressure from home pulled Sumner in the direction of the Episcopalians. “We are all of us Episcopalians, Bill, and you must be the same, can’t you,” wrote friend William Whitney on behalf of the Bones group. Upon returning to Yale, Sumner joined his friends and the Episcopalians.

Although conventions of the pulpit ruled out specific references to current affairs, Sumner used his sermons to tackle the most pressing intellectual and social issues of the day. His sermon titles alone told much of the story: “Ill-Gotten Wealth,” “Individualism,” “Tradition and

Progress,” and “Solidarity of the Human Race.” In the Broad Church spirit, he sought in each case a middle ground upon which contending factions could unite.

A case in point was the mounting conflict between religion and science, not a “warfare” of opposing groups (as Cornell president Andrew D. White would soon imply), but a battle over the nature of science itself. Negotiating this thicket, Sumner distinguished science as “method” from the “speculations” of individual scientists. He found “no great fault” with Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, or Herbert Spencer in “their original works,” he told his New Jersey congregation. “They may be right or wrong in their speculations and theories,” but they were “honest, sincere, and industrious” in method. What this method was he was not yet prepared to say, although he was still disposed to the narrowly inductive Baconianism he first learned at Yale.

Sumner also sought compromise on the merits of “tradition” and “progress.” “The traditions of centuries have a true *moral* authority,” he told his parishioners. “We must begin with the world as we find it, that is, as it is handed down to us from the past.” But he also cautioned that the “true use of tradition” should be distinguished from “traditionalism”—the blind acceptance of “old errors” and “worn-out falsehoods.”

The issue was personal as well as theological. During his stay at Oxford, tradition in the form of English class snobbery made Sumner acutely aware of his own humble origins. Like many an American Oxonian in similar circumstances, he accommodated by embracing English tradition with the passion of the half-converted, chiding fellow Americans for their lack of tradition. But the spirit of progress in post-Civil War America proved equally contagious. “When I came back,” he later wrote his fiancée, “I saw that the vast body of people here were free, prosperous, free from care, & happy, & that is worth all the elegance it robs us of.” This inner tension, as it turned out, dovetailed neatly with the desire of most Anglicans to avoid the excesses of either the High or Low Church positions, as he soon demonstrated in the sermon “Tradition and Progress.”

In an age when career patterns remained fluid, Sumner was soon unhappy within the church. Friends showered him with advice concerning alternative careers—in law, perhaps even in commerce. In the spring of 1871, a week before he proposed marriage to Jeannie, he was offered the presidency of the University of Alabama at the princely sum of \$5,000 a year. At Yale, friends lobbied on his behalf for a faculty position, the job he really wanted, although in precisely what field remained to be

seen. For two years, obstacles delayed the appointment: Jeannie had no wish to be a faculty wife, and the \$2,000 his friends were able to raise initially was too little. Finally, in September 1873, he returned to Yale.

Sumner's reasons for leaving the clergy and the legacy of this experience have been the subject of considerable speculation. Denying a crisis of faith, he later quipped that he merely put his beliefs in a drawer, only to find them gone when next he looked. He never officially resigned from the clergy, served as a vestryman, and attended various church functions until his death. At the other extreme, he once remarked cynically to a student that one of two wasted periods in his life was when he was "a parson." (The second one was when he was active politically during the 1870s.)

Sumner's refusal to break cleanly with the church probably reflected a desire not to offend his wife and other family members, perhaps coupled with a reluctance to undermine so powerful a source of social authority. As he grappled with questions of faith and reason, tradition and progress, and solidarity and individualism, Sumner's ideas *did* change. His analysis gradually secularized in tone, a shift already evident in an 1873 revision of an earlier sermon, "The Solidarity of the Human Race." However, this change registered his participation in a broad transformation of western thought rather than any sudden conversion to the ideas of Spencer or Darwin.

The clerical years, nonetheless, left their mark. Affording an opportunity to develop his oratorical skills and prose style, the pulpit allowed Sumner scope to discuss pressing issues, both philosophical and social. If some of the answers changed, the questions remained remarkably the same, notably those concerning tradition and progress. For Sumner, this issue involved two deeply held, but potentially contradictory convictions: a belief in history and institutions as a check on progress, and an instinctive commitment to individual freedom. For someone who would be at once "conservative" and "American," this dilemma admitted no easy solution.

Educational Reformer, Politician, Polemicist

When Sumner returned to New Haven in 1873, Yale was struggling in its own way with changes then transforming American higher education. Harvard's appointment in 1869 of Charles W. Eliot, the university's first lay president, symbolized an end to clerical domination. Two years

later, Noah Porter replaced Theodore Dwight Woolsey as Yale's president. Although a clergyman, Porter also was a moral philosopher of considerable repute and dedicated to his own vision of the modern university.

Woolsey's departure left Porter with the unattractive prospect of teaching single-handedly the senior-year catchall course in mental and moral philosophy they had previously shared. Hoped-for assistance vanished with the resignation of Daniel Coit Gilman of the Sheffield Scientific School, an unannounced presidential candidate and the one person who might have taken over Woolsey's part of the course. The subsequent allotment of funds for a chair in "political and social science" placed Sumner in competition with a well-connected Congregationalist clergyman named Diman, who had been showered with academic offers since his appointment at Brown in 1864 and who was soon the favorite of Yale faculty members who opposed Sumner. A year of vintage academic politics ensued, including attempts to steer Sumner to a less-prestigious (and unendowed) chair in ancient history or to persuade him to withdraw his candidacy altogether. Sumner was finally offered and accepted the new chair in political economy with high hopes that it could be made "most influential on the future of this country."

In most respects, Sumner was the consummate college reformer. Writing in *The Living Church*, he welcomed Eliot's appointment at Harvard, arguing that American colleges could become true universities only by overcoming their sectarian origins. At Yale, he endorsed a recent experiment to divide classes by academic rank rather than alphabetically for recitations, and he even supported attempts to eliminate the tedious recitations altogether. In his own courses, he replaced graded recitations with a single final examination and made attendance optional, causing Porter to warn that he was destroying the program "on which the whole system of discipline and honors is founded."

At the same time, Sumner rejected as worthless one Eliot proposal to bring experts to the university to energize graduate studies. He likewise distrusted extreme demands that the universities "keep up with the times," wanting only to assure that they not become bastions of "mere traditionalism and stagnation." Although admiring the German model, he wanted the United States to build its universities upon the experience and traditions of its colleges. With characteristic bluntness, he identified poor endowment rather than curriculum as the heart of the matter. "It is money, or the want of it, which is the root of all evil." As in the Broad Church debates, Sumner again staked out an idealistic as well as prac-

tical position, a balance between tradition and progress. As he turned to public affairs, this balance would be more difficult to attain.

During the early Yale years (1873–78), Sumner was best known as scholar-politician and polemicist rather than for any contributions to social theory. “What is needed now,” he wrote, “is, not more thorough theoretical discussion of the scholar-in-politics, but that a few more should try it.” Sumner launched his career as scholar-in-politics in the fall of 1873 when he ran successfully for New Haven alderman, a position he held for four years. The same year he also became an honorary member of the New Haven Chamber of Congress, which he used as a personal forum for his favored causes. At the national level, he joined the recently founded American Social Science Association (ASSA), where he served on a newly established finance committee until finally resigning in disgust at ASSA’s congenital do-goodism. In November 1877, he joined an electoral commission to investigate fraud in New Orleans during the recent presidential election. The following year, he testified before a congressional committee investigating labor unrest.

In politics, Sumner was a Republican less from conviction than from the absence of a viable alternative. The Democrats historically represented the excesses of Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism he most despised, while the GOP attracted most of the “best men” in the North and, more importantly, in New Haven. Disgusted by the corruption of the Grant years and dismayed by Republican policy on tariffs and the money issue, he shared the outlook of future Mugwumps, as independents in both parties would later be dubbed. In the fall of 1877, he shocked friends and political allies by throwing his support to the Democrat, Samuel Tilden.

As polemicist, Sumner attempted to reach a popular audience by way of public lectures, newspapers, essays, and books. Among public issues, he focused especially on the currency issue, then agitated by calls for the retirement of the Civil War “greenbacks” and later by the establishment of a “bimetal” standard of gold and silver. He also focused on free trade, now apparently doomed by the protective tariffs of the war years. He devoted his first two books—*A History of American Currency* (1874), and *Lectures on the History of Protection* (1877)—respectively, to these two issues.

Sumner’s own experience with the depreciating value of money through inflation gave him a personal stake in the currency issue. The

size of his debt to his friends and his concern over financing further work in Europe or the Far East left a legacy of hatred for paper currency and inflation. Although he paid little attention to the demonetization of silver in 1873 (a move critics later dubbed the “Crime of ’73”), he was distressed as leading economists otherwise within the classicist camp supported international bimetallism, among them his Yale colleague Francis A. Walker. After holding his fire for several years, Sumner attacked bimetallism in 1878, placing himself in open conflict with potential allies.

In his attacks on the protective tariffs, Sumner characteristically combined appeals to the pocketbook and to morality. Tariffs were ostensibly a levy on overseas trade, but Sumner saw them as a tax to benefit some Americans over others. “The victim and the beneficiary are amongst ourselves,” he argued, since consumers ultimately paid in higher prices. Worse, the tax was an indirect one, leaving those taxed unaware of their burden.

Although few Americans appeared so well-equipped to raise economic theory to a new level, Sumner sought to popularize rather than to extend classical British theory. More interested in practical problems than theoretical issues, he instead catalogued the dire consequences, past and present, of paper money and high tariffs. After a visit with Sumner in New Haven in 1875, Alfred Marshall, the brilliant British economist, judged him to be a man of “enormous ability,” but one lacking “the nature fitted for epoch-making truths.”

Disillusionment with politics during 1877, a result both of his personal experience as New Haven alderman and of his assessment of voting fraud in the Hayes-Tilden election, presaged a shift in Sumner’s priorities during the next decade. “I found out that I was more likely to do more harm than good in politics than almost any other kind of man,” he later wrote of his career as alderman, “because I did not know the rules of the game and did not want to learn them.” After an abortive attempt to return to the Republican fold, he repudiated politics as a waste of time, declining even to vote in the 1880 election. Accordingly, during the 1880s, he argued for the necessary separation of politics and economics and for the need to eliminate political corruption through civil service reform.

Meanwhile, developments in the industrial sphere shifted the focus of Sumner’s interest to labor and big business and, finally, to Marxism. Responding to the bloody summer of railway strikes in 1877, he penned an angry article meant for but not finally published in the *North American Review*, following it with several other essays on labor and strikes

throughout the 1880s. Although the secretive formation of the Standard Oil trust in 1882 heralded a new phase of industrial combination, Sumner, like most of his contemporaries, realized its implications only gradually. In a series in the *Independent* in 1888–89, however, he took direct aim at the emerging “plutocracy,” a concept that joined middle-class fear of industrial combination with the patrician dislike of vulgar wealth he had earlier expressed in his sermons. Narrowly defined by Sumner, plutocracy referred to “a political form in which the controlling force is wealth.” But more generally it enshrined the “increasing thirst for luxury” and the acquisitive appetites of the man “on the make.” He concluded with disgust that “the principle of plutocracy is that money buys whatever the owner of money wants.”

He also gradually realized that Karl Marx was not just another socialist. Initially he knew Marx only as the leader of the International who wanted “to carry the war into the arena of scientific economy.” But Marx’s treatment of “capital” was soon at the center of Sumner’s indictment of the entire socialist movement. When the visit of Marx’s daughter and son-in-law to the United States in 1886 stimulated new interest in his theories, Sumner took aim at such concepts as “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie.” “No American artisan” can understand these terms, he charged. “Such ideas are a part of a foreign dress of a set of ideas which are not yet naturalized.”

As Sumner moved from the mugwumpish scholar-in-politics to full-blown controversialist, his prose gained strength and power. His early style, as his biographer Donald Bellomy has written in *The Moulding of an Iconoclast* (1979), was “frequently stilted, often latinate, more than a little long-winded,” probably due to his status as a newcomer attempting to use an official rhetoric, but lacking the confidence or experience to do so gracefully. Although his friend Henry Holt finally published the *History of American Currency*, Holt confessed that it never failed to put him to sleep. Only in extemporaneous speeches and student lectures did Sumner display the boldness that would become his hallmark. As he directed his attention from public policy to social theory in the early 1880s, this boldness quickly won national attention.

Social Theorist

During his early clerical years, Sumner had dipped into Herbert Spencer’s *Social Statics* (1850) and *First Principles* (1861), but found both works too “metaphysical” for his taste. During the seventies he dis-

played only passing rhetorical interest in the Englishman's work. His first recorded use of the phrase "survival of the fittest" in 1872 was in the context of appealing for charity toward the weak. However, he also apparently read the *Study of Sociology* when it appeared in serial form in 1872 and eventually thought enough of it to assign it as a text at Yale. For this decision, he soon earned an undeserved reputation as America's "leading Spencerian."

Until the early 1880s, Sumner's social thought echoed other works he had read. Among these were Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1834), a primer of classical economics by example, and Francis Lieber's *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government* (1853), whose proto-sociological emphasis on customs and institutions informed his later distrust of schemes based on "natural rights." In Woolsey's course at Yale, he read enough of Francis Wayland's *Elements of Political Economy* (1837) to convince him that Martineau was basically right about economic issues. Later he added David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and others in the British tradition.

Growing attack on this tradition in the late 1870s first forced Sumner to rethink his basic assumptions. From overseas, this attack was spearheaded by representatives of the German Historical School, the *Kathedersozialisten* ("professorial socialists," as Sumner rendered the term) and their American disciples who founded the American Economic Association in 1884. More popularly, it found voice in Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), Lawrence Gronlund's *Cooperative Commonwealth* (1883), and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). All bothered Sumner: George for his attack on Malthus, Gronlund as a homegrown socialist, and Bellamy as the model for the "absurd effort" to plan a better world with "a slate and pencil." In one way or other, George, Gronlund, and Bellamy figured in most of his essays of the eighties. Social scientists seemed little better. He wrote in the late seventies that the social sciences were the stronghold of many "pernicious dogmatisms." The economists, he added with reference to the German school, "instead of holding together and sustaining . . . the scientific authority and the positive truth of their doctrines, break up and run hither and thither."

In a series on "Socialism" and "Sociology" between 1878 and 1882, Sumner defended Malthus in particular, fired in part by Henry George's attack on Malthusianism in *Progress and Poverty*. "Human beings tend to multiply beyond the power of a limited area of land to support life, under a given stage of the arts, and a given standard of living," he wrote