

THE GREAT GENERALIZATION: THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION IN AMERICAN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL THOUGHT AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

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Americans make use much more often than do the English of general ideas and take more pleasure in them ... All the truths applicable to himself appear [to the one who inhabits a democratic country] to apply equally and in the same manner to each of his fellow citizens and to those like him. Having contracted the habit of general ideas in the one study he occupies himself and most interests him, he carries the same habit over to all the others, and thus the need to discover common rules for all things, to enclose many objects within the same form, and to explain a collection of facts by a single cause becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human mind.

~ Alexis de Tocqueville¹

Generalizations are useful to all men, especially democratic men. When he visited America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted America's propensity for generalities and tied this to their democratic nature.²

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¹ Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 412-413.

² Alexis de Tocqueville was a French aristocrat who traveled to America in 1831 and spent six months traveling the states. He was intrigued by the way that democracy expressed itself in America and, subsequently, wrote a book entitled *Democracy in America* in which he explored not only the form and

Tocqueville defines generalizations as “the enclosing [of] a great number of analogous objects under the same form so as to think about them more conveniently.”³ No man has the ability or time to study all the particular facts, so he studies some particulars and groups those that seem similar under general headings. This allows him to study more easily. Aristotle, while not a democratic man, makes generalizations when he discusses the main types of regimes.⁴ He categorizes the regimes initially based upon who rules – the one, the few, or the many. He follows this with a discussion of the good and bad forms of each. Aristotle acknowledges that each individual government is different in certain particulars, but he generalizes so as to allow the governments to be grouped and studied. Democratic men tend to appreciate generalizations to a greater extent than men of an aristocratic state. All men seem, to the democratic man, to be similar, leading him to generalize about those things which all men think, like, or do. Having found generalizations so helpful in understanding his fellow-man, the democratic man seeks generalizations in all fields of study. Furthermore, democratic men are rarely at leisure to pursue questions in great depth. Generalizations are appreciated as they give the democratic man a broad concept by which he can understand many things quickly.

benefits of democracy in America, but also the dangers of democracy.

³ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*. Book III

In November 1859, less than two years before the start of the Civil War, Charles Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. In this work he presented a theory explaining the process of evolution. This theory of evolution presented the possibility of a generalization that could be applied to all aspects of life. This prospect was intriguing to many around the world, but it was particularly intriguing to Americans. Scientific theories don't often reach past the confines of science into the minds of men, but those that do, change the very way men see the world. In December of 1863, Edward Youmans, who would later found a magazine called *Popular Science Monthly*, wrote to Herbert Spencer, a prominent English thinker who was influenced by the theory of evolution, saying, "I am an ultra and thoroughgoing American. I believe there is a great work to be done here for civilization. What we want are ideas – *large, organizing ideas* – and I believe there is no other man whose thoughts are so valuable to our needs as yours are." (emphasis added).⁵ Herbert Spencer's "large, organizing ideas" stemmed, in part, from his belief in evolution. Youman expressed the American desire for an overarching idea of life. In Darwin's theory of evolution America found such an idea. Evolution was an overarching idea that could be applied not only to nature but to mankind and society.

The influence of the theory of evolution in American culture was profound. It was not confined to a single political persuasion, interest group, or topic. It shaped scientific discoveries, found its way into popular novels, perpetuated beliefs in the inferiority of certain races, and spurred many a religious debate. The theory of evolution so

permeated the culture that it was used to support any number of viewpoints. It did not matter that sometimes these viewpoints were incompatible. Anti-imperialists and imperialists, Social Darwinists and Progressives, reformers and anti-reformers were all influenced by evolution and used evolutionary rhetoric in their arguments. While they did not agree on how evolution was to be interpreted and applied to political and social questions, all of these groups understood that evolution had captured the minds of the culture and was, therefore, a vital element of any argument. One cannot fully understand the post Civil War Era in America without understanding the influence that the theory of evolution had upon it. The purpose of this thesis is to explore some of the various ways in which evolution influenced American political and social thought, specifically, its influence on Social Darwinism through the figure of William Graham Sumner, its influence on the question of American imperialism, and its influence on Progressivism.

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was a broad scientific theory; it attempted to understand the workings of the entire natural world – how it changed, grew, and progressed – but the theory was very open ended. The theory explained the process by which change occurred without specifying the results of that change. The majority of scientific theories are formulated so that if A is done than B will result. Darwin's theory was not such a theory; it merely stated that if A occurred, than change would result, but change in an unspecified form. Being new, the theory was still very open to discovery and interpretation. The flexibility of the theory, its newness, and its openness to change were the qualities which made evolution relatively pliable and able to support any number of positions, even those in opposition to each other. William Graham Sumner's views stood in stark contrast to those held by Progressives, and yet they

⁵ Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American thought, 1860- 1945: Nature as a model and nature as a threat* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 150-151.

both used the theory of evolution to support their position.

Sumner believed that competition and the survival of the fittest formed the cornerstone of the theory of evolution. Sumner's interpretation of competition, that only the fittest would survive to make the world better, shaped his understanding of the world, including his beliefs on economics, government, reform, natural rights, and morals. He was a strong supporter of a laissez-faire approach to economics because he felt that interference by the government or reformers hindered competition. These hindrances would favor the weak, thereby disrupting the survival of the fittest and the progress of evolution. Consequently, he believed that government should have a very limited role in society. It was to be an instrument of protection not activism. Throughout his life he strongly resisted the advances of the reformers.

Sumner rejected the "natural rights" that many of the reformers touted in their effort to effect change. He could find no explanation for the origin of the rights, which the reformers claimed were inherent in the nature of humans. Instead, he saw natural rights as an idea which arose through the normal out-working of evolution; it served an evolutionary purpose in helping men to reach self-government. Natural rights, for Sumner, were only good as long as they were useful. The same could be said about morals; they were not fixed. Morals, like everything else, were subject to the process of evolution. They adapted with man to the changing circumstances. Many reformers of his day were distressed by the harsh conditions propagated by the Industrial Revolution. These men regarded as morally wrong the harsh conditions of the factories and thus pursued reforms. Sumner believed their actions to be folly. He believed that, in time, the mores of the nation would adjust themselves and men would no

longer be pained by conscience over the plight of the weak. Sumner believed that America had but two options: pursue a path of laissez-faire or pursue a path of destruction.

Like Sumner, Progressives believed that America would either continue in prosperity or fall into decay. The Progressives, however, embodied that which Sumner most resisted. They were the reformers. Instead of resisting governmental growth, they encouraged it, believing that government was the perfect instrument for furthering their reforms. Their emphasis on the evolutionary element of progress, rather than competition, caused them to be much more optimistic than Sumner. They envisioned a better world achieved through the hard work and determination of men.

Edward Bellamy's utopia in which brotherly love reigned was seen as the possible or even likely result of the evolutionary process. Building off the premise of evolution, Bellamy believed that men acted in response to their environment. The actions of men, being largely influenced by circumstances, meant that a simple change in those circumstances could fundamentally alter the way in which men interacted with each other. Perhaps the only thing that kept men from living in harmony was their circumstances. Bellamy believed that if capitalism was discarded and a national ownership of all the land and businesses was instituted then men could live together in perfect harmony. Competition, for Bellamy, was also an outgrowth of particular circumstances. In the utopia Bellamy envisioned, competition would only find expression in the world of love. There, men would compete for the affections of the best women through a display of their intelligence, wit, and love of country. In this way, according to Bellamy, survival of the fittest would be made manifest.

Woodrow Wilson, another Progressive, focused his attention on the need to update American institutions to reflect the evolutionary thought. Wilson saw the American government as the edifice of a time gone by. He explained that the Founders built the nation upon the assumptions of Isaac Newton. The advent of the theory of evolution signaled the necessity of transforming American institutions so that they reflected Darwin's discoveries. Governments, Wilson believed, were like organisms. They needed to be able to adapt quickly to the ever-changing circumstances. Just as the parts of an organism must work seamlessly together, so too must the various branches and departments of a government work together; such a government had no room for a cumbersome system of checks and balances. It needed to be flexible enough to progress through the evolutionary process. To this end Wilson advocated the formation of an Administrative branch of government. Staffed by men with extensive technical training in the science of administration, this new branch of the government, Wilson believed, would be able to operate above the turmoil of politics, pursuing the good of the country as a whole. Wilson's vision exhibits his deeply rooted faith in academics and scientists. This, too, was an outgrowth of Darwin's theory of evolution which played a substantial role in supporting the prestigious position which both science and scientists occupied in the minds of post-Civil War America.

The brief era of American imperialism provides another example of two diametrically opposed ideas which both used evolution to further their arguments. Sumner stood in opposition to imperialism on the basis of his evolutionary beliefs. Sumner believed that one should respond to what life presented, but that man should not chase after trouble by expanding his problems. The first was an outgrowth of competition; the second was just pure folly. American

imperialism was, for Sumner and other anti-imperialists, not only folly but potentially dangerous to America. Imperialism would force America to relinquish her identity and would make her like Spain. Anti-imperialists viewed Spain as the poster child of the folly of Imperialism; she was a broken and tired nation who had lost her liberty piece by piece in her pursuit of imperial greatness. Imperialism was a repudiation of the Founding principles, and while Sumner held the Founding principles to be conventional rather than self-evident, he believed their repudiation detrimental to American prosperity. Imperialism would eventually lead to the rise of governmental power and the subsequent demise of American liberty. As liberty was vital for evolution to be able to proceed unhindered, American imperialism was to be resisted.

American imperialists argued the opposite. They believed that imperialism was the necessary next step in America's evolution. Building off the philosophy of Manifest Destiny, American imperialists saw America as the culmination of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic evolution, which was a continual movement toward self-government. This view of history, combined with evolutionary sentiments of racial inferiority, supported the idea that some peoples were not fit for self-government. Those people needed someone to rule them until the day in which they could rule themselves. Many American imperialists, also being Progressives, believed that they could direct the process of evolution. This created the notion that with Americans at the helm, these inferior races could progress more quickly and more certainly. The extent to which they could progress was always a bit ambiguous.

The evolutionary concept of the survival of the fittest gave the American imperialists a sense of urgency. Nations, like people, were in a competition for life. A nation had to strive for power and prestige in an effort to succeed in the competition.

America might be the culmination of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic evolution, she might have the best form of government, but, American imperialists thought, if she made the wrong decisions she could lose all of that. It was imperative, therefore, that America continue to adapt, conquer new lands, and exert her influence in the world.

Political and social thought, of course, does not exist in a vacuum. History shapes the way people think, and, in turn, those people shape history. The theory of evolution could not have gained such prominence in the minds of Americans had it not coincided nicely with their beliefs and circumstances. While receiving some resistance from the religious front, the theory of evolution was accepted relatively quickly. “Two of the most striking things about the reception of Darwin’s theory,” writes Louis Menand, “are the degree to which it was regarded, even by its supporters, as highly speculative, and the speed with which it was nevertheless assimilated by younger intellectuals.”⁶ Evolution received a resounding welcome in America. To a large degree the alacrity with which this still untried theory gained acceptance can be attributed to the extent to which the theory seemed to fit with and explain the circumstances in which America was enmeshed. Evolution provided a framework that explained America’s experience with the Civil War, promised solutions to difficult questions, and even reaffirmed racial prejudice.

⁶ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 140.

CHAPTER ONE

The Symbiotic Relationship between the Civil War and Evolution

Given the overwhelming influence that the Civil War exerted on America, it is not surprising that the experiences of the Civil War played a significant role in causing Americans to accept Darwin’s theory of evolution. While it is true that many Northerners had denounced slavery both before and during the Civil War, it did not mean that they were ready to treat the former slaves as equals. In fact, most people of the era were not convinced that whites and blacks were equal. The theory of evolution reaffirmed the racial prejudices of many white Americans who already suspected that African-Americans, Native Americans, and other races were not as highly evolved as the white race. It provided a scientific theory which supported the existence of inferior races. This prejudice was only furthered by the flawed “scientific” research of men such as Samuel Morton who measured skull sizes to prove that the white race was superior. “The highest places in the hierarchy of civilization” wrote Thomas Huxley in 1865, “will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins, though it is by no means necessary that they should be restricted to the lowest.”⁷ He continued by stating that no matter where the negro ended up in the scope of the civilized world, “all responsibility for the result [would] henceforward lie between Nature and [the negro]. The white man [might] wash his hands of it, and the Caucasian conscience be void of reproach for evermore.”⁸ Many Americans agreed with this sentiment. Evolution presented the perfect justification for Americans’ apathy toward the freedmen. The theory of evolution would continue to shape American

⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

policy toward the African-Americans for years to come.

The horrific clash between pre-modern military tactics and the emerging modern weapons created another inroad for the acceptance of the theory of evolution in the American mind. Tactics of the eighteenth century, promulgated at West Point and successfully used in the Mexican-American War just a few years earlier, focused on close formations of men, firing guns in volleys, and slowly advancing. As the two lines drew close enough, they would rush toward each other with bayonets.⁹ This tactic worked well when using muskets, which had an effective range of only about 80 yards. During the Civil War, however, rifles were the preferred weapon. With a range of 400 yards rifles made these tactics horrifically deadly. The shocking death toll of the Civil War can be traced, in part, to the practice of eighteenth century tactics combined with the more modern rifles.

The carnage of the war impressed upon many that old and new did not always mix well. The Progressives were able to build off of this sentiment when they asserted that the old, pre-modern government, established by the Founders in accordance with Newtonian thought, was no longer applicable to the situations and advances of the modern world. The government and society, the Progressives explained, needed to be updated to reflect the new circumstances of industrialization and the new mindset of Darwin's theory of evolution. The consequence of failing to modernize would be tantamount to mixing old tactics with modern situations, resulting in ruination.

The Civil War also sparked a greater interest in science. Wars often bring with them an influx of inventions as the best

minds of each side are focused on giving their side the advantage. The Civil War was no exception. David Goldfield writes, “[s]cience, scientific inquiry, efficiency, and professionalism all received boosts from the war effort.”¹⁰ This interest in science only increased in the following years. “Science,” writes Rebecca Edwards, “promised progress and delivered on that promise in tangible ways.”¹¹ Telephones, light bulbs, and vaccines, along with the discovery of dinosaurs and advances in the understanding of chemical properties gave science an air of excitement and novelty, and gave credence to the notion that science had an answer for everything. “When we contemplate,” Simon Newcomb, a well-known astronomer and mathematician, wrote in a magazine article, “what sixty years [of science] have done for us...one is led to believe that everything we want to do or to know will yet be found possible. The telegraph has spanned the earth; ...electricity moves our street cars; why should not the flying machine come next?”¹² Everywhere one looked science seemed to be doing something, either providing medical advances, furthering interesting new inventions, or working to further prove the theory of evolution.

Interest in science, however, was not confined to scientists and intellectuals; it had captured the attention of the masses. Granted the masses were not interested in the technical end of science, but they were eager to learn about science if it was presented in laymen's terms. In response to this desire, numerous popular magazines

⁹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 473.

¹⁰ David Goldfield, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 303.

¹¹ Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the “Gilded Age” 1865-1905*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152.

¹² Simon Newcomb, “Science During the Victorian Era,” *The Independent...Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, June 17, 1897, 7, <http://search.proquest.com>.

materialized to cater to such an audience. *The Scientific American*, *Popular Science Monthly*, and *Science* were just a few of the popular magazines that had large circulations.¹³ Likewise, many colleges were making the shift from a focus on classical education to a broader focus which included scientific studies. Harvard added science to its course of study before the end of the Civil War. In an effort to encourage scientific study, Congress passed the Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862 which granted public lands to states in order to fund colleges. These colleges were required to offer training in the scientific, agriculture, and mechanical arts in addition to the more standard courses of study.¹⁴

Part of science's appeal stemmed from the fact that it seemed applicable beyond the confines of the natural world. Science, unlike religion or philosophy, provided concrete, testable solutions to problems that humans faced. John Wesley Powell, an explorer and later head of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology, commented that, "The history of science is the discovery of the simple and the true; in its progress illusions are dispelled and certitudes remain."¹⁵ Science offered answers to problems, providing a sense of certainty and truth. These answers were the result of study, experiments, and facts. As a newspaper of the day, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, noted

[A]rmed with statistics, the government could reduce social theories "to a certainty. A nation...with such analytic self-inspection at periodic inter-

vals might mould its growth, and forecast its future with a knowledge of all the resources and all the forces operating to shape its destiny.¹⁶

This was the promise of science. Science solved problems through experimentation and study. Armed with the results of their studies, scientists could answer questions that had puzzled mankind for centuries and even predict the future. For example, science was finally starting to answer some basic questions about illness. The causes of illness had always been a bit mysterious. Was illness brought about by the gods, was it caused by demons, or the imbalance of the humors? The theory of germs was beginning to emerge by the end of the Civil War. During the Civil War surgeons and doctors caring for the wounded noticed that cleanliness reduced fatalities even though they still did not understand the reason for this. With the unfolding of the subsequent decades, the discovery of germs allowed doctors to understand why cleanliness reduced fatalities. Men like Louis Pasteur, Edward Jenner, Joseph Lister, and Robert Koch did extensive research on the topic of germs; vaccines were found for diseases like anthrax and methods to prevent gangrene in wounds were discovered. The sterilization practices implemented in light of this discovery, reduced deaths so dramatically that hospitals, once viewed as places of death, were attracting the well-off by the early 1900s.¹⁷ If problems that had plagued mankind since the beginning of time, like diseases, could be "solved" through scientific research, then could not these same principles be applied to government and society thereby solving problems like poverty which had also plagued mankind? Many set about applying scientific principles to various aspects of society. The

¹³Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Gilded Age or, The Hazard of New Functions*, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), 160.

¹⁴Goldfield, 304.

¹⁵Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), 180.

¹⁶Goldfield, 304.

¹⁷Edwards, 152.

Charity Organization Society, for example, was founded in 1877 by an English-American clergyman named Samuel Humphreys Gurteen. It was to be a “scientific philanthropy” which would organize all the charities of a particular city so as to more effectively address the issues of poverty. (While it made little real impact on poverty, it did provide a blueprint for later charity movements.)¹⁸

More enticing than solving human problems like poverty or illness, science, and especially evolution, seemed to offer a hope for discovering principles, patterns, or themes applicable to man, which could provide a blueprint for the best type of society or government. Prior to this age, social theories about the best structures for society or government had always been the product of conjecture. Science seemed to offer a system by which social theories could be reduced to certainty. If man could better understand himself and his fellow man, he would be better able to construct the perfect type of society and government. Man’s ignorance had precluded this achievement in previous generations but now had the potential to remove those barriers. In 1895, Daniel Brinton, a leading American anthropologist, explained this concept:

Ignorant of his past, ignorant of his real needs, ignorant of himself, man has blundered and stumbled up the thorny path of progress for tens of thousands of years ... Now anthropology steps in, the new Science of Man, offering... itself as man’s trusty mentor and friend, ready to conduct him by sure steps upward and onward to the highest summit which his nature is capable of attaining; and who dares set a limit to that?¹⁹

Brinton accurately depicts the mindset many Americans held in relation to evolution and the scientific studies which were its progenies. Science, especially the social sciences, offered to illuminate the path of progress, to help that generation avoid the many mistakes humans had made in the past, and to help them attain perfection, or as Brinton refers to it, “the highest summit which [man’s] nature is capable of attaining.” Science would illuminate the path by helping men, in this case Americans, to understand their past, their real needs, and their very essence. By understanding history within the framework of conflict and struggle for existence, Social Darwinists believed they could help society more closely adhere to that framework which would lead to the most advantageous society, while the Progressives believed they could slowly build a new framework, gradually weeding out the need for conflict and struggle which would ultimately usher in a utopian society. Science held the possibility of discovering for certain the needs of man, or at least the current needs of man. Evolution, with its concept of the continual adaption of organisms, predicted that man’s needs would change over time, but science held the tools for discovering those changing needs. Newcomb wrote:

Of [evolution] it may be said that its significance lies less in what it teaches or asserts than in the key which it affords to the investigator to unlock the mysteries of Nature. Evolution is, perhaps, as much a tenet of philosophy as a scientific principle, and therefore more remarkable for what it suggests than for what it proves.²⁰

Evolution held the key to understanding the world. If applied correctly it could aid man

¹⁸ Goldfield, 491.

¹⁹ Gabriel, 175.

²⁰ Newcomb, 6.

in rightly ordering society so as to promote the greatest amount of peace and prosperity. This was the promise that captivated America.

CHAPTER TWO

William Graham Sumner and the Social Darwinists

Americans eagerly studied the theory of evolution to discover its correct application to society, to politics, and to science. Different interpretations of evolution developed as this study was pursued. Social Darwinism represented one of these interpretations. Social Darwinists believed in the inferiority of certain races, studying everything from skulls to history to tribal people to prove the hierarchy of races. Believing that the world operated under the framework of the survival of the fittest, they explored eugenics, the study of selective breeding to improve the human race. They believed that competition was both good and necessary and, therefore, should be allowed to happen unhindered. Morality and ethics were considered products of their age; that along with man himself, were mutable and could change. They believed, as the theory of evolution stated, that change must happen slowly. They advocated laissez-faire economic and political policy and resisted reform movements. This led them to champion small government and the rights of the individual. While most Social Darwinists believed in these basic tenets, the specific beliefs of social Darwinists varied as widely as the men who proclaimed them.

Herbert Spencer is often considered the “father of Social Darwinism.” Though many of his writings pre-date *The Origin of Species*, Spencer had already made use of evolutionary concept that creatures could evolve over time. Many of Spencer’s ideas

regarding evolution came from the French scientist Jean Baptiste Lamarck. Lamarck’s theory of evolution operated on the “law of use and disuse.” Lamarck believed that as an organism used a particular organ or faculty it grew stronger or better adapted to the organism’s circumstances. Conversely those organs or faculties which were not used would grow weaker. The changes in the organs or faculties were then passed on to the offspring.²¹ Many believed that the inheritance of acquired traits applied to both physical and mental characteristics.²² This offered great hope that men could advance intellectually as well as physically. It was common for evolutionists in the 19th century to couple Lamarck’s theories with Darwin’s.²³ While Darwin himself accepted the law of use and disuse as one element of evolution, he believed that natural selection and variations played a larger role in evolution. Spencer did read Darwin’s works; it was, in fact, Spencer, not Darwin, who first coined the term “survival of the fittest.” Darwin would later include this phrase in subsequent editions of his book.

Spencer was born in 1820 to a lower-middle class English family, which instilled in him the values of individualism and self-reliance. He worked as a railway engineer, journalist, and writer.²⁴ He wrote profusely,

²¹ Genes and DNA had not yet been discovered so this theory seemed as plausible as any other. One of the common examples is that of a giraffe. The first giraffes would have had short necks, but as the giraffes continually stretched their necks to reach higher branches their necks would lengthen. This slightly longer neck would be inherited by the offspring. This process, repeating itself through numerous generations resulted in the long neck of the modern day giraffe.

²² Paul F. Boller Jr., *American Thought in Transition: The Impact of Evolutionary Naturalism, 1865-1900*, (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1969), 3.

²³ This coupling declined as science gained a greater understanding of DNA and genetics.

²⁴ Hawkins, 83.

and his works were widely read in both America and Great Britain; a total of 368,755 copies of Spencer's books were sold in America between the 1860s and 1903.²⁵ This was a large number of books for an author to have sold, especially considering that the books were on academic topics such as philosophy and sociology. Some of his books even ran serially in magazines; *Popular Science Monthly* ran the serialized books alongside various articles he had written. The public was eager to explore scientific ideas, and the fact that his writing was not very technical made it accessible to wide audience. Henry Ward Beecher famed Protestant minister of the Second Great Awakening, reported to Spencer in 1866 that the "peculiar condition of American society has made your writings far more fruitful and quickening here than in Europe."²⁶ Beecher does not elaborate on what these peculiar conditions were, but perhaps he was referring to the fact that many of Spencer's ideas and philosophies coincided nicely with cherished American principles. Spencer promoted individualism, believed that the widest possible liberty was best, was optimistic, had faith in progress, and believed that there was a natural order to the world.

Spencer defined evolution as "a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite coherent heterogeneity, accompanying the dissipation of motion and integration of matter."²⁷ In other words,

through continual change everything is moving from a simple to a more complex state. He supported industrialization, which he viewed as a more complex and therefore more evolved form of society. With this central idea Spencer believed he had a generalization that could be applied to all areas of study. He spent roughly 40 years writing a ten volume series called *Systems of Synthetic Philosophy* in which he applied his ideas to various fields of study including biology, sociology, and philosophy.

While Spencer had a profound impact on American social and political thought, Social Darwinism found its most influential American advocate in William Graham Sumner. Sumner was born in 1840 in Paterson, New Jersey. He was the son of a self-educated English laborer who had been forced to move to America when English factories put him out of work. Frugality and hard work were the major tenets of his father's life, tenets that influenced Sumner deeply. He went on to study theology at Yale in 1859, and after graduating he spent time in Europe studying various languages, Anglican theology, and history.²⁸ He was ordained as a deacon in an Episcopal church in 1867, spent two years as a Rector for a church in New Jersey, and then was elected as Professor of Political and Social Science at Yale College in 1872.²⁹

He remained an influential and, at times, controversial professor at Yale until the year prior to his death in 1910. "[As] an exacting but popular teacher, and through his vigorously written articles in popular magazines and books," Boller wrote,

helped Spencer index his monumental work, asked if he could write this "summary." Spencer agreed. While initially skeptical, Spencer praised the work when it was finished and said as much in his introduction to the work.

²⁸ William Graham Sumner, "Autobiographical Sketch," in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, vol. 1, ed. Albert Galloway Keller and Maurice R. Davie (? : Archon Books, 1969), 4.

²⁹ Hofstadter, 52.

²⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, revised ed. (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1959), 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 31.

²⁷ Frederick Howard Collins, *An Epitome of the Synthetic Philosophy*, with intro by Herbert Spencer (Edinburgh, London: Williams and Norgat, 1889), 45.

As the preface says "The object of this volume is to give in a condensed form the general principles of Mr. Herbert Spencer's Philosophy as far as possible in his original words." It is roughly one tenth the length of the original. Collins, who had

“Sumner probably did as much as any one man to ensure the ubiquity of Social Darwinist ideas in America in the Gilded Age and after”³⁰ Sumner taught for 37 years at Yale. He helped to shape the minds of hundreds of Americans who came through his courses. Men like William Lyon Phelps, a well known scholar, author, and Professor of English Literature at Yale, Thorstein Veblen, a well known economist and sociologist, and Irving Fisher, a well known economist and inventor, were all students under Sumner. Some of those he taught went on to be professors in their own right and they continued to spread Sumner’s ideas. Not only was he able to help shape the new generations of student minds, but as the professor of political economy and social science at Yale, Sumner also had the opportunity to shape these brand new areas of study. He was the first professor to teach a course on sociology and as one of the pioneers of sociology he left an indelible mark on that field.

Encouraged by Spencer’s comprehensive work, *A System of Synthetic Philosophy*, Sumner embarked on a lifelong search for and study of what he called the Science of Society; others called it the Science of Man. There was a need for such a science because, as Sumner put it, “[o]ur traditions about the science and art of living are plainly inadequate. They break to pieces in our hands when we try to apply them to the new cases...the traditional doctrines and explanations of human life are worthless.”³¹ The old ideas regarding life could no longer explain the modern world; they left man with an old map in a new world. It was time to discard the old inadequate ideas and discover new ones. Many believed that if

mankind could discover the principles and “laws” of this overarching science then a better life could be achieved. There were, however, varying beliefs as to what this better life would look like. For some, a better life would entail a continual progression toward a perfect world. For others, those of a more skeptical nature who did not believe that a perfect world was achievable, the science of society could help men live better lives in a smaller sense. Sumner fell into this latter category. Taking his cue from Darwin, Sumner believed that conflict and competition were a part of life and that a greater knowledge of the science of society could do nothing to change that.

The study of the science of society, Sumner taught, began with one of the most basic elements of Darwin’s theory of evolution – competition. Sumner believed that there were two forms of competition. The first was the struggle for existence, the most elementary type of struggle. It is evidenced throughout the natural world and leads to the survival of the fittest. That struggle is permanent, and, contrary to what reformers thought, Sumner believed that it could not be softened in any way. Within the ranks of the fittest, however, there is a second struggle – the competition of life. This is the struggle for those things which make one’s life more comfortable. It is the competition that happens between those who already have the necessities of life but who want to secure the comforts of life.³² For Sumner competition was the key to understanding the world. It informed his view of economics, reformers, natural rights, and morals.

Sumner’s view of the inherent role of competition in the process of evolution caused him to be staunchly in favor of a laissez-faire approach to economics and

³⁰ Boller, 56.

³¹ William Graham Sumner, “The Science of Sociology” in *The Forgotten Man and other Essays*, ed. Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), 403.

³² Sumner, “War,” in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. Keller and Davie, 142.

politics.³³ Laissez-faire was not a new concept; it had been the mainstay of the classical school of political economy in America since the early nineteenth century.³⁴ The theory of evolution seemed, for men like Sumner, to confirm its validity. Sumner believed that a laissez-faire approach was vital for evolution to proceed correctly. When government got involved in society by issuing regulations, giving grants, or attempting to break up the large corporations, it thwarted the natural process of competition stifling evolution. Sumner believed, therefore, that the government should have a very limited role in society. “[T]here are two chief things,” Sumner argued, “with which government has to deal. They are the property of men and the honor of women. These it has to defend against crime.”³⁵ Government, according to Sumner, was to be an institution of protection not activism. Sumner did not advocate anarchy, nor did he believe that nature had to work wholly unrestrained. He supported the protection of private property and the order of law. Any interference by man, he believed should be done in a very limited way.³⁶ He used a garden to illustrate his view of laissez-faire. He derisively compared the politicians of his day to “Dutch gardeners” who pruned their trees to look like animals.³⁷ Both politicians and “Dutch gardeners,” Sumner explained, form ideals first and then try to invent ways to reach those ideals. The wise gardener, on the other hand, goes about gardening in a very different manner.

³³ The Puritan ethics of hard work and honesty instilled in Sumner by his father also helped to shape his ideas of economy.

³⁴ Boller, 71.

³⁵ Hofstadter, 62.

³⁶ William Graham Sumner, “Laissez-Faire” in *On Liberty, Society, and Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. Robert C. Bannister (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 227.

³⁷ This, Sumner said, spoils the tree without achieving the end, namely that of making it look like an animal.

First of all, he doesn’t form preconceived ideas about what the garden should look like; instead, he watches and observes, trying to discover nature’s laws already at work. When he has discovered these laws, he then works within them to guide the garden to his tastes. He does this not by imposing his will, but, as Sumner says, by “furnishing to nature what she needs to help her and in removing all the obstacles which would hinder her in concentrating her forces on the things which men like to the exclusion of the things they do not like.”³⁸ Nature could be guided, but only in this somewhat passive manner, letting nature do the work and assisting only by giving nature what is needed while removing any obstacles in her way – obstacles such as meddlesome politicians and reformers.

His belief in the importance of laissez-faire principles caused him to be very critical of the reformers of his day. He saw reformers as working to prune society according to their idea of what was best, failing to first submit to the laws of nature. The central natural law they transgressed was the law of the survival of the fittest. Sumner tried to make it clear that the term “fittest” was not synonymous with “best.” Sumner emphasized that his thoughts were not based on some theological treatise on how the “best” – a moral term – would survive; instead, he was merely stating a fact – that those who survive are the fittest. Those who survive, Sumner argued, were not better in the moral sense; they were just better adapted to survive in the current world.³⁹ The reformers tried to circumvent the law of survival of the fittest by giving aid to those who were weaker. The problem, Sumner explained, was that “[t]he law of the survival of the fittest was not made by man and cannot be abrogated by man. We can only,

³⁸ Ibid. 229.

³⁹ Sumner eventually gave up on using the term “survival of the fittest” as people often attached the moral connotation despite his protest otherwise.

by interfering with it, produce the survival of the un-fittest.”⁴⁰

The result of the work of the reformers, whether tariffs, regulatory legislation, grants to various projects, or aid societies to help the poor were a means of helping the un-fittest to survive, thereby hindering the continual process of evolution and adaption to the changing world. Reformers were hurting mankind, not helping it; they were holding it back from its true potential.⁴¹ Sumner wrote many essays pointing out their follies, one of which he titled, “The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over.” His title is a clear statement of thoughts about their efforts; they were absurd and not founded on any scientific basis. “The first instinct of the modern man,” Sumner wrote, “is to get a law passed to forbid or prevent what, in his wisdom, he disapproves. A thing which is inevitable [the new age], however, is one which we cannot control. We have to make up our minds to it, adjust ourselves to it, and sit down to live with it.”⁴² These modern men or reformers, he contended, were attempting to force society to conform to their view of the best society instead of realizing the pointlessness of their actions. Man cannot change his world; he can only go with the flow of change and adapt. Sumner added:

It is only in imagination that we stand by and look at and criticize [progress] and plan to change it. Everyone of us is a child of his age and cannot get out of it...That is why

it is the greatest folly of which a man can be capable, to sit down with a slate and pencil to plan out a new social world.⁴³

This encapsulates Sumner’s thoughts about politics and society: evolution would continue its unstoppable march, and all that man could do was accept the evolutionary process and work within it. Man had to be willing to change and adapt to be able to survive.

Reformers encouraged the antithesis, agitating men by holding aloft various “natural rights” that were not currently being enjoyed - rights such as the “right to the full product of one’s labor.” Sumner believing that these demands could not be met, thought their promulgation only resulted in men feeling cheated or let down by both government and society. Sumner believed that all of the so-called “natural rights” were in reality civil rights, rights that were agreed upon by the society. The idea of certain rights being natural, Sumner conceded, was very valuable only if viewed in the proper historical setting. This was Sumner’s way of saying that “natural rights” had a role in the evolution of society. During the Medieval era the concept became valuable as a means to resist the power of the king, and it, subsequently helped societies to evolve to their present state.⁴⁴ As a piece in the evolutionary process, Sumner conceded, they were useful, but useful did not make them natural. In fact, Sumner did not believe that any rights were natural. Sumner’s ideology held that man was born as an animal with no rights, and the sooner people realized this, the better. “The curse of the self-glorification of the human species,” Sumner argued, “is that it blinds them to the truth of their

⁴⁰ Hawkins, 110.

⁴¹ Sumner was not against all reform, just most. One exception was his staunch support of national education. He also held that limited reforms with the aim of protecting women and children were reasonable as he felt that they could not protect themselves.

⁴² Sumner, “The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over” in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. Keller and Davie, 94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

⁴⁴ Sumner, “Some Natural Rights,” in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. Keller and Davie, 363.

situation, keeps them from intelligent effort to make the best of it, and sets them to rending each other when their demands are not satisfied”⁴⁵ Reformers, in Sumner’s eyes, perpetuated a glorified view of man which hindered men from grasping the reality of their place in the world. Thus hindered, men were forever discontent.

Sumner believed that morals, like natural rights, were merely products of their time. Men and societies were not the only things that evolved. Morals, beliefs, and philosophies changed too.⁴⁶ Sumner believed that ethical standards, philosophies, and beliefs were conditioned by the society from which they had sprung, and, consequently, as that society changed, so also would those standards, philosophies, and beliefs. Sumner explored this concept in depth in his work *Folkways*. Folkways, he explained, are the particular ways of doing things, the habits of individuals, and the customs of society that a people develop through trial and error according to what is most expedient. Mores are the folkways that are considered indispensable to the survival of a society. These mores are not easily or quickly changed, but they can be changed. There is no inherent “rightness” about them. “[All mores] must be regarded as justified with regard to that time and place. ‘Good’ mores are those which are well adapted to the situation. ‘Bad’ mores are those which are not so adapted”⁴⁷

The mutability of morals was an important concept. Many opponents argued that Sumner’s laissez-faire approach was harsh and unforgiving. The reformers were

concerned that industrialization had actually made peoples’ lives worse. Tenement houses were crowded, unpleasant places where disease festered, and factories were hot, dangerous places that did not pay well. Reformers struggled with the immoral or unethical nature of allowing things to continue without intervention, allowing people to just die in these awful conditions. For Sumner, this was the inevitable outcome – the way it was supposed to be. He believed that eventually the mores of the nation would catch up with the circumstances in which they lived; when that happened the people would not be as concerned about the dying poor. Given time, the morals would change, and mankind would realize that it was, in fact, good to let those people die so that they would no longer burden society.

The reformers were horrified by the harshness of the industrial age, yet Sumner saw this increased harshness or sharpening of the competition between men in America as a product of evolution, for as population increased so did competition. Like Darwin, Sumner was impressed with Thomas Malthus’ “Law of Population.” Malthus was a British classical economist who died in 1834. The ideas he expressed in *An Essay on the Principles of Population* were influential in shaping both Darwin and Sumner’s view of the world.⁴⁸ In this essay Malthus made the assertion that “food [was] necessary to the existence of man” and “that the passion between the sexes [was] necessary and [would] remain nearly in its present state.”⁴⁹ In other words, humans would keep populating the earth and they would keep needing food. He then went on to say “that the

⁴⁵ Sumner, “The Demand for Men,” in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. Keller and Davie, 426.

⁴⁶ One of the basic assumptions of evolution is the mutability of men and morals as mentioned in the introduction.

⁴⁷ William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1940), 58.

⁴⁸ This work is credited with shaping Darwin’s view of the role of competition in the process of evolution.

⁴⁹ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (online: Electronic Scholarly Publishing Project, 1998) accessed January 27, 2013, <http://www.esp.org/books/malthus/population/malthus.pdf>, 4.

power of population [was] indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man.”⁵⁰ Malthus believed that population statistics revealed a cycle wherein the population grew greater than the subsistence provided by earth, and then through famine, vice, or natural disasters, the population was brought below the level that could be supported by the earth, allowing it to grow again.

Drawing from Malthus’ ideas, Sumner formulated what is often called the man-land ratio which he believed was the foundation of all societies. “The most important limiting condition on the status of human societies,” Sumner stated, “is the ratio of the number of their members to the amount of land at their disposal.”⁵¹ When the population was sparse, land and its accompanying resources would be plentiful, but as the population increased, the amount of land in relation to the population would decrease, decreasing the available resources. If the increase of population were unchecked by disease and war, the human population could outgrow its resources, resulting in the starvation of many. One of Sumner’s premises was that Americans had always lived in relative prosperity because they had always had an abundance of land. As abundance of land decreased, corresponding to a rising population, life would get harder for Americans. A sharper degree of competition would, necessarily, arise; he argued that reformers did not need to be worried about what was viewed as a growing harshness in the world – it was just a natural step in the process of all societies.

Sumner’s philosophy is easily summed up in his own words. “Let it be understood,” he wrote, “that we cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, survi-

val of the fittest; not-liberty, [or] equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst members.”⁵² For Sumner, these were the only two options. One could either allow progress by supporting liberty, keeping government from interfering and upsetting the natural process of the survival of the fittest, and by allowing inequalities to arise naturally, or one could cause progress to stagnate by supporting government interference, the “not-liberty” concept, and thereby upsetting the natural order of survival of the fittest in an effort to gain equality among men. Owing in part to his understanding of evolution, Sumner believed that humans, Americans in particular, could choose either progress or eventual destruction; there was no other possibility.

CHAPTER THREE

The Question of Imperialism and America’s Role in the Evolutionary Process

Sumner’s evolutionary worldview was not merely theoretical; he took his ideas and applied them to the situations around him. One of these situations was the Spanish-American War and the questions it raised about American imperialism. The Spanish-American War, which lasted only three short months in the summer of 1898, left America in possession of Cuba, the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, Wake Island, and Hawaii. America was then faced with the question of what to do with these newly acquired territories. Was America to allow them to become their own independent nations, was she to treat them as ter-

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Sumner, “Earth Hunger or the Philosophy of Land Grabbing,” in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. Keller and Davie, 174.

⁵² Hofstadter, 51.

ritories which could eventually become states, or was she to turn them into her empire, ruling them as the great European nations had ruled their empires?

The title Sumner gave to an essay in which he explored these ideas, “The Conquest of America by Spain,” reveals the heart of his position on American imperialism. “I intend to show,” he wrote, “that, by the line of action now proposed to us, which we call expansion and imperialism, we are throwing away some of the most important elements of the American symbol and are adopting some of the most important elements of the Spanish symbol.”⁵³ While America was militarily conquering Spain, Sumner explained, she was losing the war of principles. In choosing empire, America was exchanging her Founding principles for the principles of Spain and thereby losing her identity.

Sumner staunchly opposed American imperialism. It went against his basic understanding of evolution which was that humans have only a passive role in the evolutionary process. He did not mince words addressing the folly of the reformers for trying to change natural circumstances, and he similarly pointed out the folly of imperialism. It, too, was a way of trying to force the hand of evolution, Sumner thought. “What comes to us in the evolution of our own life and interests, that we must meet;” Sumner explained, “what we go to seek which lies beyond that domain is a waste of our energy and a compromise of our liberty and welfare.”⁵⁴ He saw imperialism as reaching beyond our own domain, and, as such, it was both folly and waste. Even more than that, however, Sumner saw imperialism a threat to the American way of life.

For Sumner, imperialism was not an issue of America’s military strength to be able to hold the territories, but an issue of whether America was willing to give up her identity. “The question,” Sumner asked, “is whether we are prepared to repudiate the principles which we have been insisting on for one hundred and fifty years?”⁵⁵ Sumner wanted Americans to think long and hard before they rushed into ruling an empire. While he had no affinity for the Founding principles themselves, he did not see this repudiation as a good thing. Sumner made no pretense of claiming that American principles were true or even good; His argument was simply that America had been insisting on those principles since her founding, they were part of the fabric of American thought and life, and, therefore, important to the health of the American regime. In other essays Sumner made it quite clear that he did not believe that American principles such as natural rights or the equality of men were true. In a world created by evolution there was no basis for them being natural or unalienable. At best Sumner believed that these principles were useful in a given time and place at worst they were dangerous tools in the hands of the reformers. Sumner focused on the inextricable connection between the American regime and her Founding principles. He pointed out that “[t]he field for dogmatism in [his] day [was] not theology, it [was] political philosophy.”⁵⁶ In the “old world” of Europe, principles were based in theology, but in America principles were tied to the political philosophy. According to Sumner, American principles could not be separated from the American regime; if one changed so would the other.

Building on this idea, Sumner argued that the principles could not be rejected without rejecting the form of government at

⁵³ Ibid., 297.

⁵⁴ Sumner, “The Conquest of the United States by Spain,” in *War and other Essays*, ed Albert Galloway Keller (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 300.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 317.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 309.

the same time. Democracies, according to Sumner, were already fragile governments; they could exist only under particular circumstances such as abundant land and a small population, circumstances which America had been blessed with but which she could not expect to enjoy forever.⁵⁷ While imperialism might increase the abundance of land it would weaken the principles which held the democracy together, thereby negating the advantage gained by additional land. America could not stay a democracy forever unless she could keep her population low. At some point that demise would probably come, but it did not need to be hurried along by imperialistic pursuits. Imperialism, if pursued, would change the shape of American character and principles, and subsequently the regime, to reflect those of Spain and the other imperial nations of Europe. Imperialism, especially the Spanish version of imperialism, always led to increased governmental power. Governmental interference is liable to stunt the natural evolutionary processes as it often helps the weak to survive at the expense of the fittest.

Not all who believed in evolution or even all Social Darwinists, however, agreed with Sumner on this point. For pro-imperialists, evolution seemed to coincide nicely with aspects of imperialism. American imperialism drew heavily from the idea that certain races did not have the capacity for self-government.⁵⁸ Evolution provided a scientific support for racial discrimination. All races evolve, it was believed, and some, like the Anglo-Saxons, had evolved further than others and were more capable of self-government. The “survival of the fittest”

and the “might makes right” view of justice inherent in evolution provided a justification for America to keep the Philippines and the other territories she had gained from Spain; as long as she had the power to keep the territories, she had the right to do so. Additionally, Malthus’ law of population, used by both Darwin and Social Darwinists, encouraged the acquisition of more land as the only way to lessen the pressures of an expanding population.

Unlike Sumner, many pro-imperialists believed that not only could they shape and direct evolution but that they had a duty or obligation to do so. They saw America’s mission to spread self-government and freedom to the world as part of the evolutionary process. This belief in America’s mission harkened back to the idea of Manifest Destiny which was prevalent in the 1840s.

Finding its roots in the Puritan idea of a “city on a hill,” Manifest Destiny was the belief that Providence had ordained that America would spread across the continent bringing with it liberty, self-government, and Christianity. Manifest destiny aligned perfectly with the unfolding drama of the American experience. Nothing seemed to stand in way of American settlers; the Allegheny Mountains, the Mississippi River, and the Rocky Mountains each had been crossed in its time and the distance made increasingly smaller by technological advances. The Indians were continually pushed further west or sidelined onto reservations. In November of 1839, an article entitled “The Great Nation of Futurity” appeared in the *Democratic Review* magazine.⁵⁹ Expressing the key elements of Manifest Destiny without actually using the phrase which has become inextricably linked to these ideas, the article proclaimed,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 324.

⁵⁸ Some believed that potentially all races could progress or evolve to the point where they would be able to govern themselves, but this would take many generations. They looked back to American history and saw the American nation as the culmination of the evolution of the Anglo-Saxon/Germanic races.

⁵⁹ Many attribute this article and the phrase “Manifest Destiny” to John L. O’Sullivan, the editor of the *Democratic Review*. The actual phrase would appear in an article he wrote entitled “Annexation.”

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High.⁶⁰

Providence shone down upon the great nation of the United States of America. America was the epitome of self-government, the protector of liberty, and the great missionary to the world. Six years later another article in that magazine proclaimed, “our *manifest destiny* [is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”⁶¹

The imperialists built off of the framework of Manifest Destiny carrying over much of the Providential rhetoric into their own arguments for imperialism. Senator Albert Beveridge, in his speech supporting American empire, proclaimed “Blind indeed is he who sees not the hand of God in events so vast, so harmonious, so benign.”⁶² Beveridge asserted that God had given America a mission and had given her the start of an empire to help fulfill that mission; she, therefore, needed to accept the responsibility and not shirk it. Beveridge’s speech is littered with references to God and Providence. Support for imperialism, however, was not merely a reiteration of Mani-

fest Destiny. This becomes evident when three the major territorial acquisitions in American history – the Louisiana Purchase, the Mexican territory, and the Spanish islands – are compared. Each of these territorial acquisitions raised questions of how to deal with the territory and whether a foreign people could be integrated into American society.

In 1803 America purchased the Louisiana Territory from France for a mere \$15 million dollars. While there were questions about the constitutionality of the purchase and a fear that a republic could not operate over such a great expanse of land, there was also the practical question of how to integrate the French and the others who lived in the territory, especially those in the more concentrated areas along the Mississippi River. Ultimately it was decided that they should be able to become American citizens with all the rights and privileges. Thomas Jefferson, President at the time, did set up a provisional government for the territory that is now the state of Louisiana. This provisional government was a temporary body, established to provide order during the transition until the people of Louisiana could call a convention, write a constitution, and apply for statehood. John Q. Adams pointed out that the United States of America had been founded upon the principle of self-government; it would go against the very fabric of her identity, therefore, if she were to rule another people.⁶³ And so, the people of the Louisiana territory were given the freedom to become citizens.

This question arose again during the Mexican-American War. Senator John C. Calhoun resisted the “All Mexico Movement,” whose advocates urged America to conquer all of Mexico. “[I]t is without

⁶⁰ “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The United States Democratic Review*, November 1839, 427, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu>.

⁶¹ John L. O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” in *The U.S. War with Mexico*, ed. Ernesto Chavez, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 37.

⁶² Albert Beveridge, “In Support of an American Empire,” accessed February, 10, 2013, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=639>

⁶³ Merrill Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 778.

example or precedent,” Calhoun declared, “either to hold Mexico as a province, or to incorporate her into our Union...We have conquered many of the neighboring tribes of Indians, but we never thought of holding them in subjection – never of incorporating them into our Union.”⁶⁴ The argument was again that America could not rule another nation; she had to either incorporate the land she acquired as states or she could not take the land.⁶⁵ While the crux of Calhoun’s argument centered on race, he began his argument by reminding America that she either had to be willing to incorporate the Mexicans as equals or she had to let Mexico be her own country.⁶⁶ Calhoun believed that the first could not be done, and so, the second option should be followed. While all Americans may not have agreed with the racial aspects of his objections, they ultimately decided that Mexico was not worth taking. The territories we did obtain as a result of that conflict were treated as territories with the freedom to apply for statehood according to the dictates of the Constitution. Every time America acquired new territory she incorporated it as a state or states as soon as the population was large enough.

With the advent of the Spanish-American War in 1898, however, a shift became evident in American thought. Prominent Americans began to make the argument that America *could rule* a foreign

people. Men like Theodore Roosevelt and Albert Beveridge argued that the Philippines, over which much of the imperial discussion centered, could be treated like a colony and did not have to be offered the option of statehood. It could be governed without the consent of the governed. This was a distinct shift in the American mindset. The proponents of Manifest Destiny had focused on the spread of self-government, not on empire building. O’Sullivan proclaimed, “[O]ur country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity. It is so destined, because the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny, and that of equality is perfect, is universal.... We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity, only as lessons of avoidance of nearly all their examples.”⁶⁷ O’Sullivan placed the principle of equality at the heart of the American identity. He rejected the European way of life by claiming that America had never followed Europe’s lead and should not begin to do so now. While O’Sullivan rejoiced that America was wholly different from Europe and did not follow the European example, the imperialists of the 1890s drew from European history to justify American colonies. Beveridge asserted that “[i]f England can govern foreign lands, so can America. ... Will you say by your vote that American ability to govern has decayed; that a century’s experience in self-rule has failed of a result?”⁶⁸ Beveridge implied that if America chose not to rule the Philippines, then the American experiment in some way had failed. He re-defined America’s greatness based on her ability to rule others, and not on her role as a champion of self-government.

⁶⁴ John C. Calhoun, “Speech on the War with Mexico,” in *The U.S. War with Mexico*, ed. Chavez, 119.

⁶⁵ Or, as in the case of the Indians, the conquered people could exist as sovereign bodies within the confines of the reservations. Statehood was not immediate as many times the land was rather “empty.” Once an area had the required number of people, however, they had to be allowed to apply for statehood.

⁶⁶ His argument was that racial Mexicans were not equals and, therefore, could not be treated as equals. Consequently, America should not attempt to take all of Mexico.

⁶⁷ “The Great Nation of Futurity,” 4276-237.

⁶⁸ Albert Beveridge, “The March of the Flag,” in *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion*, ed. Amy S. Greenberg, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012), 156.

The theory of evolution played a role in this shift. Looking at history through the lens of evolution, imperialists saw the American regime, and subsequently her mission, as the culmination of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic evolution. They saw the history of the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic tribes as one of continual movement toward self-government. Even Charles Darwin himself found “much truth in the belief that the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people, [were] the result of natural selection.”⁶⁹ Darwin went on to explain that the best of Europe had been immigrating to America for several decades. It was no wonder, Darwin thought, that America was prospering; it was the culmination of generations of evolution of the best of Europe. Theodore Roosevelt agreed. “Our people are now successfully governing themselves,” Roosevelt claimed, “because for more than a thousand years they have been slowly fitting themselves, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, toward this end.”⁷⁰ Self-government was something that a race or a nation could only gain after centuries of evolution.⁷¹

Other races and nations had not yet reached the pinnacle that America had and thus were not capable of self-government. America, therefore, could not expect the Filipinos or any of the other natives on the islands they now possessed to immediately be ready for self-government. “How shall [the Filipinos],” Senator Beveridge asked, “in a twinkling of an eye, be exalted to the heights of self-governing peoples which required a thousand years for us to reach,

Anglo-Saxon though we are?”⁷² Self-government was not something of which all men were capable, according to many imperialists. Roosevelt explained that people need to have self-control and self-restraint before they can have self government. “[I]f those qualities,” he wrote, “do not exist --- that is, if the people are unable to govern themselves – then, as there must be government somewhere, it has to come from the outside.”⁷³ Racism played a large role in the assessment of a people’s capabilities to rule themselves. A race had to evolve or progress over many generations to reach the capacity for self-government. The oriental heritage of the Filipinos combined with their Spanish upbringing were to blame for their inability to rule themselves. The Filipinos, therefore, needed a government from the outside.

Unlike Sumner, many imperialists, especially those of the Progressive persuasion, believed that humans had the opportunity to shape evolution and thereby to shape a people’s progress. It was partially on this basis that Albert Beveridge, Theodore Roosevelt, and other imperialists argued we should keep the Philippines. The Filipino people were incapable of self-government, so America, they thought, should administer the government. The hope was to train the Filipinos in the ways of self-government so that possibly some day they could rule themselves. Problematic for those imperialists who sought to instill self-government in another people, was that they were forced to first abrogate the principle of self-government by ruling over a people without their consent.⁷⁴ Beveridge did not see this as

⁶⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1871), 172.

⁷⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address part II”, December 3, 1901.

⁷¹ This evolution could be conscience or unconscious. The progressive would place a strong emphasis on the need for a conscience evolution.

⁷² Beveridge, “In Support of an American Empire.”

⁷³ Theodore Roosevelt, “Expansion of the White Races.”

⁷⁴ Both imperialists and Progressives were forced to reject various aspects of the Founding philosophy, aspects such as natural rights, consent of the governed and written limitations on the national government’s constitutional power to be able to pursue their designs.

a problem. He argued that it would be better for America to give up on doing her part to redeem the world than to give the Filipinos self government when they were not prepared for it.⁷⁵ Not only did he feel that the Filipinos were not capable of self-government, but he felt it would be dangerous for them to try before they were ready. For a people who had never been self-governing to be ruled first by a benevolent ruler who could allow them to become habituated to ways of self-government was perhaps a necessary step in the process. America had been blessed to learn self-government in her townships while under the auspices of Great Britain. Tocqueville argued in 1830s that a “democracy” is only able to succeed amongst a people who have been habituated to self-government.

The evolutionary idea of the survival of the fittest also shaped the imperialists’ viewpoint, although it was applied differently. Beveridge argued that if America did not keep the Philippines for herself, then other European nations would take her. John Barrett, journalist and former minister to Siam, argued that there was a mighty struggle in the Pacific for supremacy.

America had two options: she could seize the moment, cementing her position as a leader or she could back down and be surpassed by the rest of the major nations. He went on to say,

The rule of the survival of the fittest applies to nations as well as to the animal kingdom. It is a cruel, relentless principle being exercised in a cruel, relentless competition of mighty forces; and these will trample over us without sympathy or remorse

unless we are trained to endure and strong enough to stand the pace.⁷⁶

For the imperialists there was more at stake than just the opening up of foreign markets or the spreading of the enlightened American way; the whole future of America was at stake. Her decision regarding imperialism was a decision about her role in the world. This is part of the reason many Progressives so ardently supported American imperialism. America exerting a strong influence over the Americas was not enough; they wanted her to play a pivotal role in the world. They did not want her to succumb in the fight for survival of the fittest. Their belief that evolution could be shaped by people made it all the more important that they fight for American imperialism. America might be the culmination of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic evolution, she might have the best form of government, but if she made the wrong decisions she could lose all of that. Both Sumner and the imperialists believed that America could lose her greatness, but Sumner and his followers believed this loss would be the result of interference by reformers or government into the affairs of man, not the opposite. Thus, both imperialists and anti-imperialists argued their respective positions from an evolutionary standpoint; each claimed to be furthering evolutionary principles such as the survival of the fittest, but their application of those principles to the situations facing America showed the versatility and adaptability of the theory of evolution as one of those “large, organizing ideas” which Edward Youmans had felt so vital.

⁷⁵ Beveridge, “In Support of an American Empire.”

⁷⁶ John Barrett, “The Problem of the Philippines,” *The North American Review* (1821-1940) 167, no. 502 (1898): 267, <http://search.proquest.com>.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Progressives

Imperialist often found that there understanding of evolution coincided nicely with the Progressive movement. The Progressive Era brought with it many reforms and ideas which stood in opposition to the Founding Fathers. The Progressives are characterized by three major tenets: their belief in the continual progress or perfection of both society and man over time, their desire for a government that could adapt quickly, and their vision of a government that provided a certain standard of living to all her people. Progressivism, like Social Darwinism, was influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution; however, the Progressives applied the theory in very different ways. While Social Darwinists like Sumner encouraged government and reformers to leave society alone, the Progressives encouraged both to be actively involved in shaping society. Many of the major figures of Social Darwinism were scientists and academics, while the major figures of the Progressive movement tended to be reformers and politicians.⁷⁷ This explains, at least in part, their differing approaches when applying evolution to politics and society. Social Darwinists were much more focused on scientific discoveries and the practical details of how evolution operated. They felt society and man would evolve as the natural course of competition and the survival of the fittest was played out. Progressives, on the other hand, were more apt to look at the big picture. They applied evolution to society in broad brushstrokes, without getting bogged down in the details of competition or the survival of the fittest. Progress, they

⁷⁷ This distinction is not meant to apply to all Progressives or all Social Darwinists. There were academic Progressives and there were political Social Darwinists. For example Woodrow Wilson was both an academic and a politician.

believed, was the central theme of evolution. Evolution proclaimed that all matter was in a constant state of change; this change or progress was seen by Progressives as a movement toward perfection.⁷⁸

Against the backdrop of the late 19th and early 20th century America, this kind of progress was an especially appealing idea. It provided hope in an era of change and upheaval. The Industrial Revolution, which was in full swing during the Progressive Era, had brought with it many changes, both good and bad. The Industrial Revolution was also a time of exciting, new discoveries; the light bulb, the telephone, and the airplane all made their debut during the Industrial Revolution. Factories and the assembly line had made once expensive products affordable to the masses – items such as store bought clothes, manufactured furniture, and various novelties. The Industrial Revolution, however, was also plagued with many bad aspects as well. Gone, it seemed, were the days of the idyllic yeoman farmer that Thomas Jefferson praised. Gone also were the days of a “fluid” society in which the distinctions of wealth and position in society could easily be changed; the poor had been able to become rich and the rich, had, at times, become poor. Class distinctions were not rigid, and had not, therefore, been able to hinder a person from advancing their social standing. Although the America of the Founding Fathers had been a very fluid society, industrialization was changing that. One telling aspect of this change was in the realm of business where class distinctions were increasingly rigid and nearly impossible to transcend. Businesses were no longer family-run affairs in which everyone knew each other and in which an employee could easily become an employer one day. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the capital needed to buy the machines and

⁷⁸ All further uses of the word progress will be in this vain, that is progress toward perfection.

the buildings necessary for a factory made it prohibitive for most working class men to even dream of owning their own factory. Thus the disparity between owner and laborer became increasingly set.

Compounding the problem was the fact that these factories were dangerous places. The machines could easily maim or kill the workers if they were not careful. Men, women, and children had to work long hours to make ends meet. They lived in cramped tenement houses that were ripe for the spread of diseases. Labor strikes, terrible conditions endured by the laborers, and stories of corrupt government typical of the change and upheaval of the period cast a dismal picture of the world that industrialization had made.

Progressives rejected the view that evolution was a slow process for which man could only wait. They looked around at the world and saw a myriad of problems waiting to be answered – problems that could not wait for hundreds of years – problems that needed to be answered now. “We are” Theodore Roosevelt declared, “in a period of change, we are fronting a great period of future change. Never was the need more imperative for men of vision who are also men of action... The unrest cannot be quieted by the ingenious trickery of those who profess to advance by merely marking time.”⁷⁹ America could not just wait for progress to happen. Action was needed to bring about progress.

Some compared the problems facing America to the Sphinx’s riddle.⁸⁰ Henry George, an American political economist

and writer in the 19th century declared that the “association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our times...It is the riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilization, and which not to answer is to be destroyed.”⁸¹ Edward Bellamy, another writer of the time, also made reference to the Sphinx’s riddle in a novel he wrote about a 19th century man who found himself in the year 2000. This man asked his 21st century friend, “[W]hat solution, if any, have you found for the labor question? It was the Sphinx’s riddle of the nineteenth century, and when I dropped out the Sphinx was threatening to devour our society, because the answer was not forthcoming.”⁸² Without a solution to the perplexing issues of poverty, labor difficulties, and the fluidity of society which seemed to go hand in hand with progress, the destruction of the American way of life would be certain. The Progressives believed that evolution and progress could move much more quickly than men like Sumner would ever endorse, especially if men helped to direct the progress. They were not willing to wait and see if time alone would allow the process of evolution to solve the problems. Solutions had to be sought and action had to be taken to aid progress or evolution, in its continued march. So said the Progressives.

Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, published in 1888, presented one such solution in story form, and it captivated the minds of the American people. Between 1890 and 1891 at least 165 “Nationalist Clubs” or “Bellamy Clubs” were formed across the nation with the purpose of working toward the world Bellamy

⁷⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, “Who is a Progressive,” in *American Progressivism*, ed. Ronald Pestritto and William Atto (New York: Lexington Books, 2008), 42.

⁸⁰ The “Sphinx’s riddle” is a reference to the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*, in which Oedipus saves himself and the city of Thebes by solving the perplexing and seeming unanswerable riddle posed by the Sphinx.

⁸¹ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, (New York: Random House, 1929), 10.

⁸² Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000 -1887* (New York: Signet Classic, 1960), 49.

described in his book.⁸³ Bellamy was born to a New England family. He rejected his Calvinist upbringing, focusing instead on the aspect of brotherly love and human solidarity that he found in the Christian faith. He passed the bar exam but chose to pursue a career in newspapers until his health forced him to become a freelance writer.⁸⁴ It was during this time that he began writing *Looking Backward*. The book centers on 19th century light sleeper, Julian West, who has problems sleeping; he is put into a trance in 1887 to help him sleep but, due to a series of events, remains asleep until he is found in the year 2000. At that time he is awakened by Dr. Leete, who becomes his guide in the new world in which he finds himself – a world that looks very different than the one West left.

Bellamy believed that competition and, therefore, capitalism were the central problems to be solved. Getting rid of economic competition would solve the nation's problems. Bellamy believed that men were mostly good, but circumstances often forced them to be bad. Dr. Leete explained to West that “[human nature had not changed] but the conditions of human life [had] changed, and with them the motives of human action.”⁸⁵ Capitalism caused men to try to get the better of each other; by removing capitalism, Bellamy reasoned, men could live together in harmony. Bellamy imagined a world ruled by brotherly love and a desire to pursue the general good of society. Bellamy believed that industrialization would culminate in a marriage of business and government. In his utopia each nation would be a single giant business. All the citizens would work in this business; they would be educated in their youth and taken care of in their old age. All the resources would be

held in common; money being dispensed with, each person would be given a certain amount of credit at the national store. Citizens were bequeathed this credit for doing their best at the occupation which, according to their tastes, they had chosen; this included children, disabled persons, and stay-at-home-parents. All citizens were given equal credit, which was more than enough for a comfortable life. They were encouraged to work diligently through a system of promotions and distinctions that were awarded on the basis of one's devotion to the public good and hard work for its furtherance. There would be no poverty, little crime, and no ignorance.⁸⁶

One can see evolutionary influences in Bellamy's work. When West asked how the “riddle of the sphinx” was answered, Dr. Leete responded that “it was not necessary for society to solve the riddle at all. It may be said to have solved itself. The solution came as the result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise. All society had to do was to recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become unmistakable.”⁸⁷ His use of the phrase industrial evolution is interesting when contrasted with the typical term industrial revolution. Unlike the term industrial “revolution” – a term that expresses a throwing off of one way of life for another – the term industrial “evolution” signifies a belief that the industrial age was not the active throwing off of the old in favor of the new way of life, but rather an inexorable movement beyond the old way of life, an evolution into a brand new age. Thus, the solution to the riddle was to cooperate with the evolutionary process. Men could not stop its march. Dr. Leete explained that the movement toward monopolies and consolidation had been “desperately and

⁸³ Erich Fromm, “Foreword”, in Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, vi. These clubs were short lived, petering out after 1891.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁸⁵ Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, 56.

⁸⁶ The only crime Bellamy envisioned would be the result of a mental illness. Criminals would be rehabilitated so that they could return to society.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

vainly resisted.”⁸⁸ Despite the efforts of many to thwart it, consolidation had continued. Bellamy, however, did not leave the explanation there. The final consolidation did not occur until the movement was *recognized*, as Dr. Leete put it, “as a process which only needed to complete its logical evolution to open a golden future to humanity.”⁸⁹ Bellamy believed that evolution was something that could not be stopped, but that it could be slowed or accelerated according to the actions of men.⁹⁰ Once the nation recognized evolution’s course and saw the future it offered, the people stopped resisting and started cooperating with it. The nation’s recognition of the trajectory of evolution was the turning point when the process began to speed up.

A comparison of Bellamy’s and Sumner’s perspectives highlights some of the differences between the Social Darwinists and the Progressives. Bellamy’s view of evolution was similar to that of Sumner in that he believed evolution was inevitable, but Bellamy, in contrast to Sumner, encouraged people to actively seek to influence the process of evolution. The direction of evolution was another point on which Bellamy and Sumner disagreed. Whereas Sumner believed that competition would always play a large role in the lives of humans, Bellamy thought that it was merely a temporary state of human life. Bellamy envisioned a future where all men worked together for the general good, guided by brotherly love, while Sumner envisioned a future where each man worked for his own good, guided by self interest in the competition inherent in the survival of the fittest.

Bellamy, however, did not wholly dispense with competition and the survival of the fittest. It exerted its influence through

sexual selection. This topic arose during a discussion Dr. Leete and West were having concerning the nature of marriage and love in the 21st century. Women, like men, worked and received a yearly credit equal to that of everyone else.⁹¹ All men and women being thus provided for equally, and, with all other past considerations of family, situation, etc. being of no consequence, matters of love could be left entirely to preference. Marriage, in this world of the 21st century, was based wholly on “pure love” as West called it. This manner of allowing each to pick their spouse wholly unhindered, Dr. Leete commented, “[meant] that for the first time in human history the principle of sexual selection, with its tendency to preserve and transmit the better types of the race, and let the inferior types drop out, [had] unhindered operation.”⁹² Women were no longer tempted by wealth or rank to marry men for whom they did not care. The result, Dr. Leete continued, was that “the gifts of person, mind, and disposition – beauty, wit, eloquence, kindness, generosity, geniality, courage – [were] sure of transmission to posterity.”⁹³ Bellamy assumed that the natural result of having rid society of all economic constraints would be that the fittest women would marry the fittest men, thus producing even better children.

It should be noted that this is a positive rather than a negative view of the survival of the fittest. Negative survival of the fittest involves the weak dying of disease or an inability to compete for the resources necessary to life. As the weak die, only the fittest are left to propagate the species.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ While Bellamy never actually states this, he definitely implies it in this passage.

⁹¹ Their credit remained the same even if they if they decided to stop working to take care of their children. Dr. Leete explains by asking what more important job could a nation have than the raising of the next generation?

⁹² Ibid., 179.

⁹³ Ibid.

Positive survival of the fittest, in contrast involves the fittest gravitating toward each other, freed from any constraints, helping to create an increasingly better race. In this setting the weak will not die; they will live healthy and full lives, but will be less likely to find mates and have children. They will, therefore, have little or no effect on the next generation. Over the generations the number of unfit will continue to decrease. In Bellamy's world there would still be competition; it would just be a competition for the fittest spouse instead of a competition for the necessities or even the comforts of life.

Not all Progressives focused on the idea of a riddle that had to be solved. Men like Woodrow Wilson focused more on the need to update the American system. America's problem was not just capitalism or some other single feature; America's problem was that she had not kept up with the times. Wilson began a discussion on the nature of progress by recounting a portion of the story of "Alice Through the Looking-Glass." In this part of the story the Red Chess Queen grabs Alice and races off at top speed. After having run for quite awhile, Alice and the Queen stop. To Alice's amazement they are exactly where they started. The Queen merely comments that they would have had to run twice as fast to actually go somewhere. "That is the parable of progress." Wilson explained, "The laws of this country have not kept up with the change of economic circumstances in this country; they have not kept up with the change of political circumstances; and therefore we are not even where we were when we started."⁹⁴ By his reckoning, America had not kept up with her circumstances leaving her even worse off than when she started as a nation. She now needed to run more than twice as fast as she had been just

to make up for the progress that she had not yet made.

A large part of the problem, Wilson and many other Progressives believed, was that the American government and its system of laws had changed little since the Founding. A hundred odd years had passed since the Founding. In that time America had tripled in size, her population had exploded, she had been through a Civil War, she had rid herself of slavery, and she had witnessed the rise industrialization. Because of these monumental changes, the Progressives questioned whether the government crafted in the Founding was still effective in this new era. Progressives believed that the Constitution was "outdated," not only because circumstances had changed, but also because 20th century Americans had a new understanding of the world. Darwin with his theory of evolution had given Americans a new perspective on society. This new perspective, many Progressives believed, gave them a better understanding of the aims of government and how government should be organized to reach those aims.

In *The New Freedom and Constitutional Government* Wilson explored the idea. He argued that the Founders operated under a Newtonian mindset while the 20th century operated under a Darwinian mindset:

Now, it came to me,... that the Constitution of the United States had been made under the dominion of the Newtonian Theory...The trouble with the theory [as expressed through our Constitution] is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Woodrow Wilson, "What is Progress?" in *American Progressivism*, ed. Pestritto and Atto, 45.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

The implicit conclusion is that the Constitution, crafted under the premises of Newton, is no longer relevant to a nation which now has the ideas of Darwin. This outdated Newtonian mindset was seen as one of stasis, balance, and laws of nature. These ideas pertained to Sir Isaac Newton's work on celestial mechanics and natural laws. Newton showed that the heavens operated in an almost mechanical way; the planets circle the sun following exact orbits that are in accordance with the gravitational pull of the sun and other celestial bodies. Newton also discovered several laws of nature, including the law of gravity. Wilson saw the government formed by the Constitution as a reflection of these ideas, claiming that the Founders "proceed[ed] to represent Congress, the Judiciary, and the President as a sort of imitation of the solar system."⁹⁶ Several paragraphs later he adds, "And [the Founders] constructed a government as they would have constructed an orrery, – to display the laws of nature. Politic in their thought was a variety of mechanics."⁹⁷

Darwin's theory of evolution, on the other hand, presented a very different perspective. Whereas Newtonian thought represented rigidity or stasis, balance, and the laws of nature, Darwinian thought represented adaptation, organic life, progress of species, and natural selection. Wilson had a vision of nations adhering to these ideas. "All that progressives ask or desire" Wilson wrote, "is permission – in an era when "development," "evolution," is the scientific word – to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine."⁹⁸ Wilson and the Progressives saw the Constitution as standing in the way of this dream. They wanted a government that could readily

adapt. The Constitution with its checks and balances set up a government that was too cumbersome and slow moving. They did not want to appear un-American, but, as in the case of their support for American imperialism, the Progressives' desire to update the American government forced them to reject elements of the Founding and the Constitution.

It must be noted that the Founders, contrary to Wilson's opinion, did not believe that societies were static or that a government could be programmed like a machine and calibrated correctly so as to always work. Furthermore, based on their writings, even if they had thought it was possible, they would not have wanted to craft such a government. They held dear the idea that men are capable of self-government. James Madison in *Federalist* #39 explores whether the government formed under the Constitution is "strictly republican":

It is evident that no other form would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the revolution; or with the honorable determination, which animates every votary of freedom, to *rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government.*⁹⁹
(emphasis added)

One who believes in man's ability for self-government does not create a mechanical government absolving humans of the responsibility to govern. Instead, the Founders sought to form a government which would allow men to govern. The Constitution was not meant to hold all the answers. Many pressing issues were left unresolved by the Constitutional Convention, issues regarding important matters such as commercial dis-

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁹ Jacob E. Cook, ed., *The Federalist* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 250.

crimination and the national debt.¹⁰⁰ These issues did not come as a surprise to the Founders; it was not that they had forgotten to add an article to the Constitution about commercial discrimination and debt. They knew that these issues were already a point of contention between the states. Their goal in crafting the Constitution was not to answer all the problems that government would face, but to provide a government that had the power and the ability to work out these issues. Those at the Constitutional Convention felt that these issues should be decided by the first Congress under the Constitution. To set up a mechanized government was not only undesirable but it was impractical. The Founders were very aware that they could not predict all the issues that the government would face. The Constitution was designed to provide the framework for government, setting up the process by which decisions would be made rather than making the actual decisions.¹⁰¹

As the Founders did not craft the American government to work like a machine, neither did they believe that societies were static. Like the British and most other European nations of the 18th century, the Founders believed that societies “evol-

ved,” that they grew and changed over time. Of course the term evolution here is different than Darwin’s theory of evolution. The 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries had seen enormous commercial growth for Europe. The New World had been discovered and had quickly been claimed by various European nations. In addition to the lands held in the New World most of these great nations held land in either or both Africa and the East. Historians of the time became intrigued with the growth of nations and sought to decipher a common pattern to this growth. The result of these inquiries was the emergence of a cyclical view of societies. Societies, they believed, grew, matured, and then died. They typically saw societies passing through four stages – hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce – which were a movement from simple/barbaric to complex/civilized.¹⁰² The commerce stage always resulted in a growth of wealth and opulence in the society. Eventually vice and opulence would cause decay, and the society would die.

Both the Founders and the Progressives, therefore, believed that societies change and that comparisons between societies and the organic world could lead to profitable discoveries. They both used these comparisons to explain their beliefs. They differed, however, with regard to how far the comparison between society and the organic world could be taken. Those of the 18th century used the comparison to find similarities, but they stopped short of saying that men could evolve like the natural world could. They never lost sight of the fact that human societies were different than the natural world. While the society could evolve or change the basic element that made up society – men – could not change; man had an immutable nature. The Progress-

¹⁰⁰ After the thirteen colonies gained their independence, Great Britain began to treat them as a separate nation, blocking American merchants from trading within the British Empire. As the government, under the Articles of Confederation, had little power to enforce any nationwide policies, Great Britain was able to continue trading with the former colonies as it always had. Some, like Madison, felt it was important for America to impose duties. They could then adjust those duties through trading compacts with other nations, thereby allowing them to discriminate between friends and foes. The debts contracted during the Revolutionary War by both the State and Federal government also needed to be funded.

¹⁰¹ The Constitution does exert some influence over specific decisions by providing certain restrictions on the power of government both in Article II section 9 and in the Bill of Rights.

¹⁰² Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 19.

sives, and Social Darwinists for that matter, did not make this distinction. They believed that societies were merely a part of the organic world, and humans were just a species of animal, which, like all animals, was subject to change. Thus, the 19th-century version of evolution, held that mankind, not just societies, were constantly changing.

Another important and distinct difference between the Founders and those of the 19th century was their beliefs in the end result of these changes. The predominate belief in the 17th and 18th century was that the fourth stage of development, that of commerce and industry, would eventually lead to its decay. The predominate belief in the 19th century, however, was that of progress, the belief that things – society, man, nature – were getting continually better. All progress was a step toward perfection not decay.

Thus, while Wilson and others implied that there were stark differences between the Progressives and the Founders, not all of those differences were accurate. It is true, however, that the Progressives drew very different conclusions about men and society; conclusions that led them to believe that the work of the Founders was outdated and in need of change. The Newtonian verses Darwinian dichotomy set up by Wilson was, while not wholly accurate, a very useful distinction for the Progressives to make. By drawing the connection between Newtonian thought and the Constitution they found a way to admire the Founders' work as the best product of that age while at the same time rejecting it as no longer applicable to the current age, which now had the greater understanding of Darwin's theory. Progressives could effectively argue that the governmental form that was built under the Newtonian framework needed to be adjusted or transformed to fit the new framework of Darwin.

Looking at government through the framework of Darwinian evolution, the Progressives saw it as a living organism. As an organism is made up of many parts that have to work together, so too is the government. The system of checks and balances, carefully crafted by the Founders to insure that no one branch of government could overwhelm the others, was considered archaic and in need of change. As Wilson explained, “[n]o living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as checks, and live. On the contrary, its life is dependent upon their quick co-operation, their ready response to the commands of instinct or intelligence.”¹⁰³ An animal cannot live if its heart and lungs are set against each other, working as a check and balance. Wilson argued, therefore, that instead of a system of checks and balances the government, an organism of sorts, should have a system in which each “part” worked seamlessly and efficiently with all the other parts. This would allow the government to adapt and adjust to the changing circumstances with ease. This was an important element of the Progressive vision; they wanted a government that could change and adapt quickly to the needs and desires of the people for which the government was created. Wilson continued:

There can be no successful government without the intimate, instinctive co-ordination of the organs of life and action. This is not a theory, but a fact, and displays its force as fact, whatever theories may be thrown across its track. Living political constitutions must be Darwinian in structure and in practice. Society is a living organism and must obey the

¹⁰³ Wilson, “The President of the United States,” in *American Progressivism*, ed. Pestritto and Atto, 155.

laws of life, not of mechanics; it must develop.¹⁰⁴

Evolution and the organic view of the world presented by Darwin were scientific facts and must inform one's view of government. For America to progress, the Progressives believed that she needed to transform her government into a government which answered to the dictates of Darwin's theory of evolution. It could not continue to be trapped in the mechanical confines of its inception.

If the government was viewed as an organism, it followed that the documents that defined it would also need to be organic. They would need to change and adapt along with the government. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America were hindrances to America's progress unless they could be translated in accordance with the modern era. "The Declaration of Independence" Wilson stated, "did not mention the questions of our day. It is of no consequence to us unless we translate its general terms into examples of the present day."¹⁰⁵ Senator Beveridge expressed a similar sentiment saying that "the Constitution is not immortal in itself, is not useful even in itself. The Constitution," he continued, "is immortal and even useful only as it serves the orderly development of the nation."¹⁰⁶ These two documents needed to be treated as living and changing documents, not final expressions of universal principles. Only then would they be truly useful for shaping the government of America.

Wilson was careful to point out that one must build off of one's heritage; one cannot just throw it all out and start over.¹⁰⁷ Instead, one must weave the new into the

old. To be certain, Wilson needed to assuage the fears of those who thought the Progressives were going to throw American heritage out and essentially start over, but this was probably not his whole reason. Evolution is a process of continual changes, adaptations, and mutations. Each species has been greatly influenced by their various ancestors. Their heritage has, quite literally, made them who they are. Each generation builds upon the last generation. In the same way a nation, a people, must build upon what the last generation left. The Progressives saw America as the highest culmination of thousands of years of the evolution of the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic races. The Founding was just one of many steps in the progress of the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic peoples. Now it was up to the Progressives to guide America in taking further steps of progress; building off what had been done before.

Wilson, along with other Progressives, favored the creation of an administrative branch of government. This was one means to help make the government more organic. "Administration," as Wilson famously said, "is the most obvious part of government; it is government in action."¹⁰⁸ In every government a law is passed, and then the particular and practical details of the law have to be worked out. In the American government those details are worked out by the legislature and then by the states. Wilson and others wanted those details to be entrusted to an administrative body. Wilson envisioned this branch of government filled with men who had extensive technical training in the science of the administration. This branch would not be elected and would have little role in the politics of the government. This separation from politics was especially important as all Progressives were disenchanted with corrupt

¹⁰⁴ Wilson, "What is Progress," in *American Progressivism*, ed. Pestritto and Atto, 51.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Beveridge, "In Support of an American Empire."

¹⁰⁷ Wilson, "What is Progress?" 49.

¹⁰⁸ Wilson, "The Study of Administration," in *American Progressivism*, ed. Pestritto and Atto, 192.

and self-serving politicians. Thus freed from politics, these administrators would be able to focus on the good of the country, working out the details of laws with an impartial, scientific, and technical approach. There was no doubt in the mind of Wilson or those who agreed with him that these administrators would be able to execute their duties devoid of political pressures and personal motives.

This reveals a deep trust in those who are scientifically trained. It was as if the proponents of the Administrative branch believed that men of science could be wholly objective. This belief in the greatness of the scientist was largely rooted in the prestige that science had achieved in the previous several of decades.¹⁰⁹ The industrial age in America was a time of great discoveries both in the very practical realm through inventions and in the more scientific realm through advances in man's understanding of biology, physics, geology, and sociology. Scientists were seen as men who were honestly seeking the answers to questions with no prejudices, personal or societal. Science promised to seek results through experimentation, not through political rhetoric and compromise. Placing such men in charge of the workings of the government offered a hope for progress. Progress was one of the central themes of the Progressive movement. As evolution had played a significant role in the rise of the prominence of science and the corresponding belief that scientists were able to rise above the political machinations which corrupted politicians, it can be credited with

helping to shape the Progressive view in regards to the Administrative branch.

CONCLUSION

The theory of evolution had a profound influence on the United States especially in the realm of political and social thought. Two major factors contributed to its powerful influence in the United States. First, the manner in which evolution coincided with the beliefs and circumstances of America gave credence to Darwin's theory. In the aftermath of the Civil War it reaffirmed racial prejudices, confirmed the belief that one must adapt according to the prevailing circumstances, and provided increasing popularity to the study of science. This alignment between the American culture and the theory of evolution explains its quick acceptance, but it does not fully explain why evolution had such an influence. As long as a theory remains as just an accepted idea, it may influence a small circle, but when that idea can be applied to the circumstances of life, it gains a strong foothold. The great promise of evolution, that it held the key to understanding the universe and discovering a "science of society," made evolution an idea poised for application in the tumultuous world of the Post Civil War Era. Thus, it was not in its acceptance, but in its acceptance combined with its application that evolution's influence changed the American landscape. These applications were wide and varied, at times supporting opposing viewpoints. Social Darwinism, anti-imperialism, imperialism, and Progressivism were all influenced and shaped by Darwin's theory of evolution. Because it was applied in a wide variety of circumstances and situations and applied by such a wide variety of people with diverging interests and viewpoints, it soon permeated virtually all areas of

¹⁰⁹ It is to be noted that Wilson, one of the biggest proponents saw himself as a scientist, an academic. Part of his trust in the impartiality of the administrative branch of government was rooted in the fact that he believed that he himself could be impartial and, therefore, believed that others could also.

thought. No matter who you were, or in what part of the country you lived, or what realm of study interested you, the theory of evolution was there.

While the theory of evolution coincided with American beliefs it was not just “a nice thought” tacked on to help give credence to these beliefs; it helped to shape them. *Laissez-faire*, part of the classical economic tradition, took on a harsher more widespread application. It no longer pertained just to economic conditions but also to people; one should allow competition to weed out the weakest in society. Evolution also provided an argument for the mutability of morals; in the past morals either existed or they did not. Now morals could exist as changing expressions of folkways, being real but not permanent. While affirming the tradition of Manifest Destiny, evolution took American expansion a step further. It provided both the justification for and the impetus for America to rule a foreign people. Evolution said that America, the nation built on the principle of self-government and the consent of the governed, was justified in ruling a people as they were not fit to rule themselves; the impetus was, of course, the need to stay at the top of the game, to be the “fittest.” The idea of reforming a society was in no way new, but evolution shaped the reforms the Progressives pursued. The concept of adaption and

the belief that circumstances influence actions stirred the call to reform and offered the hope of progress. Evolutionary progress provided the manner by which a perfect world could be achieved. Evolution also provided the justification for adjusting the government crafted by the Founders to more accurately reflect Darwinian thought.

Evolution’s influence in American culture was not superficial. It entered American thought at a time of great upheaval and helped to shape American political and social thought as America navigated the uncharted waters of a new era. One cannot truly understand post Civil War America without understanding the influence which evolution had upon the hearts and minds of Americans.