Rethinking Classical Liberalism in “Progressive” Times:
The Divergent Sociologies of Spencer and Sumner

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Nineteenth-century liberal political thought was intimately interwoven with theories of transformative social change. Liberal institutions and ideals were championed as the optimal political order for “modern” or “advanced” societies.¹ This mode of argument was premised on beliefs about the character of such societies and how they arise. When early nineteenth-century liberals such as Benjamin Constant articulated these beliefs they drew on the theory of the rise of “commercial society” associated with the Scottish Enlightenment.² But that theory predated, and thus did not speak directly to, democratization and industrialization, the two dominant socially transformative trends of the new century. When Tocqueville updated liberalism by addressing these trends in the 1830s he interpreted them as potential threats to the political order classical liberals advocated: a representative government limited to securing peace, property, and the rule of law, and thereby, a society in which the motor of progress is free competition and association. The dark edge of Tocqueville’s analysis was, however, mitigated by mid-century as liberals such as John Stuart Mill intellectually tamed industrialization and suffrage expansion by interpreting them as extensions of paths of economic and political progress charted in the rise of commerce. Classical liberalism’s limited government ideal was thereby rearticulated as being just as relevant and forward-looking a political theory as it had been early in the century.

The mid-century reformulation of limited government as compatible with, or even the natural ally of, industrialization and democratization was soon unsettled by the tides of history. During the last third of the nineteenth century the activities of governments in all “advanced” countries increasingly departed from classical liberalism’s ideal. This trend posed a dilemma that

¹ This mode of argument left open to liberals the possibility of justifying illiberal political orders in “backwards” societies, and thereby defending European imperial rule in Africa and Asia. See Uday Singh Mehta, Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, Jennifer, A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
² Kalyvas, Andreas and Ira Katznelson, Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
liberals responded to in such discrepant ways as to permanently rupture the liberal tradition. On the one hand British new liberals and American progressives began to argue that industrialization had transformed societies in ways that necessitated a more active government. They encouraged liberals to respond to this transformation by rethinking their conception of individual freedom to allow that governmental activity could, if it embodies the democratic will, advance rather than undermine freedom. The new liberalism thus embraced democracy as its ally in responding to industrialization with social and economic reforms that broke proudly from classical liberalism.

The new turn in liberalism did not, however, sweep all before it. Thinkers more wedded to classical liberal beliefs charted an alternative theoretical trajectory. They reacted to trends they saw as “paternalism” or “collectivism” by questioning the valorization of democracy or the very concept of progress itself. Classical liberalism’s disillusionment has received less attention from historians of liberal thought than the new progressive liberalism that was its temporal twin. This relative lack of attention might, perhaps, be due to the fragmenting character of disillusionment. There was no lack of liberal thinkers who reacted with skepticism or downright hostility to late nineteenth-century trends, but their disillusionment played itself out in divergent ways. Sir Henry Maine, for example, charged that democratization tended to empower masses hostile to liberal progress. 3 If Maine did not exemplify a general pattern, this because there was no pattern, and in the absence of a shared thrust beyond a disillusioned sensibility, the reactions of classical liberals to the late nineteenth century have too often fall through the sieve of histories of liberal thought.

This paper explores classical liberal disillusionment via two figures: Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. As self-avowed sociologists both made their theories of social change explicit, and thus offer an excellent opportunity to analyze how the disillusionment of classical liberalism was—like all shifts in nineteenth-century liberalism—entwined with visions of the

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past, present, and future of social change. In comparing these figures I also suggest the limits of recurrent portrayals of Sumner as an American Spencerian. Crucial differences between Spencer and Sumner came to the fore in their responses to the late-nineteenth century. While reacting in light of a shared background in classical liberalism, each sociologist worked out the theoretical consequences of disillusionment in divergent ways. In his later works Spencer retained his initial mid-century confidence that the endpoint of progress is a social order with minimal government by postponing realization of this ideal to a more distant future and opening up the present as a target for cutting critique. Sumner by contrast put aside belief in progress as he forged a “science of society” from the perspective of which such a belief was only a myth unable, at the dawn of the twentieth century, even to claim the redeeming feature of being socially useful.

**Herbert Spencer: Reconciling Sociology with Classical Liberalism**

It might appear paradoxical to turn to two sociologists to study a movement in the history of classical liberal thought. After all when Auguste Comte coined the term “sociology” in *Cours de Philosophie Positive* of 1830-42 it was to label a science he formulated with anti-liberal goals. Sociology was the new “positive” science of society meant to supersede the old field of political economy and, in particular, its view of the progress of commercial society. Comte offered a new theory of social progress—here analyzed, for the first time, as social “evolution”—whose telos was specifically *industrial* society. This theory reinterpreted liberal institutions and ideals as a way station to be superseded in the new stage of social evolution. Representative government as developed in England, and promoted by continental liberals like Constant, was thus, Comte held, only a “transitory and inadequate” political system. Optimal for the new era of industrial society was, instead, a “positive polity” that would place “spiritual power” in the hands of scientists and
“temporal power” in the hands of industrialists, bankers, and merchants. Comte envisioned the new science of sociology, not only as the herald of this positive polity, but also as a technocratic science that would help its elites consciously manage society so as, for example, to provide “security of Education and Employment” for all, and thereby combine “order” with “progress.”

Comte gave sociology its name and its concern with “evolution.” But the science was not inextricably bound to his politics. Efforts to reconcile sociology with liberalism, begun in J. S. Mill’s *System of Logic* in the 1840s, were later carried to their fullest extent by Herbert Spencer. While crediting Comte for the term sociology and other minor debts, Spencer stridently rejected his view of the science’s political implications. In contrast to “M. Comte’s ideal of society” as “one in which government is developed to the greatest extent” Spencer set forth his belief that the “society towards which we are progressing” was “one in which government will be reduced to the smallest amount possible, and freedom increased to the greatest amount possible.”

Spencer wedded sociology to classical liberalism by reimagining the relation between sociological knowledge and progress. Like Comte, Spencer charged sociology with developing knowledge of natural laws in the social domain. But he expected the science to show that the complexity of societies is such that efforts to consciously shape details of their current and future character spur unintended consequences that usually make overall outcomes worse. For Spencer sociology thus promised to lay a new scientific foundation for the old classical liberal conviction that government’s role in modern societies should be limited to securing conditions—rule of law,

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stable property rights, and national security from external aggression—under which progress
could, and would best, proceed on its own momentum. To the extent sociology could serve any
immediate practical end it was principally as a scientific corrective to rising calls for government
to act to address social problems of the industrial age:

increased knowledge … will check the tendency to think of a remedial measure as one
that may do good and cannot do harm. Nay more, the study of Sociology, scientifically
carried on by tracing back proximate causes to remote ones, and tracing down primary
effects to secondary and tertiary effects which multiply as they diffuse, will dissipate the
current illusion that social evils admit of radical cures.7

Spencer’s Evolutionary Theory of Social Progress

Through over four decades of sociological reflection, Spencer persistently exemplified a
marriage of sociology with classical liberalism. But major substantive details of his theory of
social change did change considerably. I schematize these changes by differentiating two periods
in Spencer’s thought. First I explore the evolutionary theory of social progress he forged during
the mid-century heyday of Victorian classical liberalism. I then turn to his mature sociology as
presented in Principles of Sociology, published between the mid-1870s and mid-1890s. Written
in the new—and to an aging classical liberal, the profoundly disillusioning—political context of
the late-nineteenth century, the Principles presented a more somber sociology in which the once
synonymous concepts of “evolution” and “progress” began to come apart.

When Spencer took up the search for natural laws of social progress during the 1850s he
oriented his search, as had Comte, in light of advances within biology, deploying the concept of
the “social organism,” and analogically using the originally biological concepts of “evolution,”
“structure” and “function.”8 For example, while inheriting the emphasis of political economists

7 Herbert Spencer, The Study of Sociology (New York: Appleton, 1874), 21-22, see also 401-02.
8 Herbert Spencer, "The Social Organism," in On Social Evolution, ed. J.D.Y. Peel (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1972; first published 1860), 53-70.
on the division of labor’s role in progress, Spencer analogized it to the physiological division of functions, which comparative anatomists argued marked the course of evolution in organisms.\(^9\)

But when drawing on biology, Spencer used work that was, we must remember, pre-Darwinian. Evolution was conceived here as a cumulative, progressive, step-by-step movement along a fixed developmental dimension. It would take decades after the 1859 publication of the *Origin of Species* before the devastating implications of Darwin’s ideas for this older conception were understood and accepted even among biologists. In the sociology of Spencer, as in that of Comte, the theory of “evolution” moved within the parameters set by the pre-Darwinian conception.\(^10\)

For Spencer a theory of social evolution hence had to chart the overarching trajectory of social evolution understood as a natural process cumulatively tracking a general direction. He undertook this task as a subpart of an overall philosophical endeavor to conceptualize evolution in terms sufficiently universal to integrate the study of all phenomena: inorganic, organic, and “super-organic” (i.e. social).\(^11\) Situating social evolution within such a synthetic perspective was, for Spencer, essential if sociology was to be a “science, in the complete meaning of the word.”\(^12\)

But his all-encompassing “System of Synthetic Philosophy” did, by dint of its very abstraction,\(^13\) leave considerable work to be done identifying the concrete changes that instantiate evolution in different domains. For Spencer, social evolution specifically involved:

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\(^11\) Spencer pursued this philosophical endeavor in *First Principles*. The first edition appeared in 1862, but changes in the 1867 edition make that, and later editions, the best guide to Spencer’s grand “System of Synthetic Philosophy.”

\(^12\) Spencer’s full claim is: “Only when it is seen that the transformations passed through during the growth, maturity, and decay of a society, conform to the same principles as do the transformations passed through by aggregates of all orders, inorganic and organic—only when it is seen that the process is in all cases similarly determined by forces, and is not scientifically interpreted until it is expressed in terms of those forces;—only then is there reached the conception of Sociology as a science, in the complete meaning of the word.” Spencer, *Study of Sociology*, 329.

\(^13\) The abstraction involved is more than evident in Spencer’s overarching formulation: “Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion: during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent, homogeneity to a definite, coherent, heterogeneity: and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.” Spencer, *First Principles*, 334 (italics in original).
1) increasing societal size (i.e. a larger population)

2) increasing complexity of social organization (i.e. an increasing differentiation of social “structures” and “functions” as involved, for example, in the division of labor)

3) increasing mutual dependence between the increasingly differentiated parts of the “social organism.”

Besides specifying the direction of social evolution (which at this point in his thought was conceptually synonymous with progress), Spencer also explicated its dynamics. He looked to the relationship between societies and their environments as the taproot of all social change—including, but not limited to, movement in the direction of evolution. Social change was spurred by lack of “equilibrium” between a society and its environment. The flavor of Spencer’s thought here is evident in his comments on Japan in the 1860s, after its forced opening to the West, and before the Meiji Restoration:

The finished fabric into which its people had organized themselves maintained an almost constant state so long as it [Japan] was preserved from fresh external forces. But as soon as it received an impact from European civilization, partly by armed aggression, partly by commercial impulse, partly by the influence of ideas, this fabric began to fall to pieces. There is now in progress a political dissolution. Probably a political reorganization will follow.

As this example suggests, a society’s environment encompassed not only its natural environment, but also other societies it interacted with. Such interactions played a core role in Spencer’s evolutionary dynamics. Inter-societal interactions often led to conflict, and it was largely under pressure of waging war that some societies had evolved more complex forms of organization, which then helped them to prevail. Societies less successful in adapting were, by contrast, eliminated or subsumed by conquest. Many societies thus disappeared, but those that

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remained were larger and more internally complex, and hence evolution advanced. For Spencer war would continue until the whole globe came—via the elimination or conquest of less evolved societies, or their successful adaptation in response to outside pressures—under the control of societies of a relatively highly evolved type.¹⁶

The conflict-centered side of Spencer’s evolutionary dynamic was, however, balanced by his belief that evolution would ultimately lead to societies whose values and organization center on peaceful pursuits. Spencer conceptualized this form of society as “industrial society” and, as Comte had earlier done, he made a transition from “military” to “industrial” society a central part of social progress.¹⁷ One of the first spurs to industry was military demand for arms and other products. Industry could, however, reach a scale sufficient to make profit serving other demands only after extensive populations came into peaceful interaction. This itself came about largely through societal expansion via war. Industrial growth required, moreover, a labor force as well as a market. In early evolutionary stages industrial labor was socially disvalued: thus the origin of industrial labor was found in the enslavement of populations conquered in war. On this account military society made industry possible. But as industry expanded it ultimately became, on both Spencer and Comte’s account a challenge to military society. There was a point in evolution past which the benefits industry accrues from war are outweighed by its costs. War destroys men and resources that could be used in industrial development, and it sustains an ethos valuing skill in war over skill in industry (originally the skill of the slave). The transition to an industrial society proper begins as commercial and industrial leaders win sway over government and orient society away from war. As industrial societies came into being they would seek peace with one another,

¹⁷ For Comte’s views on the military to industrial society transition as discussed in the next few paragraphs, see Positive Philosophy, 144-46, 183-89, 302-26, 375-78. For Spencer’s views see Study of Sociology, 194-99.
and hence, social evolution would eventually culminate in a golden age of mutually reinforcing industrial prosperity and international peace. Thus, even as “industrial” replaced “commercial” society as the endpoint of progress, the vision of a future era of peace crafted by proponents of commerce in the eighteenth-century carried forward into nineteenth-century sociology.

The broad outlines of Spencer’s vision of a transition from military to industrial society paralleled Comte’s. But their sociologies disagreed about the details of industrial society. Comte viewed competition as a lingering survival of military society to be superseded. Industrial society would replace competition with coordination in the political, economic, intellectual, and indeed, all domains. By contrast, in line with his classical liberal commitments, Spencer interpreted the transition from military to industrial society, not as a shift from competition to coordination, but as a shift from one mode of competition to another. Predatory competition giving victory to the physically stronger would give way in both political and economic life to peaceful competition among organizations based on voluntary association. Where Comte saw order and progress in industrial society as requiring scientifically informed cooperative coordination among elites, Spencer carried forward classical liberalism’s confidence in free competition and association.

*The Principles of Sociology: A New Spencer?*

There were shifts in Spencer’s conception of social change during the first period of his sociological thought. For example, the talk of progress dominant in his early 1850s works gave over pride of place to talk of evolution. But this conceptual shift was not accompanied by any qualitative reorientation in his theory of social change—“progress” and “evolution” both labeled movement along the same general dimension toward the same classical liberal end of history. In the 1870s, however, Spencer broke with this unilinear view of social change. The mature period
in his sociology can be dated from his move, announced in the 1876 first volume of *Principles of Sociology*, to pull the military vs. industrial contrast apart from social evolution and treat each as an independent dimension in a two-dimensional classification of social types.

What were the ramifications of this move? The import of the military versus industrial contrast was heightened by its elevation into an independent dimension of social classification. Separating it from evolution also concentrated the evaluative moment in Spencer’s sociology. The industrial social type was conceptualized in *Principles* as marked by voluntary rather than compulsory cooperation, and by political power being democratic or representative and limited, rather than despotic and unlimited in its control over personal conduct. Attaching these classical liberal ideals to a concept now formally independent of evolutionary rank entailed shifts in the latter also: it focused more narrowly on social size and complexity, and lost evaluative weight.

Spencer’s two-dimensional typological vision opened up new options in the analysis of actual societies and their change over time. It allowed him, for example, to highlight traits of military society in contemporary societies whose size and complexity placed them at a high level of evolution. Winnowing the connection between military-to-industrial transition and evolution also freed Spencer to see evolutionary change as combinable with movement either way on the military vs. industrial society dimension. Because Spencer tied his talk of progress principally to advance toward industrial society, the result was the opening of a conceptual gap, albeit a partial one, between evolution and progress.18

Spencer viewed the *Principles* as the culmination of his sociology. Where he previously forged claims via analogical and deductive reasoning illustrated with scattered examples, he saw the *Principles* as inductively testing, revising, and refining his sociology. As a preliminary to this

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18 In summing up the reorientation of Spencer’s theory of social change and its ramifications in this and the prior paragraph, I draw on Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1898), I: 549-97.
endeavor he had organized a team of assistants to collect facts about as many societies, past and present, as possible, and to classify and summarize the findings in tables based upon a scheme he devised. While this research was begun to aid his own work, Spencer decided its results should be publically available: between 1873 and 1881 eight volumes of *Descriptive Sociology* hence appeared. In narrating his intellectual development late in life, Spencer held that this project recurrently led him to revise his views. Since the vast majority of the societies surveyed by Spencer’s researchers were “uncivilized societies,” it seems safest to credit his self-narrative in this area. Treatment of these societies was much more nuanced and sympathetic in the *Principles* than in earlier work. Most importantly, Spencer now held that, far from being universally warlike, many simple societies are profoundly peaceful. Moreover, when peaceful, such societies tended to be characterized by voluntary cooperation and democratic government. This finding provided a major impetus for Spencer’s new sociological typology, within which he could identify these societies as being of the industrial type, despite their low level on his evolutionary dimension.

Spurs toward the reorientation of Spencer’s sociology came, however, from more than his inductive research project. The reorientation was also a response to contemporary political trends. Spencer’s early view of social change had crystallized around 1850 during the years he worked

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19 Herbert Spencer, *Descriptive Sociology: or, Groups of Sociological Facts, Classified and Arranged by Herbert Spencer*, 8 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1873-81). The research was divided between three divisions—1) Uncivilized Societies; 2) Civilized Societies: Extinct or Decayed; 3) Civilized Societies: Recent or Still Flourishing. Division 1 was largely completed in four volumes surveying African, Asian, and Native American “races.” But only limited headway was made elsewhere. Division 2 volumes appeared on the ancient Hebrews and Phoenicians and on civilizations in Central and South America prior to European arrival. Division 3 volumes were published on France and England. The project was suspended in 1881 because its expenses exceeded Spencer’s means. At his death he left money to revive the project, but while three further volumes did appear (on Hellenic Greece, Ancient Egypt, and China), the project was never completed on the scale initially planned.


21 Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, I: Part II, Chap. X. Spencer’s use of simple societies as a reference point for a conception of industrial society centered on voluntary cooperation (rather than “industry” as construed in phrases such as the “industrial revolution”) was also further developed later in the *Principles*. See Part V, Chap. XVIII.
At *The Economist*. At that time he had seen a rising classical liberal tide, as exemplified in the success of the popular movement for Corn Laws repeal, moving Britain toward his social ideal. But Spencer’s earlier optimism later waned as political trends shifted into directions at odds with classical liberalism. As he found himself ever more out of sync with current politics, confidence in the promise of the present and near future gave way to critical, indeed caustic, commentary on contemporary British politics. The disillusioned stance Spencer developed is perhaps best known from the polemical essays of his 1884 *The Man versus The State*. But this stance dated to the 1870s. It was both contemporary with, but helped spur, the reorientation of his sociology.

The connections here are clear in volume one of *Principles of Sociology*. After Spencer introduced his new typology, he turned to the “social metamorphoses” involved when societies changed type. The conceptual independence attendant upon the two dimensional character of his typology meant that transition from military-to-industrial society was no longer, as it was in his earlier writings, subsumed within evolutionary advance. There were now multiple forms social metamorphoses could conceptually take. Spencer’s empirical focus was however more limited. What most interested him was how industrial society “retrogrades towards the militant type.”

By 1871 he had begun interpreting current events in terms of such retrogression. While this interpretation would be impossible to square with his earlier sociological writings, conceptual space in which to pursue it was opened up by the reoriented vision of Spencer’s *Principles*.

Much of Spencer’s discussion of social metamorphoses was devoted, in particular, to critical analysis of recent British politics. He held that the Liberal party had lost its way. Where it

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22 In concluding an autobiographical discussion of his time as sub-editor at *The Economist* (1848-53) Spencer noted: “In short, I think I may say that the character of my later career was mainly determined by the conceptions which were initiated, and the friendships which were formed, between the times at which my connexion with *The Economist* began and ended.” Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1904), 1: 491.


25 Spencer, “Specialized Administration,” in *The Man Versus the State*. 
once promoted “individual liberty” by “abolishing religious disabilities, establishing free-trade, removing impediments from the press, etc” it now “vied with the opposite party in multiplying State-administrations which diminish individual liberty.” Liberal party politicians had forgotten that “in essence Liberalism stands for the freedom of the individual versus control of the State.”

While suffused with disillusionment, Spencer’s analysis involved more than carping because it used and expounded his reoriented sociological vision. He interpreted these trends as a general social metamorphosis—reversion from traits of industrial society to those of a military society—developing in parallel in Britain and on the European continent. The “changes of late undergone by our own society” were, Spencer thus provocatively proposed to his British readers, “kindred” to those to found, for example, in Bismarck’s Germany.

In interpreting changes in Britain and Europe this way Spencer scored polemical points. But he also sought to explain these changes. Spencer held it to be a general sociological truth—established by reasoning from the social organism analogy, and by induction from examples of societies at all levels of evolution—that military conflict (and preparation for conflict) promotes the compulsion characteristic of military societies. Contemporary trends were thus, for Spencer, best explained as a consequence of revived international antagonisms after the 1850s breakdown of decades of peace between the major European powers. The main sociological work done by Spencer’s analysis of British politics was to chart this relationship between international and domestic affairs playing itself out in his own country. Looking back over six decades of British politics to the 1815 end of the Napoleonic Wars (shortly before his birth in 1820), he contended:

> if we contrast the period from 1815 to 1850 with the period from 1850 to the present time, we cannot fail to see that along with increased armaments, more frequent conflicts, and revived military sentiment, there has been a spread of compulsory regulations. While nominally extended by the giving of votes, the freedom of the individual has been in

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27 Ibid., 1: 580.
many ways actually diminished; both by restrictions which ever-multiplying officials are appointed to insist on, and by the forcible taking of money to secure for him, or others at his expense, benefits previously left to be secured by each for himself. And undeniably this is a return towards that coercive discipline which pervades the whole social life where the militant type is predominant.\textsuperscript{28}

Spencer extended this argument in the study of political institutions he published in 1882 as Part V of \textit{Principles}. He there pushed further back in time, identifying 1775-1815 as a previous era of retrogression toward military society tied to international conflict, and more generally sketching multiple centuries of English history as marked by ebbs and flows of domestic progress toward industrial society in line with shifts in international affairs.\textsuperscript{29}

Spencer’s analysis of English history also highlighted, however, the role that a belief in progress retained in his sociology. Recognizing past shifts between progress and retrogression provided a backdrop for his claim that the current trend toward military society would, as such trends had before, turn around at some point. A decline in international antagonisms would open the way again for progress toward the ideal of industrial society. While the reorientation of his sociology had given Spencer new conceptual room in which to critically study the present, he had contained the theoretical consequences of his disillusionment. The leading tone of \textit{Principles of Sociology} was indeed disillusioned realism and criticism, and this became more pronounced over the two decades Spencer worked on it. But while the dark edge in his analysis of the present deepened through the 1880s and 1890s, Spencer still held persistently onto the belief that a return towards classical liberal progress would come eventually.

At the end of his sociological studies Spencer still saw the course of the future as, in its broadest outlines, predictable. Reorientation of his sociology in the 1870s had given him more flexibility to engage with ebbs and flows in history. But this engagement was pursued beside a

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\item[28] Ibid., 1: 587.
\item[29] Ibid., 2: 620-28, 32-37.
\end{footnotes}
continued belief that an overarching process was working itself out in the course of history as a whole. Spencer’s classical liberal concept of progress, and his concept of social evolution, had been freed up to part ways in analyses of specific times and places, but not fully divorced. The gap between them was now contingent upon inter-societal military conflicts, which Spencer still held would eventually disappear. The highest evolutionary level would be attained with a final securing of international peace and the full realization of industrial society. The telos of classical liberal progress and social evolution remained the same. The Principles of Sociology deferred it to a more distant future, but its eventual realization remained a premise. Spencer could close the 1896 final volume of his sociology by quoting views he had advanced almost fifty years earlier in his Social Statics because he still believed in a classical liberal end of history.30

William Graham Sumner: From Classical Liberal Moralism to the “Science of Society”

Comte and Spencer gave shape to sociology as a science pursued outside the universities, and often at odds with the human and social sciences as taught within them. Only in the closing decades of the nineteenth century did sociology begin to penetrate the academy, making some of its earliest inroads in the reforming higher education institutions of Gilded Age America. One of its first academic advocates was William Graham Sumner, who spent nearly his entire adult life at Yale, as a undergraduate, a postgraduate tutor, and most importantly, as a professor from 1873 to 1909. Sumner is perhaps best known for the strident classical liberal moralizing of his popular writings in the 1880s, above all his 1883 What Social Classes Owe to One Another, which made him a bête noire of American progressivism in its formative decade.31

30 Ibid., 3: 608-11.
31 In an 1884 article another of America’s earliest sociologists, Lester Frank Ward, singled out Sumner’s book as the “most extreme statement of the laissez-faire doctrine” against which his progressive articulation of sociology battled. Lester F. Ward, “Mind as a Social Factor,” Mind 9, no. 36 (1884): 565n.
But Sumner was more than a popularizer of classical political and economic liberalism. He was also a serious independent-minded scholar. American economic and political history, and the interplay between them, was his first research interest. Subsequently, however, he became excited about sociology and made it a new focus for his teaching and research despite its lack of academic respectability. The institutional history and political economy that were his first areas of scholarly concern left, however, lasting legacies in Sumner’s thought, such as his classical liberal conception of “civil liberty.” When he first articulated sociological arguments in the early 1880s Sumner resituated his political and economic thought within a broad naturalistic vision of social forces, while carrying forward a prior attachment to classical liberal moralizing. But by the time he served in 1908-09 as second president of the American Sociological Society, Sumner’s sociology had changed significantly. As in Spencer’s sociology, the shift responded to classical liberal disillusionment. But the way Sumner worked through the consequences of disillusionment for his sociology was decidedly different, as he developed a detached matter-of-fact realism that bordered on ethical relativism, and in doing so dismissed, rather than delayed, “progress.”

Teaching Civil Liberty

When Theodore Dwight Woolsey stepped down as the president of Yale College in 1871, it was decided that the senior-year instruction in political philosophy he had given should come under the purview of a new “Chair of Political and Social Science.” The position was offered to Sumner, who without hesitation left his briefly held position as an Episcopal minister to take up the chair. Following Woolsey’s example, Sumner initially taught Francis Lieber’s Civil Liberty

and Self-Government (which Woolsey had assigned since the mid-1850s33), international law (using Woolsey’s textbook), and classical political economy.34 His engagement with Lieber’s political theory was far from superficial. Indeed, it shaped a standpoint that continued to frame Sumner’s political thinking even after he resituated it in a sociological setting in the early 1880s. At the core of this standpoint was the concept of “civil liberty” construed in the historical and institutional sense that Lieber, like British and American Whig thinkers before him, had given it.

Civil liberty was on this account a specifically modern achievement. It was the “status of a freeman in a modern jural state.” This status was embodied in, and guaranteed by, an array of institutions built up over centuries. It hence had to be defined “in terms drawn from history and law.”35 Developed in England as the product of centuries of political struggle, civil liberty had been “inherited by all the English-speaking nations, who have made liberty real because they have inherited it, not as a notion, but as a body of institutions.” Efforts to imitate it in continental Europe had, by contrast, “realized it only imperfectly” because, without “local institutions or traditions” to support it, civil liberty remained primarily “a matter of ‘declarations’” rather than something “positive, practical, and actual.”36

A major feature of Sumner’s conception of civil liberty was its intertwining with personal liberty, which he, as a classical liberal, understood in terms of a socio-economic order centered on self-reliance and self-improvement. Laws and institutions embodying civil liberty secured the “personal liberty of individuals” by guaranteeing a free man “that, in doing his best to learn the

34 The courses Sumner gave in 1873-74 are outlined along with his conception of the purview of his chair at the time in his “Introductory Lecture to Courses in Political and Social Science.” William Graham Sumner, The Challenge of the Facts and Other Essays, ed. Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1914), 391-403.
laws of right living and to obey them, to the end that his life may be a success, no one else shall be allowed to interfere with him or to demand a share in the product of his efforts.” Sumner contended that if Americans wanted “to be taken care of as Prussians and Frenchmen are,” they would have to sacrifice some of their personal liberty.  

For Sumner American exceptionalism was rooted in, and sustained by, the classic Whig fear of abusive government as the core threat to liberty. He stressed that this threat was in no way mitigated or outdated by the rising tide of democratization in his own day and age. The record of past abuses was dominated by “kings and nobles and priests” simply because they had been the ones with power. But “vice and passion” were not “limited by class.” Hence lower classes with political power would abuse it “just as all the others have done unless they are put under checks and guarantees.” It was, for Sumner, a matter of grave contemporary import for people to realize that civil liberty did “not consist in majority rule or in universal suffrage or in elective systems at all.” Such democratic “devices” were not to be valued in and of themselves but judged as “good or better just in the degree to which they secure liberty.”

For Sumner the “danger of democracy” involved the possibility of lower classes using power in ways inconsistent with civil liberty. But this outcome was not inevitable. Democracy could constitute “a sound working system” if those to whom it gave political rights offered “the same cold resistance to any claims for favor on the grounds of poverty, as on the ground of birth and rank.” The soundness of extended suffrage and majority rule thus came down to the extent

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39 Ibid., 204-207.  
40 Sumner, *Social Classes*, 32.
to which those with political rights were committed to self-reliance. Citizens with exceptional values were the precondition for the co-existence of civil liberty and democracy. Such a hybrid had crystallized in nineteenth-century America via democratization of a “constitutional republic” whose framers had been, Sumner reminded, hostile to democracy. To comprehend and preserve America’s now “democratic republic,” it was key to distinguish its republican and democratic elements. For Sumner, “republican government” took “civil liberty” as its “first aim.” Civil liberty was, however, no aim of democracy. Its core doctrine was equality, and on this basis it erected the further doctrine that sovereignty should reside in “the people.”

In making tension between liberal and democratic doctrines a centerpiece of his political thought, Sumner stood out in stark contrast to British new liberals and American progressives. Where progressives like Woodrow Wilson saw liberal democracy as the normal form of modern democracy, Sumner saw it as exceptional. He held that democracy was also instantiated in other forms of government. If America’s republic embodied democracy in one of its most attractive (to a classical liberal) forms, this was because laws and institutions integral to civil liberty had so far survived the democratization of American politics. But to study democracy as a general trend in contemporary history—and to become aware of, and to guard against, the civil liberty destroying potential of democratic doctrines—it was necessary to also recognize the illiberal political forms embodying these doctrines. A motley parade of these was to be found in post-revolution French history. “Jacobinism,” “Sansculottism,” and the plebiscitary despotism of Napoleon III’s Second Empire were, for Sumner, all examples of the dark side of democracy, and had, as such, to be incorporated into a general understanding of this rising trend of the modern age.

41 Ibid, 83-84, 177. See also Sumner, “Politics in America,” 49-52.
42 Lieber’s *Civil Liberty and Self-Government* had been written against the backdrop of the Second Empire. The rise to power of Napoleon III—endorsed by the French people in a universal suffrage plebiscite—was a preoccupation of Lieber. Sumner discusses Napoleon III in his 1877 “Republican Government” on which I have been drawing in the
Sumner’s political writings of the 1870s and 1880s approached classical liberal ideals and institutions of civil liberty as the exceptional inheritance of “English-speaking nations.” Forged through “centuries of experience” at a great cost in “blood and labor,” laws and institutions that sustained civil liberty were never free from threat. To sustain them through democratization, as had occurred in America, was even more exceptional. It required citizens to value civil liberty as a sacred charge in need of ongoing support. The “only real guarantee of civil liberty” lay in the “prejudices” and “instincts” of the citizenry. What was critical was a “jealous instinct … quick to take alarm,” which would “not, at any time or under any excuse, allow even a slight or temporary infringement upon civil liberty.”

The moralizing tone in Sumner’s earlier works reflected his wish to foster such instincts. Sumner offered more than intellectual arguments for the role of a citizenry with a certain temperament in sustaining civil liberty; he also rhetorically sought to motivate his audience to embrace that temperament.

Appealing to exceptionalism and tradition made Sumner a very different kind of classical liberal than Herbert Spencer. Sumner never looked forward to a classical liberal end of history open to all societies. He treated classical liberalism instead as a matter of extending a cherished past and hence appealed to tradition in a way the future-oriented Spencer never did. Even when most forthright in his youthful belief in progress Sumner called for a balance between confidence in progress and respect for tradition. To put the contrast simply, probably too simply, Sumner was a conservative classical liberal while Spencer was a radical one. Their difference effectively

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43 Sumner, Liberty, Society, and Politics, 91-92. While Sumner’s concern with a vigilant citizenry has republican strains, it is critical to keep in mind his modern classical liberal conception of “liberty” (and of “virtue” when he invoked this term). To discuss Sumner as a “republican” has merits only so far as such talk is not premised on the often confusing contrast: republicanism versus liberalism. For a nuanced treatment that tries to move the history of political thought beyond the stale debate framed by this contrast, see Kalyvas and Katzenelson, Liberal Beginnings.  

44 Sumner, Liberty, Society, and Politics, 16-25.
echoed the difference that had divided the Whig T.B. Macaulay and the radical James Mill in their famous debate of the 1820s. Moreover, as in that debate different tenors of liberal thought were interwoven with methodological disagreement. Spencer proudly insisted that his scientific studies of psychology, biology, sociology, and ethics were guided and integrated by his “System of Synthetic Philosophy.” Sumner, by contrast, disliked all philosophy and held that the “facts” of what happened in the past, not philosophical reasoning from general premises to the promise of the future, must be the basis of social science. Only against the background of these contrasts can the particular character of Sumner’s uptake of sociology be appreciated.

Sumner as a Sociologist

In considering Sumner as a sociologist perhaps the best place to start is the account he gave of his new intellectual interest in an 1881 letter to members of governing board of Yale:

I am a professor of political and social science. Four or five years ago my studies led me to the conviction that sociology was about to do for the social sciences what scientific method has done for natural and physical science, viz.: rescue them from arbitrary dogmatism and confusion. It seemed to me that it belonged to me to give my students the advantage of the new standpoint and method just as fast as I could win command of it myself, just as every competent professor aims to set before his students all the speculations, anticipations, efforts, extensions, reconstructions, etc., etc., which mark the growth of the sciences.

Sumner’s belief in the potential of sociology was sparked by a burst of publications by Spencer. Between 1872 and 1876 Spencer’s call for a natural science of society in *Study of Sociology* was followed by the tabulated data of volume one of *Descriptive Sociology*, and in turn, the opening volume of the *Principles of Sociology*. Eager to introduce students to the scientific breakthrough he believed was taking shape, Sumner assigned *Study of Sociology* to his senior class in 1879-80.

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Given sociology’s extra-academic origins and intellectually controversial character, this was a maverick move. It garnered national attention after Yale’s president, Noah Porter, objected on the grounds that assigning the text would “bring intellectual and moral harm to the students.”

The conflict at Yale is a compelling moment in the entry of sociology into the American academy. But we are misled if we approach Sumner as a disciple of Spencer. When we pause to consider arguments advanced in the conflict at Yale, we find that a key question about sociology was raised, and Sumner took a decidedly un-Spencerian position on it. Spencer saw his sociology as presupposing the synthetic philosophy he had crafted as the integrating foundation of all his specific studies, whether in biology, psychology, sociology, or ethics. Porter agreed. He objected to Sumner’s assigning *Study of Sociology* because he believed that doing so connoted a tacit endorsement of Spencer’s philosophy, which he saw as entailing the rejection of all theistic interpretations of social life. Porter believed that such a rejection was not only morally baneful, but also intellectually untenable. Indeed, he had himself assigned Spencer’s *First Principles* in order to teach Yale students the flaws he saw in the philosophy propounded there.

The stance Sumner took involved a very different interpretation of Spencer’s sociology. Pulling Spencer’s specialized works apart from his synthetic philosophy in a way neither Porter nor Spencer could have accepted, Sumner insisted that teaching *Study of Sociology* implied no judgments on the merits of Spencer’s philosophy. Sumner was not being disingenuous here. He had no interest in, and indeed actively disliked, philosophy of all varieties, Spencerian or not.

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47 Sumner’s former student and later faculty colleague, William Lyon Phelps, recalled him declaring at a Faculty meeting: “Philosophy is in every way as bad as astrology. It is a complete fake. Yale has a great opportunity now to announce that she will take the lead and banish the study of philosophy from the curriculum on the ground that it is unworthy of serious consideration. It is an anachronism. We might just as well have professors of alchemy or
He envisioned sociology as a freestanding empirical science that could and should develop its claims independently of philosophy. Sumner’s disinterest in Spencer’s philosophy was reflected in the rarity with which the core concept of that philosophy—evolution—appears in his writings. The main conceptual burden in presenting broad directions of social change was carried instead by the venerable “civilization” and “progress,” along with a newer term, “organization.”

In turning to sociology, Sumner saw himself as building upon, rather than breaking with, classical political economy. Its teachings had been a dominant influence on his early scholarship and his primary intellectual reputation was, and long remained, as a defender of these teachings. Sumner saw sociology as extending the older field. In his 1881 article “Sociology” he identified political economy as “the first branch of sociology… pursued by man as a science.” By studying “the industrial organization of society” in abstraction “from the organism of which it forms a part” political economy had, however, been sidetracked into “endless wrangling.” Revitalization could now come from political economy finding “its field and relations to other sciences fairly defined within the wider scope of sociology.” Since sociology studied “industrial organization in combination with the other organizations of society,” it could inherit key “elements of political economy”—Sumner singled out the “Malthusian law of population and the Ricardian law of rent”—while showing them to be “corollaries or special cases of sociological principles.”

When Sumner formulated his sociology he established it on Malthusian foundations. At no point would he depart from the dictum presented in 1881: “Let him, therefore, who desires to study social phenomena first learn the transcendent importance for the whole social organization, industrial, political, and civil, of the ratio of population to land.” The import of this ratio centered


48 Sumner, Liberty, Society, and Politics, 192-93.
on its relation to the “struggle for existence.” The maintenance of human life required struggle against nature to acquire and rework materials to meet human needs. The struggle for existence also encompassed, however, the struggles that men wage against one another to win control over materials. The ratio of a society’s population to the supply of materials available to meet needs of its members was a key factor shaping the character of social relations.

If the actual number present is very much less than the number who might be supported, the condition of all must be ample and easy. Freedom and facility mark all social relations under such a state of things. If the number is larger than that which can be supplied, the condition of all must be one of want and distress, or else a few must be well provided, the others being proportionally still worse off. Constraint, anxiety, possibly tyranny and repression, mark social relations.

Sumner’s commitment to this outlook rested on more than reading Malthus. He believed in its explanatory efficacy, as was already evident in his early research on American history. In an 1876 article surveying American politics since the Declaration of Independence, Sumner used “physical and economic circumstances” to explain why the “constitutional barriers” the nation’s founders set up against democracy had “proven feeble and vain.” Given America’s character as “a new country … with unlimited land” it was “inevitable” there would be “substantial equality of the people in property, culture, and social position.” From social equality, “political equality” had followed “naturally.” At a more specific level, Sumner situated democratization during the Jacksonian era as following on a “great series of inventions” that opened up the “continent to

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49 In his early 1880’s writings Sumner wielded the phrase “survival-of-the-fittest” in connection with the struggle for existence in a loose way that attracted criticism at the time, and did much, over the longer term, to earn him a poorly fitting reputation as America’s premier social Darwinist. After a passing effort in 1884 to clarify this phrase, Sumner dropped it. But his concern with the relation of population and resources to the intensity of struggle and character of social relations was unaffected. This concern derived from Malthus, while the “survival-of-the-fittest” was an easily dispensed with flourish that Sumner had almost certainly picked up from Spencer, rather than Darwin. On Sumner and the phrase, see the essay “Survival of the Fittest” and accompanying information provided by the editor Robert Bannister. Sumner, Liberty, Society, and Politics, 223-26.

50 Ibid., 187-89. Sumner discussed the denominator in his ratio both as “land” and “the supply of materials.” He was, moreover, very aware that the materials available to sustain a given population living on a given amount of land was affected by technology. His comments on land are thus best read as a placeholder and starting point for what it is, in substance, a broad consideration of factors shaping the supply of materials available to for consumption in a society.
mankind” to an extent never before possible. Based in material circumstances the democratic tide in American politics would last until these circumstances changed. Efforts to advance “political aristocracy” would become possible “only when the pressure of population, and the development of a more complex social organization” led to “inequality in the circumstances of individuals” and a concomitant “social aristocracy.”51

Explanatory links Sumner here proposed in the context of American history were, as part of his embrace of sociology, reformulated as general relationships. How could an outlook linking America’s democracy to its open frontier also explain democratic tendencies in Europe? Sumner addressed this challenge by relating the material situation of Europe to that of America and other European settlements, such as Australia and South Africa. He stressed how “advances in the arts and sciences” had improved “transportation and communication.” The improvements facilitated emigration from Europe, and the importation back into Europe of staple goods, such as meat and grain. Because emigration lowered Europe’s population, and staple imports decreased the cost of living for those there, both acted to “relieve” the intensity of “social pressure and competition” in the “great centers of population.” Just as this relief followed from technological improvement, its consequences could in turn be analyzed. Doing so would provide a sociological explanation of “the general tendency towards equality, the decline of aristocratic institutions, the rise of proletariat, and the ambitious expansion” characteristic of “modern civilized society.”52

Sumner’s analysis here exemplifies the way his sociology situated his earlier political and economic commitments in a broader framework. The contemporary trend toward democracy was not just to be noted as historical fact, but analyzed as the product of social forces whose relations

51 Sumner, “Politics in America,” 52-53, 64-65, 78. What Sumner argued specifically about America in this earlier essay is restated as a set of general claims about economics, society, and politics in “under-populated” countries in his 1881 “Sociology” essay. Sumner, Liberty, Society, and Politics, 194. 52 Sumner, Liberty, Society, and Politics, 196-98.
to one another followed fixed natural laws. To the extent sociology succeeded in such analyses, it would be able to formulate universal propositions about conditions under which democracy naturally tends to thrive or decline. The knowledge produced would, in turn, create a scientific foundation upon which to project future social tendencies and situations.

*Projecting the Future: Moralism and Beyond*

The agenda of projecting tendencies and situations excited Sumner’s interest from his earliest engagements with sociology up until his inquiries were cut short by his death in 1910. When he made his recurrent forays into projecting, threats occupied the center of his attention. But the character of these forays changed significantly from the 1880s to the opening decade of the twentieth century. Evocative glimpses of distressing possibilities to be averted gave way to a matter-of-fact anticipation of tendencies that might, at best, only be tempered. The change in this aspect of Sumner’s writings offers an entry point to the disillusionment that made the “science of society” he pursued late in life different from sociology as he initially conceived it.

A distinctive Sumnerian move during the 1880s was to juxtapose a narrative of classical liberal progress with anxious glimpses of possible future decline. Mankind was seen as currently enjoying great benefits derived from scientific and technological change, growing international economic exchange, and competitive individualism operating within the context of institutions supporting classical liberal civil liberty.\(^{53}\) The result had been an epoch of relaxed social pressure for European populations and their offshoots around the globe, and hence movements toward a more democratic social and political order. These movements were, in turn, a focus of Sumner’s projections of the future. But here anxiety came to the fore. Power was passing to a majority who

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\(^{53}\) See the 1880-83 essays (“Socialism,” “Sociology,” and “The Forgotten Man”) in Sumner, *Liberty, Society, and Politics*, 159-222. The same line of argument pervaded Sumner’s 1883 *What Social Classes Owe To Each Other*. 
might be misled by “socialists” and “sentimentalists” into undermining the classical liberal order. In 1880 Sumner predicted that gains “won in the way of making government an organ of justice, peace, order, and security without respect of persons” would “have to be defended, before this century closes, against popular majorities, especially in cities, just as they had to be won in a struggle with kings and nobles in the centuries past.” Similarly, the analysis of contemporary European trends in his 1881 “Sociology” essay led to discussion of the possibility that where classical civilization fell due to “an irruption of barbarians from without,” modern civilization might “perish by an explosion from within.”

These fearful glimpses of the future were rallying cries. They suggested that a critical juncture was approaching when classical liberal progress might be derailed. But this was only a possibility, and it could be averted. The take-home lesson was that vigorous defense of classical liberal institutions and the ideal of self-reliant individualism could keep society on the right path. When Sumner looked toward the future in his early sociology, he thus passed over into classical liberal moralism. His sociology set out to explain how present trends arose and project situations they might lead into. Moralizing then kicked in to help motivate his audience to support values and institutions Sumner’s sociology identified as critical to liberal progress. His early sociology was thus infused with a public political purpose, and a vision of how it was to serve that purpose.

The blend of sociology with moral exhortation in Sumner’s 1880s works rested on certain premises. He had, for example, to view the ideals and institutions he promoted as having enough influence on social outcomes to serve the role ascribed to them. When first forging his sociology, Sumner was committed to just such a viewpoint. In an 1880 lecture, he robustly held:

The sound student of sociology can hold out to mankind, as individuals or as a race, only one hope of better and happier living. That hope lies in an enhancement of the industrial

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55 Ibid., 198.
virtues and of the moral forces which thence arise. Industry, self-denial, and temperance are the laws of prosperity for men and states; without them advance in the arts and in wealth means only corruption and decay through luxury and vice. With them progress in the arts and increasing wealth are the prime conditions of an advancing civilization which is sound enough to endure.  

Sumner’s moralism brought with it another premise. When moralizing Sumner presented liberal institutions and values as a tried and true heritage. The success of this framing—and with it, the possibility of his sociology serving the purpose with which it was initially infused—presupposed audiences responsive to appeals to tradition (a type of appeal the proudly radical Spencer would never have made). Classical liberal institutions and values already had to have a reservoir of support among his listeners if Sumner’s call to arms was to summon them to recommitment.

These premises constitute an intellectual departure point Sumner later left behind. The content of, and reasons for, the shifts in his thought from the 1880s to the opening decade of the twentieth century are multi-faceted. But perhaps the most important is that Sumner lost faith in the American people. His early sociology presupposed that Americans had (or could be recalled to) the commitment to individual self-reliance, and instinctual fear of government, central to his account of what sustains a classical liberal order. But Sumner held this belief less firmly in the 1880s than in the 1870s, and it weakened yet further over time. It ended once and for all with the 1898 Spanish-American War, which Sumner fervently opposed. A nation born in revolt against an empire had begun to acquire foreign dependencies to which it refused to extend its domestic constitution. In popular excitement about the war, and pride in America’s acquisitions, Sumner saw the death knell of ideals that that had once made his nation “something unique and grand in the history of mankind.”

56 Ibid., 181-82.
57 Ibid., 297.
What the war did for Sumner was to move America into the same trend line found among major European nations. Sumner had long used Spencer’s militarism vs. industrialism contrast, and shared Spencer’s judgment that the former was on the rise in contemporary Europe. Again like Spencer he viewed militarism as linked to domestic political trends extending government’s role far beyond the comfort zone of classical liberalism. By 1898 Sumner no longer saw America as exceptional, but only as one more example of these general tendencies. In his 1907 *Folkways*, Sumner summed them up as a “drift towards state regulation, militarism, imperialism, towards petting and flattering poor and laboring classes, and in favor of whatever is altruistic and humanitarian.” He underscored his negative judgment by adding:

> We have no grounds for confidence in these ruling tendencies. They are only the present phases in the endless shifting of our philosophical generalizations, and it is only proposed, by the application of social policy, to subject society to another set of arbitrary interferences, dictated by a new set of dogmatic prepossessions that would only be a continuance of old methods and errors.  

The shift in Sumner’s views thus parallels the disillusionment in the face of late-century events found in Spencer. Sumner, moreover, drew from Spencer concepts with which he gave sociological expression to this disillusionment. A parallel also exists here in the second factor shaping changes in Sumner’s thought. The belief in sociology’s potential Sumner derived from reading Spencer in the 1870s had, we have seen, nothing to do with Spencer’s philosophy. What excited Sumner was another side of Spencer: the inductive vision of a science drawing on facts about a sweeping array of societies. Sumner’s early sociological works were more a promissory note than a claim to be already practicing such a science. He began his own endeavor to collect and organize facts about a large number of societies in the late 1880s, and pursued it for over a decade before deciding, in 1899, that he was ready to formulate a mature system of sociology.

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58 Sumner, *Folkways*, 98.
Sumner labored upon his magnum opus, entitled *The Science of Society*, through the next decade, but it remained incomplete at his death in 1910.\textsuperscript{59}

The character of Sumner’s inductive aspiration, and its impact on his thought, is evident in the study of the “mores,”\textsuperscript{60} which he split off from his main project and published as *Folkways* in 1907. Readers are overwhelmed by examples from across the globe and throughout history. If contemporary events distanced Sumner from his former confidence in the American people, his study of social practices and values across a great variety of societies also detached him from his former liberal moralism. *Folkways* expounded the generalization that “‘immoral’ never means anything but contrary to the mores of the time and place,” and Sumner took this to entail that there is “no permanent or universal standard by which right and truth in regard to these matters can be established and different folkways compared and criticized.”\textsuperscript{61} Here Sumner diverged fundamentally from Spencer whose own final work, *The Principles of Ethics*, retained a classical liberal vision of the “absolute ethics” of an ideal society at the endpoint of evolution.\textsuperscript{62}

Sumner’s rejection of the possibility of a universal standpoint from which to make moral comparisons and criticisms did not, however, rule out all criticism. Moral criticism was to give way to a disillusioned scientific criticism detached from moral judgment. A sociologist studying mores in a society could criticize them relative to material conditions of that society: the standard of assessment was the degree to which mores shaped behavior in a way conducive to serving the

\textsuperscript{59} Albert Galloway Keller, who had been Sumner’s student and then his faculty colleague at Yale later estimated that in preparation for the science of society Sumner had collected, filed, and cross-referenced “more than 150,000 notes from sources in the dozen languages that he read.” Bruce Curtis, *William Graham Sumner* (Boston: Hall, 1981), 49. Keller took research Sumner had done and material he had written as a starting point for a four-volume work later published under both their names. William Graham Sumner and Albert Galloway Keller, *The Science of Society*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927). Since the extent to which the final work remains true to Sumner’s projected science of society is not always clear, I do not draw on it in my characterization.

\textsuperscript{60} By “mores” Sumner meant “popular usages and traditions, when they include a judgment that they are conducive to societal welfare, and when they exert a coercion on the individual to conform to them, although they are not coordinated by any authority.” Sumner, *Folkways*, v.

\textsuperscript{61} Sumner, *Folkways*, 355.

needs of a society living under those conditions. Such criticism was a far cry from the moral exhortation through which Sumner had once exhorted readers to defend institutions and virtues framed as a cherished heritage. A disillusioned science of the mores might serve public purposes, not by bolstering received tradition, but instead by exposing “the operation of traditional error, prevailing dogmas, logical fallacy, delusion, and current false estimates of goods worth striving for” in the mores of the existing society.⁶³

Thus the science of society that Sumner was pursuing in 1908 when selected as president of the young American Sociological Society had a decidedly different character from sociology as he first conceived it. Sumner’s science of society was charged with coldly dispensing matter-of-fact knowledge. It was to analyze “realities, forces, laws, consequences, facts, conditions, relations” but have “nothing at all to do” with “motives, purposes, hopes, intentions, ideals.”⁶⁴ When projecting the future Sumner also no longer presented evocative glimpses of distressing possibilities to be averted by a virtuous people. He projected tendencies to be expected, adapted to, and mitigated if possible by an elite aided by disillusioned science. Projections of the future were to combat optimistic illusions—such as the belief of the “reading public” that “the world is advancing along some line which they call ‘progress’ toward peace and brotherly love”—with a cold realism about where the world had been and was going. And the specific lesson to be taught was that in “the century now opening,” what was “rationally to be expected” was “a frightful effusion of blood in revolution and war.”⁶⁵

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⁶⁴ Ibid., 328.
Conclusion: Whither Progress?

The expectations with which Sumner looked on the dawning twentieth century were dark and all too prescient. Here he was in the company of Spencer, who was also one of the few intellectuals to expect the bloodbath of wars and political upheavals that would scar the first half of the new century. Their overlapping expectations grew out a shared experience as disillusioned sociological observers of late-nineteenth century political trends that increasingly diverged from classical liberal visions of progress. Uninterested in rethinking individual freedom to reconcile it with reforms expanding government’s role in society and economy, Spencer and Sumner instead both rethought progress and its relationship to contemporary events. But in doing so they charted divergent theoretical responses to their common classical liberal dilemma.

Spencer’s response stands out for its persistent commitment to a classical liberal vision of an ideal social and political order. In closing the final volume of *Principles of Sociology* Spencer reaffirmed the belief, articulated almost half a century earlier in his 1851 *Social Statics*, that such an order was the endpoint of social evolution. Shifts in Spencer’s thought in the closing decades of the century concerned his view of current events and the shape of the pathway to his classical liberal endpoint, but they left that endpoint unaffected. His conception of progress did not change because it was yoked to that endpoint. In political terms progress involved a diminishing role for government in society. But this change could advance no faster than the ethical advance through which humans became less eager or willing to infringe upon the rights of others, and thus better adapted to live in society without needing the coercive hand of government. Societal expansion, division of labor and economic exchange in and between societies, and improving technology all helped make ethical advance possible by increasing the amount of resources available to support humans so that conflict was no longer necessary.
The major shift in Spencer’s sociology refashioned the relationship between the material substratum of his theory of social change and the ethical and political changes at the core of his concept of progress. His disillusionment in the latter half of the nineteenth century spurred him to recognize that increased resources from material changes do not automatically entail ethical and political progress. They had indeed, as Spencer saw it, stopped doing so in recent decades. He located the source of this contemporary disconnect in international antagonisms fueling war and preparation for war among the most evolutionarily advanced nations. Nations were turning away from a classical liberal vision of a peaceful global economic order of freely moving goods, people, and capital. Where at mid-century Spencer had looked forward to rapid realization of his classical liberal ideal, as the century marched onward he came to believe progress had given way to retrogression. But he never doubted that periods in the past—such as the era of his youth—had been periods of progress. Most importantly, he came to conceive of history as marked by cycles of progress and retrogression. Progress would return in the future as it had in the past. The downside of the cycle did not cancel out all gains from the progressive side, and history hence overall traveled an upward path toward eventual culmination in a classical liberal order of highly ethical individuals living under a minimal government. Disillusionment led Spencer to postpone this end of history, and to see the road toward it as bumpier, but it did not break his faith in it.

While Spencer was a radical whose classical liberalism was translated into a future utopia available to all societies, Sumner inherited classical liberalism as a tradition cherishing account of the historically exceptional “civil liberty” of America. Where Spencer’s views were presented as part of a “Synthetic Philosophy,” Sumner rejected any role for philosophy in favor of insisting on relying on facts. So when the facts of the present took on a new shape at odds with Sumner’s classical liberal ideal, he responded not only with the disillusionment from the present-day found
in Spencer, but also departed from his former belief in progress. For better or worse, Sumner had no philosophy to fall back on to sustain belief in a view of progress when that view was at odds with present events. His late work was, as result, ambivalent at best about “progress.” Stray uses held over. But more often he put the term in quotes and treated it as a subjective idea ungrounded in facts. And at points he went so far as to treat progress as an illusion to be directly combated.

Sumner’s shifting attitude toward progress is especially noteworthy when seen alongside his persistent use of the concept of civilization. In his early work progress and civilization were close to synonyms. But in his late work they parted ways with civilization continuing to be used without any of the ambivalence or hostility now attaching to “progress.” This difference in usage was supported by a break between the material and the moral in Sumner’s thought. For him talk of progress always involved moral judgment. It could have no role in his late science of society if there was no universal standpoint from which to pass moral judgments objectively. By contrast he came to see civilization primarily in material terms and hence remained comfortable using the term to talk about a type of qualitative social change. Civilization increased the number of people who could be supported on the same amount of land. It was based on improving knowledge and associated technological change, and the efficient organization of people to direct and integrate their energies toward common tasks. There was no role for moral advance in this theory. Moral talk of better or worse was, for the late Sumner, just the language a given society used to enforce behaviors it believed served the functioning of its internal organization(s).

Sumner’s turn away from the concept of progress was also paralleled by a new emphasis on the concept of organization. The science of society had no business passing judgment upon whether trends toward larger and more complex organizations so prominent in the late nineteenth century constituted progress or retrogression. While Sumner retained a legacy from his classical
liberalism sufficient to feel a need to note that increased organization entails decreases in the freedom of individuals to do as they wish, he did not condemn organization. If organizations had competent leaders, the losses in individual liberty organizational growth involved were traded off against increasing efficiencies. Sumner’s science of society would not judge if this was progress, but it could identify inefficiencies and incompetent leadership. In this respect there was, Sumner suggested, a telling discrepancy between the economic and political domains at the outset of the twentieth-century. The former showed ever-greater efficiencies achieved via larger organizations, better management, and the utilization of new technology. Political organization was, by contrast, a mess. Democratization had devalued leadership while promoting mismanagement and waste. Elites and masses in the political domain were feeding off each other in spiraling enthusiasm for war and empire. Increases in available resources achieved by advancing economic organization were being diverted into preparation for wars that could decimate the economy itself and thereby undermine or even destroy civilization.66

Sumner thus offered a disillusioned picture of the dawning century without the lingering hope of Spencer’s belief that progress would someday somehow start again. Spencer responded to disillusionment by concentrating it onto the world around him, while holding persistently to belief in an absolute standard of moral right and wrong that validated classical liberalism as the ideal order of the future. He was to the end of his days a thoroughly nineteenth-century liberal. Sumner’s disillusionment was, by contrast, divided between despair at contemporary politics and loss of faith in classical liberalism’s belief in progress. He left his once strident liberal moralizing behind in pursuit of a morally non-evaluative technocratic science. By the end of his life, he was a recognizably twentieth-century social scientist.