

WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMNER: AGAINST DEMOCRACY, PLUTOCRACY, AND IMPERIALISM

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Pioneering sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) was a prolific and astute historian of the early American republic. His work is informed by both his classical liberalism and his understanding of economics. He authored eight major works including major biographies and thematic studies concentrating on the vital subjects of currency, banking, business cycles, foreign trade, protectionism, and democratic politics.¹

Sumner's political insights can be found throughout his histories and biographies, but his most explicit political works are *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* and some essays. Considering them together, it is possible to reconstruct Sumner's political thought. This reconstruction reveals that Sumner was a first-rate diagnostician of the vices and flaws endemic to modern democracy, and that he saw with remarkable prevision how it would develop into the twentieth century.

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¹Although Sumner's works are out of print, and hardly ever mentioned or referred to, they are quite valuable for understanding the politics and major economic issues of the early republic. They are, in order of publication: *History of American Currency* (1874); *Lectures on the History of Protection* (1877); *Andrew Jackson* (1882); *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883); *Alexander Hamilton* (1890); *The Financier and Finances of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (1891); *Robert Morris* (1892); and *History of Banking in the United States* (1896).

Sumner's critique of democracy can be summarized as follows:

- Modern, industrialized, western nation-states were too geographically extensive, populous, and diverse to be truly democratic in anything but name.
- The great mass of the population in Europe or America was incapable of self-government.
- Democratic institutions and forms (e.g., legislatures, political parties, and voting) in the most advanced democracy of the age (the United States) were under the effective control of plutocrats (i.e., politically-connected capitalists), and that plutocracy was the actual form of government.
- Plutocrats in America would become increasingly imperialistic and warlike, and would gradually extend paternal protections to the masses.

He foresaw twentieth-century American government as plutocratic, paternalistic, and imperialist.

Although Sumner never specified his ideal form of government, he was certainly no monarchist. He seemed to favor some sort of representative government with limited suffrage and limited government power.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

William Graham Sumner was born in New Jersey in 1840, the son of an English immigrant. He grew up in Hartford, Connecticut, and attended Yale University from 1859–1863. He was drafted into the Union Army upon graduation, but as he was more interested in studying abroad than in serving in a war for which he had no enthusiasm, he asked his father to purchase a substitute for him, which he did for three hundred dollars.

Intending to become a minister, Sumner went abroad for training. He spent the winter of 1863–64 in Geneva studying French and Hebrew. During the next two years at Göttingen, he studied Greek, Hebrew, church history, and biblical science. In the spring of 1866, Sumner studied theology at Oxford. Upon returning to the United States that summer, he took a job at his alma mater as a tutor of classics, a position he held for three years.

In July 1869, Sumner was ordained a priest in the Protestant Episcopal Church. The next year, he became rector of an Episcopal church

in New Jersey, where he served for three years. In the summer of 1872, he returned to Yale, where he had been offered the professorship of political and social science. For the rest of his life, Sumner remained at Yale, where he was one of the most popular and effective lecturers.

Sumner's early scholarly interests were in American history and economic theory, which he combined in a series of biographies, thematic studies, and essays on American economic history up to his own day. His works on these subjects were published between 1874 and 1896. After being converted to the theory of evolution by another Yale professor around 1876, he read Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, and the latter's works—*Social Statics* (1850), *First Principles* (1861), and the *Study of Sociology* (1872)—exerted enormous influence on his thought. From then on, Sumner became more and more interested in social theory, which he incorporated in his historical studies, before devoting his full attention to sociology starting in the mid-1890s. His chief works in social theory were *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1884), *Folkways* (1906), and the posthumously published *Science of Society* (1927), which his disciple and successor at Yale, Albert G. Keller, reorganized and revised. Sumner died in 1910.

Scholars and critics have mistakenly cited Sumner as the leading Social Darwinist of late-nineteenth-century America. Such an ascription both distorts the substance of his thought and grossly exaggerates his actual influence on the politics of his country. First, Sumner never ceased to be a classical liberal, a critic of plutocracy, and an opponent of imperialism (past and present). Second, despite the fact that Sumner was widely read and taught many of the future business and political leaders of America, he exerted little influence on its politics. The federal government continued to be protectionist, mildly inflationist, and plutocratic (corporate subsidies and privileges) until his death, after which it became substantially worse.

ON GOVERNMENT: A NECESSARY EVIL

Sumner was aware of the existence of anarchist thought in the late nineteenth century, but the evidence suggests that he did not take it seriously. He believed that government was necessary for national defense, and to guard against theft, fraud, and abuse. “We must support courts and police, an army and navy. These we need for peace, and justice, and security.” Were there none who would rob, swindle, cheat, invade, or aggress, one could do without them, but since such

is not the case, his ideal state was a minimal, Jeffersonian night-watchman state:

Taxes are the tribute we pay to avarice, and violence, and rapine, and all the other vices which disfigure human nature. Taxes are only those evils translated into money and spread over the community. They are so much taken from the strength of the laborer, or the fertility of the soil, or the benefit of the climate. They are loss and waste to almost their entire extent.²

According to Sumner, the test of “good government” is whether it preserves a peaceful and just social order, with a wide scope for liberty, security for property, and legal equality among the citizens. He defined justice largely as the Greeks had done, that is, “to each his own.” Each person shall receive the return due his efforts “under the free play of natural forces.” A state that attempts to correct nature by interfering with natural laws, that handicaps some, privileges others, or compensates for natural inequalities, *violates justice*. Sumner rejected the Marxian idea of social justice that is now held by western “free-market” democracies.³

Sumner believed that even the best government posed a constant, and often progressive, threat to liberty, individual rights, property, and freedom. “The history of the human race is one long story of attempts by certain persons and classes to obtain control of the power of the State, so as to win earthly gratifications at the expense of others,”⁴ and such persons and classes had been all too successful. Instituting democracy would alter nothing. If the broad mass of the population holds political power, they will abuse it for their own benefit just as other classes have done. “If political power be given to the masses who have not hitherto had it, nothing will stop them from abusing it but laws and institutions.”⁵ Sumner discerned that the real danger to liberty under

²William Graham Sumner, *Lectures on the History of Protection in the United States* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1888), pp. 13–14.

³William Graham Sumner, “Theory and Practice of Elections, First Paper,” in *Essays of William Graham Sumner* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934), vol. 1, pp. 263–65; and William Graham Sumner, “Republican Government,” in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1992), p. 88.

⁴William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other* (1883; repr., Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1974), p. 88.

⁵Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 28, 32.

democratic forms came not from a majority bent on plundering the possessors and makers of wealth, but from elites acting in the name and under the cover of the people. Sumner understood that minoritarian tyranny was a far greater danger than was the majoritarian variety.

Sumner gave no systematic attention to the problem of limiting and balancing political power. However, he did argue that the only way to do so was through inherited institutions, mores, and laws. Such could only be wrought by historical evolution within particular polities. For Sumner, liberty was a historical achievement, the product of gradual historical-cultural development; and Burkean prescription, particularism, and inheritance were more important than constitution-making *de novo* or theoretic speculation. Liberties “are safe only when guaranteed against all arbitrary power and all class and personal interest” by means of “laws and institutions.” He had no faith that liberty could be secured, or government limited, by means of political architecture:

It will do no good to heap law upon law, or to try by constitutional provisions simply to abstain from the use of powers which we find we always abuse. How can we get bad legislators to pass a law which shall hinder bad legislators from passing a bad law?

He also insisted that the health of liberty depended upon the moral character and habits of the people empowered to govern. Self-government required “vigilance,” “exertion,” and self-discipline. Without those qualities, the people will be governed by others, and their vote will mean nothing.⁶

THE NON-INTERVENTION PHILOSOPHY

Sumner praised modern capitalism as a system of grand social cooperation. “It is a system of division of functions, which is being refined all the time by subdivision of trade and occupation, and by the differentiation of new trades.” It is self-regulating, governed by its own laws, “automatic and instinctive in its operation.” If unfettered, it is the most productive system of economy. “The total of national wealth is greatest where each disposes of his own energy in production and exchange with the least interference.”⁷

⁶Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, p. 94.

⁷Sumner, *Lectures on the History of Protection*, p. 12.

Capitalism is also a cultural achievement, as it requires certain preconditions—private property, mercantile honesty, freedom of contract, freedom of exchange, freedom of the individual—that are themselves the product of long processes of historical development. “This great cooperative effort” is “one of the great products of civilization—one of its costliest products and highest refinements.”⁸ *Laissez faire* represented the highest political wisdom.

Sumner believed that the doctrine of *laissez faire* is just as applicable to society as it is to the economy, for the social order, like the economy, is governed by its own laws and logic of development. Society needs no government, no planning, no moral policemen, and no coerced reformation from above. “Society . . . does not need any care or supervision. Society needs first of all to be freed from these meddlers—that is, to be let alone.” No other course is compatible with freedom. “Let us translate it into blunt English, and it will read: Mind your own business. It is nothing but the doctrine of liberty.” Sumner insisted that all genuine and lasting progress in civilization is the result of growth and evolution, never “reconstruction . . . on the plan of some enthusiastic social architect.”⁹

Sumner rejected the idea that men had rights by nature. “There can be no rights against Nature, except to get out of her whatever we can, which is only the fact of the struggle for existence, stated over again.” He did not take seriously Lockean natural-rights theory. For Sumner, rights are legal and historical, and represented an accomplishment of civilization. Moreover, every just right is balanced by a corresponding duty. “There is no right whatever inherited by man which has not an equivalent and corresponding duty by the side of it, as the price of it.” For instance, the right to one’s property is deducible from the corresponding “duty” not to steal the property of others.

Although early natural-rights theorists may have had in mind only life, liberty, and property, their doctrine of grounding such rights *in nature* was misconceived and certain to be abused by indefinite enlargements, as had already happened in his day.

The divine rights of man have succeeded to the obsolete divine right of kings. If it is true, then, that a man is born with rights, he comes into the world with claims on somebody besides his parents. Against whom does he hold such

⁸Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 56, 58.

⁹Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 103–4.

rights? There can be no rights against nature or against God. . . . [T]hese rights must hold against their fellow-men and must mean that somebody else is to spend his energy to sustain the existence of the persons so born. What then becomes of the natural rights of the one whose energies are to be diverted from his own interests?

He went on:

The notion of natural rights . . . lends itself to the most vicious kind of social dogmatism, for if a man has natural rights, then the reasoning is clear up to the finished socialistic doctrine that a man has a natural right to whatever he needs, and that the measure of his claims is the wishes which he wants fulfilled.

In his day, one of “the most specious application[s] of the dogma of rights is to labor,” that “every man has a right to work.” Sumner replied that work “is not a right, but an irksome necessity.”¹⁰ For Sumner, liberty was not a right of nature but a hard-won historical achievement.

DEMOCRACY

What is democracy?

Democracy is a theory about sovereignty, or who ought to rule. Its first dogma is that all men are equal. Its second dogma is that power and rule belong as of right to a majority of the equal and undifferentiated units.

He contrasted it with “civil liberty,” the first principle of which “is that there is no one who, of right, ought to rule.”¹¹ Democracy is more than a term for a certain type of government; it is

a set of dogmas about political rights and who ought to rule. Its essence is equality. It tries to reduce human society to equal and impersonal atoms, in regard to which number would alone be important.

It is, thus, an ideology, a quasi-religious faith, a “superstition,” and it is false. Its two foundational dogmas—human equality and social atomization—have no support in human nature or experience.

¹⁰Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 116–17.

¹¹William Graham Sumner, *Andrew Jackson* (1882; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), p. 224.

I can find nowhere any foundation or place for the notion that all men are equal, in any sense of equality, nor for the notion that they ever were equal, or can be equal, or ought to be equal, or were born equal, or were intended by God to be equal.

The advance of civilization has been marked at every stage by an *increase* in inequality, social differentiation, and complexity. The principle of one-man one-vote, by giving no political recognition to differences in intelligence and wealth among persons, to the natural divisions within society, or to the existence of classes, is unjust, and can only lead to laws that are unjust and unwise.¹²

He also questioned the democratic dogma that the same form of government was suitable for all kinds of different societies and collectivities, without regard to their level of education, industrial development, and internal diversity. If democracy is understood as self-government, in which the government actually carries out the wishes of the majority of the population, then it “requires a homogenous population,” for without it, democracy becomes merely another form of class government. Here Sumner agreed with the classical republican theorists, such as Montesquieu and Rousseau, and the early American republicans, such as Jefferson, on the precondition of homogeneity for republican government. In bi-racial or multi-racial societies, democracy becomes a contest among the races for the privileges, benefits, and offices of the state.

Democracy has been “realized” in only three kinds of social organizations:

- “amongst slave-owners, enjoying leisure and recognizing amongst themselves the equality of all freemen,” such as in ancient Sparta, classical Athens, and the former slave states of the United States;
- “primitive agricultural townships,” such as in colonial New England; and
- “Caesarean empires,” such as imperial Rome and Napoleonic France.

Because Sumner rejected the moralistic, equalitarian, and atomistic dogmas upon which democracy rested, he was not in favor of extending the suffrage to ex-slaves or to women. He denied that either

¹²Sumner, “Theory and Practice of Elections, First Paper,” p. 267.

group could claim a *moral* right to vote, as he denied that *anyone* had such a right. The main question for him was whether expanding the franchise would lead to better government (as in less government, more frugal government, and more peaceful government). However, he also believed that there was a question of fairness involved. As such, he did believe that suffrage should be extended to those freed blacks who had acquired some property and formal education.¹³

From the Revolution to Sumner's own day, liberty and representative government had become conflated in both the popular and elite mind. "The popular notion is that we have a free country because we select our political officers by elections [and] that our free institutions centre in and depend upon elections." Nothing could be more untrue. Liberty is to be measured by the extent of individual freedom and the degree to which government is restrained from taxing, regulating, and supervising. "It is not at all a matter of elections, or universal suffrage, or democracy. All institutions are to be tested by the degree to which they guarantee liberty." There is no reason to believe that democracy would prove friendlier to liberty than would monarchy, aristocracy, or other forms of elitist rule.

"History is only the tiresome repetition of one story. Persons and classes have sought to win possession of the power of the State in order to live luxuriously off the earnings of others." If political power be vested in the masses, "[t]hey will commit abuse, if they can and dare, just as others have done." Ruling elites have misused their power for selfish ends because it was in their nature to do so. The people share the same nature. Greed, selfishness, and other "vices are confined to no nation, class, or age." History has demonstrated over and over that unchecked power will be tyrannical whether wielded by the one, the few, or the many.¹⁴ The reader can judge for himself how liberty has fared after more than a century of collectivist democracy.

The theory behind extending the suffrage to all adult males was that this would ensure that legislation was framed to benefit the interests of all, rather than of the few. Sumner demonstrated in his historical studies that it did not work out that way. Universal suffrage in a diverse society only prepared the way for the domination of interests. Mass opinion is always amorphous, transient, mysterious, and inactive.

¹³William Graham Sumner, "Theory and Practice of Elections, Second Paper," in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, vol. 2, pp. 29–32.

¹⁴Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 27–30.

A small group, therefore, who know what they want and how they propose to accomplish it, are able by energetic action to lead the whole body. Hence the danger which arises for us, in this country, from incorporated or combined interests; it is and always has been our greatest danger. An organized interest forms a compact body, with strong wishes and motives, ready to spend money, time, and labor; it has to deal with a large mass, but it is a mass of people who are ill-informed, unorganized, and more or less indifferent. There is no wonder that victory remains with the interests.¹⁵

The ascendancy of special interests—of minority rule—over the general interest (i.e., general freedom and impartial law) was identified by Condé Raguet two generations before Sumner as a greater threat than majoritarian tyranny.¹⁶ However, the phenomenon had been utterly overlooked by the framers of the Constitution, and it remains largely unrealized today.

SUMNER ON PLUTOCRACY

Sumner was too astute to believe that there was any danger that democracy could degenerate into mass rule. The mass was unorganized, unintelligent, and without leisure or a taste for study. How could they possibly rule? “The fate of modern democracy is to fall into subjection to plutocracy.” The term plutocracy is integral to Sumner’s thought. By it, he did not mean the rule of wealth, for he thought that wealth *should* have more political power than the mass. Rather, he meant a type of government in which effective control rested with men of wealth who sought to use *political* means to increase their wealth. Sumner believed that there is no form of government better suited to their control than democracy.

The methods and machinery of democratic, republican self-government—caucuses, primaries, committees, and conventions—lend themselves perhaps more easily than other political methods and machinery to the uses of selfish cliques which seek political influence for interested purposes.

There is nothing new or surprising about this. “The plutocrats are simply trying to do what the generals, nobles, and priests have done in

¹⁵William Graham Sumner, “Republican Government,” in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, pp. 84–85.

¹⁶See Condé Raguet, *Principles of Free Trade* (1835; reprint, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969).

the past—get the power of the State into their hands, so as to bend the rights of others to their advantage.” Thus,

the problem of civil liberty is constantly renewed. Solved once, it re-appears in a new form. The old constitutional guarantees were all aimed against kings and nobles. New ones must be invented to hold the power of wealth

from seizing the power of the state.¹⁷ But what are they?

Although Sumner was adept at diagnosing the evils of democracy, he was unimpressive when it came to fashioning remedies for them or prescriptions for representative governments that would not threaten liberty. He suggested that an independent judiciary might be a bulwark against plutocracy, but how could that be when the lawyers and judges were drawn from the same socioeconomic class as the plutocrats? Besides, he had already demonstrated how the legal profession had been a bulwark of the corrupt and plutocratic system of fractional-reserve, paper-money banking before the Civil War.¹⁸

Sumner thought all governments in the western world were falling under the dominion of plutocracy.

The power of wealth in the English House of Commons has steadily increased for fifty years. The history of the present French Republic has shown an extraordinary development of plutocratic spirit and measures.

In the postbellum United States, plutocratic democracy sanctioned massive railroad subsidies, national banking, high tariffs, and vast public debts. “Nowhere in the world is the danger of plutocracy as formidable as it is here.” In Europe, the residual power and influence of a hereditary aristocracy checked the rule of naked wealth, but in America, there was no aristocracy. Americans also had a “blind and uncritical” faith in the efficacy of their democratic institutions and “the political fallacies” that enveloped them. They were, thus, deaf to criticisms or suggestions that their democracy needed guards against plutocratic control. Sumner identified the myth of American exceptionalism as a powerful impediment to libertarian constitutional reform. Americans have a powerful habit of complacency and conservatism that springs from the idea that they are an exceptional people and country, immune from the vices and sins that have plagued mankind.

¹⁷Sumner, *Andrew Jackson*, pp. 225–27; Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 94–95.

¹⁸Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 95–96.

One of the oldest and most mischievous fallacies in this country has been the notion that we are better than other nations. This fallacy has hindered us from recognizing our old foes as soon as we should have done.¹⁹

In the twenty-first century, Americans remain just as paralyzed and bewitched by this flattering but false myth as they were in Sumner's day.

The plutocrats have another advantage. Just as they have no moral scruples against profiting from corporatist schemes, so, too, have they no qualms about flattering, lying to, or bribing the masses.

The masses continually trust the demagogues [sic] who flatter them and make them all sorts of promises, but deceive and betray them to the plutocrats. They refuse to trust the "gentlemen," who would not promise much and would perhaps tell unflattering truths, but would not lie and would not betray.²⁰

The reader must judge whether the intellectual and moral level of American politicians at the onset of the twenty-first century confirms Sumner's judgment here. He would consider it a fit test, for "the greatest test of the republican form of government is the kind of men whom it puts in office as a matter of fact."²¹

PARTY GOVERNMENT AND THE SHAM OF ELECTIONS

Sumner believed that democracies inevitably succumb to the rule of parties for two reasons. First, the mass of the people have never, under any social organization, had the leisure, the inclination, or the ability to study the issues intelligently, much less to acquire the necessary background in political and economic science. The party which best flatters their vanity, promises them costless benefits, and simplifies the issues wins their loyalty, and the election becomes an exercise in self-affirmation, group solidarity, and demonology of the enemy. It is "us" against "them." To make things worse, elections are preceded by an elaborate, secretive, and time-consuming nominating process during which political machines and managers wield effective control. This process is far more important than the election, for

¹⁹Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 90–93, 94–95.

²⁰Sumner, "Theory and Practice of Elections, First Paper," p. 268.

²¹Sumner, "Republican Government," p. 88.

it is here that the candidates will be chosen and the issues selected. At election time, the voters are given a choice between two candidates who may stand for essentially the same thing, or nothing.²²

Second, given that the nature of democracy is to throw off all limitations upon government power, elections become “struggles for power—war between the two parties” for control of the state.

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 the others.²³

Sumner came to believe that creating a powerful presidency and putting it up for frequent election had been one of the greatest mistakes made by the framers of the Constitution. The desire to possess the power, prestige, and patronage of that office had absorbed and focused all the political energies of the nation with disastrous results. “The question how and by whom to get that office filled has been constantly present, and it has superceded all other questions.” It has proved to be “the controlling fact in our political history.” One election is hardly over before the intrigue and planning for the next one begins. “Between the bickering over the last election and preparations for the next one, sometimes almost the whole four years have slipped away.” This happened from 1824–28 and 1876–80.²⁴

Elections were supposed to educate the public in the great issues of the day, clarify the choices before them, and help them to decide on a consistent course of policy. Sumner thought they had done none of these.

The education the election exerts is education in the art of elections, in the tactics of party management, in shrewd and cynical dealing with the weaknesses of human nature, and not in the principles of self-government, or the knowledge of public questions.

Party platforms are full of “empty phrases and Janus-faced propositions,” and often “two contradictory propositions are combined in the

²²Sumner, “Republican Government,” p. 86.

²³Sumner, “Theory and Practice of Elections, First Paper,” pp. 270–72.

²⁴William Graham Sumner, “Presidential Elections and Civil-Service Reform,” in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, pp. 103–4.

same sentence, or a non-proposition is so stated that each man may read there just what will suit his own notions.”²⁵

There never is but one plank which is direct and clear. That is the one on which the party-coherence depends for the time being. The other planks are a transparent attempt to say something which two men of opposite opinions may understand, each to suit himself.²⁶

The art of politics has been and continues to be

to make one set of people believe that they are about to have their wishes gratified while, at the same time, those who seem to be committed by [promises and programs] to some irksome responsibility are reassured by being told that they will not really have to do anything. Of course somebody is duped.²⁷

The object of political campaigning is not to educate the public at all, but to energize one’s supporters and win over by means of deception the non-committed middle. “Serious issues are excluded so far as possible, since, of course, the parties can be held together more easily, and the election can be managed with less trouble, if old issues are maintained.” Introducing controversial issues, taking clear-cut stands on them, or proposing bold reforms are all politically unwise, for they arouse the opposition, create enemies, and scare timid or undecided voters. Thus, political managers postpone controversial questions or urgent matters until after the election is over. The most important thing is “to elect our man.” “The election acts, therefore, as a blight upon struggling reforms, and as a hindrance to important political measures.” Other times, “measures of doubtful expediency” are pushed through “to make capital for the election.” While elections offer the public pleasing platitudes and vague promises, they often dangle real benefits to powerful special interests.

The tariffs of 1816, 1824, 1828, and 1832 resulted from the bidding of the two parties . . . for the support of the protectionists. . . . In this way the protective policy was fastened on the country in spite of the interest of the nation, and the early set of the people to freedom in trade as well as to every other kind of freedom.

²⁵Sumner, “Presidential Elections and Civil-Service Reform,” p. 101.

²⁶Sumner, “Theory and Practice of Elections, First Paper,” p. 278.

²⁷William Graham Sumner, *History of Banking in the United States* (1896; reprint, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971), p. 316.

Other times, politicians have manufactured false but emotional issues as a way of creating capital, or they have exploited or wrought up latent divisions within society. For example, politicians of both parties intensified “sectional pride and animosity until a presidential election became the occasion of the civil war.”²⁸

The viability of the democratic system depends on the intelligence, knowledge, attention, patriotism, and public-spiritedness of the vast bulk of the electorate. Sumner doubted if the public would ever possess these qualities. Democracy assumes that “the voter has a will or opinion already formed on great political issues whenever the election-day recurs.” Sumner doubted whether this was true except on the rarest of occasions.

Second, democracy assumes that the voter will vote for the candidate or party which most closely represents his deepest political convictions (that is, if he has any). This assumption ignores the proven ability of political elites to dupe, bribe, or intimidate the electorate so that, even if they have an opinion, “they will not give it.” In short, “there is no room in the theory for the supposition that the voter may be incompetent to form an opinion, or that he may be frightened or cheated or bribed so as not to state his opinion truly.”

Third, democracy assumes that the citizens will not respond to mercenary appeals to their self-interest, but will always choose the good of the whole country. As Sumner pointed out, the success of the free market is based on the universal power of the very opposite motive (self-interest) which democratic politics assume the voter will discard in his disinterested zeal for the public good.

Fourth, democracy assumes that “the ballot with majority rule is a simple but adequate mechanism for getting a clear expression of the public will.” Were elections confined to a single issue only, or a single man, without fraud, deception, bribery, intimidation, or complication, then perhaps that would be true, but it never happens that way, and there are few election devices that professional politicians regard with more detestation and fear than the referendum.²⁹

No idea more annoyed Sumner than the superstition that democratic elections are a magic elixir from which flow liberty, justice, and wise governance.

²⁸Sumner, “Presidential Elections and Civil-Service Reform,” pp. 103, 106.

²⁹Sumner, “Theory and Practice of Elections, First Paper,” pp. 277–83.

No machinery can . . . get out of a body of ignorant and incompetent voters the result, *not* which other competent voters would have given, *but* the far greater absurdity, the result which these voters would have given if they had been competent and intelligent.³⁰

Elsewhere, he writes:

If the state by its laws has given a share in political power to men who cannot form an opinion, or can be cheated, or can be frightened out of an opinion, or can be induced to use their power, not as they think best, but as others wish, then the ballot-boxes will not contain a true expression of the will of the voters, or it will be a corrupt and so, probably, a mischievous and ruinous will; but I do not see how a law can possibly be framed to correct that wrong, and make foolish men give a wise judgment or corrupt men give an honest judgment which shall redound to the public welfare. There is no alchemy in the ballot box.³¹

PATERNAL GOVERNMENT

Sumner feared that American “democracy” would grow even worse by becoming paternal while not ceasing to be plutocratic. Plutocracy would prove to be the parent of paternalism. Such plutocratic devices as “paper-money schemes, tariff schemes, subsidy schemes, internal improvement schemes, or usury laws . . . now furnish precedents, illustration, and encouragement for the new category of demands,” such as limitations on the length of the working day, unemployment insurance, government health care, and other means of providing for economic and social “security.” The plutocrats may conclude that extending such benefits is the price they must pay for retaining power and their own lucrative privileges, while the masses will regard paternalism as their right to a share in the spoils of the state.³²

Sumner condemned the incipient welfare state as incompatible with freedom and inimical to liberty. Those citizens who favor it are hypocrites who clamor for security with the same insistence and sense of entitlement as they demand freedom and equality. Here was “the inevitable result of combining democratic political theories with humanitarian social theories.” The modern man

³⁰Sumner, “Theory and Practice of Elections, First Paper,” p. 279.

³¹Sumner, “Republican Government,” pp. 85, 87.

³²Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 28, 32; and William Graham Sumner, “Socialism,” in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, p. 179.

wants to be subject to no man. He wants to be equal to his fellows, as all sovereigns are equal. So be it; but he cannot escape the deduction that he can call no man to his aid. In a free state, every man is held and expected to take care of himself and his family, to make no trouble for his neighbor.

If he fails in this, he throws burdens on others and ceases to be an independent citizen. He becomes “a privileged, petted person—emancipated from duties, endowed with claims.” Thus, “[l]iberty, universal suffrage, and democracy are not pledges of care and protection, but they carry with them the exaction of individual responsibility.”³³

THE POLITICIAN AS MORALISTIC BUSYBODY AND SOCIAL ENGINEER

There was also a danger that “democratic” government would enact moral reforms or try to alter the structure of society. In America during the 1830s, religious revivalism and spiritualism had led to various reform movements (or “enthusiasms” as they were then called), such as abolitionism, temperance (really a coerced abstinence from alcohol), sabbatarianism, and feminism. They did not have great numbers behind them, but they had active and tireless proselytizers. Their “zeal . . . was astonishing.”

Sumner wanted to ask them: “Why get so excited about it, and why not pursue your reformatory and philanthropic work outside of politics? Why not go about your proposed improvement soberly and in due measure?” His answer was that they had sought the coercive power of the state to *force* their reforms upon society.

All the cliques wanted to reach their object by the short cut of legislation, that is, to force other people to do what they were convinced it was a wise thing to do, and a great many of them also wanted to make political capital out of their causes.³⁴

“The taxing power is especially something after which the reformer’s finger always itches,” as it offers endless potential for rewarding certain behaviors and punishing others.³⁵

³³Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 34–36.

³⁴Sumner, *Andrew Jackson*, p. 366. To this day, moral reformers (e.g., advocates of affirmative action, school busing) will not admit, even to themselves, that this is their goal, and they are rarely, if ever, exposed as tyrants.

³⁵Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, p. 100.

Sumner offered a brilliant psychological study of the reformer and moral activist. Such people find satisfaction in making plans for society, for by doing so they acquire power, “public position,” and a sense of importance. “Hence, we have an unlimited supply of reformers, philanthropists, humanitarians, and would-be managers-in-general of society.” They are self-righteous and enjoy the sensation of being so. “The social doctors enjoy the satisfaction of feeling themselves to be more moral or more enlightened than their fellow-men.” Sumner suspected that they were “only more ignorant and more presumptuous than other people.” They were confident, bold, and uncritical, never looking back or subjecting their reform to any kind of scrutiny. “They never have any doubt of the efficacy of their remedies. They never take account of any ulterior effects which may be apprehended from the remedy itself.”³⁶

Sumner espied two “dangers” in “minding other people’s business.” There was “the danger that a man may leave his own business unattended to” and there was “the danger of an impertinent interference with another’s affairs.” The reformers begin with a question they have no right to ask: “What kind of society do we want to make?” Once they have “settled this question *a priori* to their satisfaction, they set to work to make their ideal society” by crafting plans and agitating for its political implementation. They assume that they know what is best for everyone else, and how others should live and order their lives. This presumption is rooted in the logical fallacy of perfect knowledge, a fallacy shared by the economic planner.

In practice, their moral legislation leads to endless revisions, tinkering, and adaptations, because their reforms never have the intended effect. The reformers also neglect to consider what impact their empirical legislation will have on other aspects of society. “They ignore all the effects on other members of society than the ones they have in view. They are always under the dominion of the superstition of government.” They never ask or consider who will pay for the reform, or how those opposed to it will respond, or what unintended side-effects will result.

They assume, wrongly, that they can perform experiments on society as if it were a laboratory in which one aspect of nature can be isolated and treated. They ignore the social fact that “all parts of society hold together, and that forces which are set in action act and react throughout the whole organism, until an equilibrium is produced

³⁶Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 97–98, 101.

by a readjustment of all interests and rights.” The projects of “empirical social science” are bound to produce endless mischief and further interventions, just as the previous and ongoing experiments in “empirical political economy” have done.³⁷

SUMNER ON THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

Sumner penned his two most prophetic essays in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, which he had opposed as an ill-advised and fateful foreign adventure likely to inaugurate an American empire. The Americans won the war and inherited, as the price of victory, elements of the defunct Spanish empire (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Philippines). Sumner argued that overseas expansion and imperialism were “at war with the best traditions, principles, and interests of the American people,” which were self-government and self-determination, freedom of trade, economic liberty, and minimal government. He further warned that “they will plunge us into a network of difficult problems and political perils, which we might have avoided, while they offer us no corresponding advantages in return.”³⁸

Sumner saw in imperialism both a temptation and a delusion. The temptation was that foreign victories and possessions flattered “national vanity” and appealed to “national cupidity,” but ignored the costs in lives and treasure. While the people and their leaders would revel in the pomp, parades, flag waving, and patriotic declamations associated with wars and the large military establishments that imperialism entailed, they would be unlikely to sit down and study the history, economics, and costs of empire. If they would do so, they would see how nations that have turned down the imperial road have ruined themselves. For example, Rome lost her republic and her very nationhood.

“Spain was the first, for a long time the greatest, of the modern imperialistic states.” Imperial Spain had “lost self-government” and squandered “her resources on interests which were foreign to her.” She was now a second-rate power, “poor, decrepit, [and] bankrupt.” Although Spain had immense gold and silver mines, fleets and armies, cathedrals and palaces, her industry and commerce had languished.

³⁷Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*, pp. 99, 104, 107.

³⁸William Graham Sumner, “The Conquest of the United States by Spain,” in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, pp. 291, 272.

Spanish manpower was squandered fighting wars, filling the ranks of the armies, manning fleets, building warships, and filling administrative and police posts abroad. Imperialism means “war, debt, taxation, diplomacy, a grand governmental system, pomp, glory, a big army and navy, lavish expenditures, political jobbery.” Sumner warned that if Americans took up Spain’s burden and followed her down the road of empire, they would suffer the same fate.³⁹

Imperialism requires a spirit and structure of militarism for its support. Sumner regarded all the labor and capital invested in military and naval forces to be so much wealth, comfort, and refinement lost to the well-being of the people. “Militarism” is a parasite upon the productive powers of modern “industrialism.” As factories multiplied, so did the size and lethality of armies and navies. The Europeans were throwing away much of the fruition of centuries of scientific and industrial development, patient capital accumulation, and hard work in armament production, overseas garrisons, oceanic fleets, administrative apparatus, and endless foreign wars.

It is militarism which is eating up all the products of science and art, defeating the energy of the population and wasting its savings. It is militarism which forbids the people to give their attention to the problems of their own welfare and to give their strength to the education and comfort of their own children.⁴⁰

How much higher would be the American standard of living, how much more capital and refinement would we possess, had we not squandered trillions upon the forty year Cold War?

Nevertheless, many profit from empire, and those who do have a powerful interest in maintaining and extending it. Sumner believed that no class benefits more and sacrifices less than the plutocrats. Unlike the aristocrats of England, France, and Spain who fought and often died for their respective empires, the plutocrats rake in the profits while others fight. In the coming century,

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

³⁹Sumner, “Conquest of the U.S. by Spain,” pp. 272, 276.

⁴⁰Sumner, “Conquest of the U.S. by Spain,” p. 290.

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 on the strong.⁴¹

The unchallenged political power of the military-industrial-petroleum complex in the United States in the aftermath of the Cold War, and its craft in conjuring a successor, the potentially endless and certainly unwinnable War on Terror, confirms Sumner's analysis here.

Sumner reminded his readers that much of their prosperity, their freedom, and their independence is due to geography.

The United States is in a protected situation. It is easy to have equality where land is abundant and where the population is small. It is easy to have prosperity where a few men have a continent to exploit. It is easy to have liberty when you have no dangerous neighbors and when the struggle for existence is easy.⁴²

Sumner asked his readers why they would want to throw away these advantages in a vain pursuit of military glory and overseas dominion.

The imperialists warned of the perils of continuing American "isolation" from the rest of the world. Sumner asked, what perils?

Our ancestors all came here to isolate themselves from the social burdens and inherited errors of the old world. When the others are all over ears in trouble, who would not be isolated in freedom from care? When the others are crushed under the burden of militarism, who would not be isolated in peace and industry? When the others are all struggling under debt and taxes, who would not be isolated in the enjoyment of his own earnings for the benefit of his own family? When the rest are all in a quiver of anxiety, lest at a day's notice they may be involved in a social cataclysm, who would not be isolated out of reach of the disaster? What we are doing is that we are abandoning this blessed isolation to run after a share in the trouble.⁴³

No one has better explained how imperialism undermines self-government at home and cannot by its very nature impose it abroad.

⁴¹Sumner, "Conquest of the U.S. by Spain," p. 291.

⁴²Sumner, "Conquest of the U.S. by Spain," p. 290.

⁴³Sumner, "Conquest of the U.S. by Spain," p. 292.

“The war with Spain,” to take one example “was precipitated upon us headlong, without reflection or deliberation, and without any due formulation of public opinion.” There was hardly a national debate at all, just a shouting match.

Whenever a voice was raised in behalf of deliberation and the recognized maxims of statesmanship, it was howled down in a storm of vituperation and cant. 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.

Those who opposed intervention were accused of being enemies of Cuban liberty, indifferent to the sufferings of the Cuban people, apologists for Spanish despotism, unpatriotic, cowardly, and un-American. “Patriotism is being prostituted into a nervous intoxication which is fatal to an apprehension of truth.”

Once the war was over and the colonies gained, expansionists argued that how the country got into the war was no longer important, and that America had international responsibilities which it could not shirk. America is a world power now, and it cannot go back, they said.⁴⁴ Sumner asked, where is self-government if leaders are relieved from responsibility for their previous words and policies, if the country’s best traditions are broken in a rush to fight a needless war, and if the country is committed irreversibly (forbidden to turn back or change course or even debate such things) to a future of empire, overseas war, foreign entanglements, and world responsibilities.⁴⁵

The Bush doctrine—American world dominion is justified by her divine mission to spread freedom and democracy—is not new. The Spanish-American War and its imperial aftermath were justified on the same grounds. Sumner noted how a senator had claimed that the United States would occupy the Philippines only long enough to teach them self-government. If such were the case, argued Sumner, the Filipinos would never enjoy self-government, for under that system, only *they* could decide when they were ready to form a government and what kind it should be.

⁴⁴For a confirmation of Sumner’s analysis of the contemporary debate, see Walter Karp, *The Politics of War: The Story of Two Wars which Altered Forever the Political Life of the American Republic, 1890–1920* (1979; reprint, New York: Franklin Square Press, 2003), chaps. 4 and 5.

⁴⁵Sumner, “Conquest of the U.S. by Spain,” pp. 274–75.

Sumner reminded his readers that every imperial power—Britain, France, Russia, Spain, the Muslim world—has boasted of its civilizing mission, and ridiculed the pretensions of the others to do the same; while, for the most part, the subjected peoples wanted only to be left alone to follow their own ways and their own leaders. He warned his countrymen that if they appear amongst the Filipinos as rulers, there will be social unrest, discord, and rebellion. “The most important thing which we shall inherit from the Spaniards will be the task of suppressing rebellions.”⁴⁶

The English, he pointed out, are “hated all over the globe” for the way “they correct and instruct other people.” Americans would do well not to imitate their “Phariseism.” If America attempts “to be schoolmistress to others, it will shrivel up into the same vanity and self-conceit,” and be the object of the same loathing and hatred as the other imperial powers. Moral imperialism is as “false and wrong” as any other kind of imperialism, for it violates freedom and self-government. The nation that says, “We know what is good for you better than you know yourself and we are going to make you do it” cares nothing for liberty or national self-determination, since liberty “means leaving people to live out their own lives in their own way.” It is also a recipe for endless intervention and perpetual war, as the subsequent history of the United States demonstrated. Sumner wrote:

The doctrine that . . . we are to take in hand any countries which we do not think capable of self-government is one which will lead us very far. With that doctrine in the background, our politicians will have no trouble to find a war ready for us the next time that they think that it is time for us to have another.⁴⁷

One thinks of subsequent American interventions and wars in Europe, Vietnam, Somalia, Bosnia, and Iraq, just to name a few.

Sumner questioned whether Americans had mastered the art of self-government sufficiently to be imposing it abroad. “Our hands are quite full at home of problems by the solution of which the peace and happiness of the American people could be greatly increased.” He listed them. One was endemic corruption in urban government. Americans, he contended,

⁴⁶Sumner presented this essay in the form of an address on January 16, 1899. The Philippine insurrection began on February 4, 1899, lasted three-and-a-half years, and cost the lives of 4,200 American and 20,000 insurgents.

⁴⁷Sumner, “Conquest of the U.S. by Spain,” pp. 276–77, 282.

cannot govern a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants so as to get comfort and convenience in it at a low cost and without jobbery—and Spain and all her possessions are not worth as much to you and me as the efficiency of the fire department of New Haven.

A second problem was excessive Civil War pensions. “Americans cannot reform the pension list. Its abuses are rooted in the methods of democratic self-government, and no one dares touch them.”

A third problem was chronic monetary inflation, and its attendant disorders, such as the business cycle:

Americans cannot disentangle their currency from the confusion into which it was thrown by the Civil War, and they cannot put it on a simple, sure, and sound basis which would give stability to the business of the country.

Fourth was the race problem. “Americans cannot assure the suffrage to negroes throughout the United States.” The attempt was made; but it failed from every point of view, and it has now been abandoned.⁴⁸

Sumner noticed the American habit of rhetorical bombast, infused with equal parts of self-righteousness and opportunism. He points out that “there is a consistency of character for a nation as well as for a man. A man who changes his principles from week to week is destitute of character and deserves no confidence.” The same goes for nations.

Three years ago we were ready to fight Great Britain to make her arbitrate a quarrel which she had with Venezuela. The question about the *Maine* was one of the fittest subjects for arbitration that ever arose between two nations, and we refused to listen to such a proposition.

In three years, the English went from being our enemies to being our friends.

Americans congratulate themselves on their materialistic civilization, on their great wealth and wide-ranging prosperity, then embark on a foreign adventure or grasp at an imperial mission to prove that Americans really value grander things than the mere pursuit of wealth. From the 1850s through the 1870s, ending slavery and imposing racial equality was the highest political ideal, justifying every means necessary to its realization; now it has been forgotten, and racial inequality is again accepted.

⁴⁸Sumner, “Conquest of the U.S. by Spain,” pp. 294–95.

For thirty years the negro was in fashion. He has had political value and has been petted. Now we have made friends with the Southerners. They and we are hugging each other. We are all united. The negro's day is over. He is out of fashion.

Sumner concluded: "So the great principles change all the time; or, what is far more important, the phrases change. Some go out of fashion, others come in, but the phrase-makers are with us all the time."⁴⁹

SUMNER FORESEES A CENTURY OF WAR AND COLLECTIVISM

Sumner was not optimistic about the fate of liberty and peace in the twentieth century. He believed that the European empires, then at the height of their global reach and power, were on a collision course to war, and that the United States, a new imperial power after its victory over Spain, would join in the carnage as an equal "party." "The probability is great that . . . the century will be as full of war as the eighteenth century was and of the same reasons."⁵⁰ The cost would be great in lives and treasure.

He foresaw the triumph of "social democracy," which he defined as a form of government in which "masses are organized to win materialistic advantages for themselves by the use of their political power." He was confident that the masses would behave exactly as the plutocrats and aristocrats had before them. Indeed, they were already doing so.

Everybody who can get a pension votes for pensions regardless of justice, right, truth, public welfare, and all those other noble things. . . . Policemen, teachers, and other employees organize politically to further their pecuniary interests at the public expense.

He hastened to add that the increasingly paternal governments of the coming century would continue to be plutocratic.

During the twentieth century . . . democracy will be strong, but the wealth, denied recognition and legitimate power in politics, will do what we now see it do; it will exert an illicit and corrupting power because its processes will be secret.

⁴⁹Sumner, "Conquest of the U.S. by Spain," pp. 292–93.

⁵⁰William Graham Sumner, "The Bequests of the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth," in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics*, p. 376.

Under social democracy, wealth will continue to be “the real power” behind the state, and what the politicians plunder with one hand they will pay back in jobs, welfare, and subsidies with the other. “There is nothing left of democracy when politicians squeeze money out of capitalists and corporations with which to win elections and pay it back by jobbing legislation.”⁵¹

Sumner’s final judgment on nineteenth-century American democracy was that it had failed to secure liberty or good government, and it would do worse in the next century. Who was to blame? He blamed the *people*. “The root of all our troubles at present and in the future is in the fact that the people fails of what was assumed about it and attributed to it.” The people complain about the politicians, about the special interests, and about the power of corporations to corrupt the political process. But who elected the politicians? Who makes up the special interests? Who elected corruptible legislatures and presidents? “He who rules is responsible, be it Tsar, Pope, Emperor, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Demos.” The “people is altogether at fault. It has not done its first duty in the premises, and therefore the whole system has gone astray.”⁵²

The nineteenth century bequeaths to the twentieth no greater curse than the “man-on-the-curbstone.” Whether as a voter, an editor, or a politician, “he is now in full control, and his day of glory will be the twentieth century. He is ignorant, noisy, self-sufficient, dogmatic, and impatient of opposition or remonstrance.” He is “the common man.” Unlike the “forgotten man,” he “is not one of the quiet people who go about their own affairs and who, since they make no noise, are neglected.” The curbstone man is outspoken and opinionated, active and engaged, martial, moralistic, and militant. “He prides himself on being a reformer and a man of moral motives,” but he does not shrink from war.

He responds very promptly to the military appeal. That is exactly in his line. There is no need to think much. The affair is one of noise and hurrah, bells and trumpets, flags and drums, speeches and poetry. . . . He supposes that

⁵¹Sumner, “Bequests of the Nineteenth Century,” pp. 379, 383, 389.

⁵²Sumner, “Bequests of the Nineteenth Century,” p. 381. Sumner would not let the identity of the *people* go without examination. Who is this collective entity known as the *people* who are supposed to rule under democracy? For Sumner, the concept of the *people* was an intellectual fiction, an abstraction without definition or substance.

patriotism is an affair of enthusiasm and brag and bluster. He calls the flag “Old Glory” and wants a law that it shall be raised on all schoolhouses. Such matters as this occupy his mind.

Since the fateful Spanish War, he has taken the reins of power, “and our destiny has been settled without any reason or sense, without regard to history or political philosophy.”⁵³

What is that destiny? A paternalistic, plutocratic, imperial state, in which freedom and individuality will slowly suffocate and civilization coarsen and die. A century of war and collectivism has vindicated Sumner’s pessimism, and it appears that the twentieth century has bequeathed even worse to the twenty-first.

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⁵³Sumner, “Bequests of the Nineteenth Century,” pp. 384–85.