“Bequests of the Twentieth Century to the Twenty-first”

In Memory of

William Graham Sumner

William Graham Sumner was my intellectual grandfather—first in the somewhat personal sense that I was a graduate student of Sumner’s junior colleague and collaborator, Albert Galloway Keller. In the second and more important sense, Sumner was my intellectual grandfather inasmuch as I soaked myself in his writings, reading and rereading *Folkways* and his *Essays* (edited by Albert Galloway Keller and Maurice R. Davie, 2 vols. [New Haven, 1934]). Among the *Essays* is one with the title “The Bequests of the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth.” The essay was written in 1901 and later revised. But at that time it was not published. Its first public appearance seems to have been in the *Yale Review* 22 (Summer 1933), 732–754. As prophecy Sumner’s essay is not very impressive. He has nothing to say about two world wars or the rise and failure of fascism and communism. But the term “bequests” does not imply specific prophecies, though it may have overtones suggesting them. Strictly speaking “bequests” meant for Sumner the economic, political, and other trends which the nineteenth century bequeathed to the twentieth, and with which the twentieth century would have to come to terms. On that score Sumner’s essay turns in a superior performance. One of Sumner’s most attractive traits was that his speeches and writings were completely free of the high-minded and edifying themes audiences still expect on ritual occasions. Thus his essay stresses the sources of severe conflict bequeathed to the twentieth century by the nineteenth. No nonsense about democracy and brotherly love in Sumner!

Recalling Sumner’s “Bequests of the Nineteenth Century to the Twen-
tieth” a short time ago I concluded that a similar effort by his intellectual grandchild roughly a century later might deserve more than an indulgent smile. That is really up to the reader to decide. The most to be claimed in advance is that truth can arise from obvious error. Furthermore at my age the possibility of learning the results of a reality test of the theses about to be presented below is comfortably close to zero. Thus the present author is reasonably well shielded from the normal sanctions against error and unsound opinions, namely the delight of one’s colleagues. Were the situation otherwise this little inquiry might never have taken written form.

Let us begin with two major social conflicts that have given the twentieth century its distinctive character but are unlikely to be important in the twenty-first. One of these is war on the scale of the two world wars. The other is revolution on the scale of the Russian and Chinese revolutions.

From the standpoint of this inquiry the important aspect of the twentieth century’s big wars is that sooner or later all major powers, as well as some minor ones, became combatants. This happened mainly because those who did the most toward starting the war were the ones defeated in the end. In starting the war they had some idea they could win it. The distribution of power in the international arena in 1914 and 1939 was not so unequal as to make the prospect of victory for the Central Powers and the Axis Powers look like an utter pipe dream.

Well before the end of the twentieth century the disintegration of the Soviet Union ended the possibility of any roughly equal coalitions among the great powers. In fact there weren’t any great powers any more in the sense of states with “vital” interests all over the globe. There was only one: The United States. Its rule could be, has been, and probably will be challenged locally with firepower and casualties. Yet the possibility of putting together a coalition sufficiently powerful to attack and humble the United States is for the time being quite remote. There is probably enough free floating hostility to the United States and its ways in the economically backward areas of the world to make such a coalition at least thinkable. But the loose cannons given to preying on such situations do not yet have enough powder to make them threatening.

In the longer run the prospect of wars that are more than local becomes much more serious. American hegemony is not and cannot be permanent. Power once possessed, can be dangerous to lose, as Thucydides has Pericles say to his Athenian critics: “for by this time the empire you hold is a tyranny, which it may seem wrong to grasp, but dangerous to let go.”
Beyond this level of generality it is unprofitable to inquire here.

Now that we have seen some reasons why another world war appears unlikely in the foreseeable future we may examine the reasons for holding that another revolution with worldwide reverberation is also improbable. First it is necessary to grasp the historical character, limitations, and achievements of past revolutions, at least in major outline. The great revolutionary wave began with the Revolt of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century. It continued with the Puritan Revolution in England and the execution of King Charles I. The next major wave was the French Revolution followed by the American Civil War, and finally in the twentieth century the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and its offshoot the Communist Revolution in China. Each revolution professed general goals of human liberation and accomplished—at large human cost—something toward their achievement: the end of religious and foreign oppression, the abolition of the divine right of kings and the inequities of aristocratic rule, the end of plantation slavery, equality before the law, the possibility of establishing a government by and for free men (and later free women), and the abolition of the scourges of capitalist society (namely, the business cycle and massive unemployment). It is easy to see that these revolutionary objectives form an historical sequence. In that sense, we can speak of a single revolutionary wave from the sixteenth century through the first half of the twentieth. Again from this vantage point it looks as though the great revolutionary wave has run its course to subside into a series of local storms. These can be violent and cause considerable suffering, yet without much noticeable effect on the course of modern civilization. One can see the end of the age of revolutions most clearly by asking one simple question: where in the modern world does a revolution stand a chance of coming to power and sending tremors throughout the rest of the world in the manner of the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution? A counter-revolution in the name of supposedly traditional virtues is something else again, to be discussed below.

Three aspects of the intellectual and material situation at the end of the twentieth century are likely to continue well into the twenty-first century and inhibit the rise of any revolutionary movement with pan-human claims. The revelation of the cruelties and coercion in Stalinist Russia and Maoist China has thoroughly discredited the idea of revolution as a tool for human betterment. Professional students of these regimes have known about these horrors for at least a generation and made their findings widely available. As long as the Soviet Union continued to exist, the effect
of the findings was limited. It was always possible to remark that one could not make omelets without breaking eggs. With the passage of time, however, it became obvious that the Stalinist regime was not only cruel but incompetent. Its collapse pulled the last supports out from the Leninist intellectual edifice.

Meanwhile the discrediting of Maoism, while no doubt aided by the collapse of Stalinism, has been going on for some time in response to internal Chinese causes. This is not the place to estimate what the outcome will be in the course of the next generation. A mixture of authoritarian politics, central control of the “commanding heights” in the economy, with wide areas open to individual enterprise and carefully controlled freedom to criticize (like Russian self-criticism?) represents one feasible combination. There are of course other combinations, some of which could turn out to be dangerously unworkable. Amid the confusion we can be sure of one thing: any return to the highly coercive pursuit of an egalitarian utopia will remain politically, if not verbally, off limits.

A second aspect of the end of the century scene unfavorable to the rise of large scale revolutionary movements is the absence of any general sense of indignation. There is no worldwide current of thought focused on, say, two or three intolerable abuses. (How abuses become intolerable, and then in time acceptable, would be worth investigating.) Instead indignation currently fragments along lines of ethnic, nationalist, reactionary religious, and antirationalist lines of cleavage. In its day, Marxism presented potential forms of fusion for the world’s fragmented indignations. The first one, “Workers of the world unite,” fell apart for good when Germany’s large disciplined, and ostensibly socialist working class supported the Kaiser’s declaration of war. After the First World War the Marxist theory of imperialism was rather more successful in fusing the indignation of the poor and unfortunate in the economically backward parts of the world. The collapse of Stalinism, however, appears to have greatly reduced the confidence and energy behind the idea of imperialism.

Ethnic and religious outrage may seem an unpromising form of anger to any remaining Leninist whose attitude toward Marxist revolutionary doctrine is “Accept no substitutes!! (Except ours!)” One can easily agree that current fashions in indignation hold little promise for a free society in the future. Instead they are a threat. It is a threat that has already included sporadic violence. We already have a counter-revolution under way with diffuse focal points in the Near East and attempts to export the product to the United States. The United States meanwhile is stirring with its home-grown version. It is quite unlikely that any part of the Near
Eastern religious counter-revolution could fuse with or cooperate with its material American counterparts. But if that should happen, American society would face not just a dangerous police problem but a potentially mortal threat.

We may complete the discussion of what is unlikely to take place with some very brief comments on hopes that are widely shared yet unlikely to be realized. One is world peace. There are just too many severe conflicts in the world, a number of which could flare up unexpectedly. They may be local, but they can be vicious and the cause of many deaths and much suffering. Trotsky's formula of "No war, no peace" still covers the probabilities accurately.

Poverty, indeed massive grinding and degrading poverty, is also liable to mark the twenty-first century. In all prosperous countries our unwillingness to do anything about poverty has become increasingly obvious toward the end of the twentieth century. This unwillingness is not explainable in terms of some notion to the effect that the welfare state is too expensive. There is instead a political unwillingness to tap abundant resources, especially those controlled by the military. Behind that unwillingness is a fear of upsetting the prevailing system of privilege and inequality. Fears and hopes on this score have characterized the history of civilization over the past six thousand years. They are not likely to go away after a New Year's party now only a short stretch into the future. There may be a high degree of truth in the claim that there are sufficient resources available to provide a modest living for just about everybody. But the political obstacles to the kind of international and domestic cooperation necessary to generate these resources and distribute them with a touch of equity are, to use an understatement, formidable.

In any attempt to assess the legacies of this century to the next, two issues stand out above the others. One is the plague of AIDS—leaving aside the prospect of old diseases that have become incurable and the discovery of similar new ones. The other is the rise of fundamentalist and antirationalist movements.

For all its horrors, AIDS is the simpler of the two problems, mainly because at present so little useful knowledge about it is available. There is always the possibility that a straightforward medical solution may be discovered in the next few years. Should that happen, the task of getting any remedy, or set of remedies to the people who need them would be daunting at the very least. In the absence of any remedy, there are responsible epidemiologists who estimate that in the near future death from AIDS will make the Black Death seem a puny affair. So horrible will
appear the vengeance of the Old Testament’s deity against the transgression of sexual prohibitions.

Between these extremes of optimism and pessimism are the painful issues we have with us today, and will have for a long time to come. Even with continued anal intercourse, if people use condoms and stop sharing needles, it appears that prevention is highly effective. Why does not prevention check the plague or cut it back to trivial proportions? Part of the reason must lie in the power of sexual passion to overcome reason. This is not the place to draw the line between a magnificent aspect of our humanity and sheer piggish self-indulgence. Both contribute to AIDS, the latter more so, simply because it leads to more frequent risky sexual acts.

A more important set of considerations comes from the fact that access to and knowledge about prevention are not equally distributed over the world today and have not been so in the past. The situation is not the same in a remote Third World country with a high incidence of AIDS and other diseases as in New York or London. To stress the obvious, AIDS already has a pattern of incidence that is the consequence of this history. It is well known that the incidence is especially heavy among blacks. What statistics there are about this could in the nature of the case hardly be reliable and are certainly liable to rapid change. In any case, for some time to come AIDS is likely to remain unlike the Black Death, a plague with a disproportionately heavy incidence among those at the bottom of the social pyramid. That is one more reason for stressing the observation that AIDS has become a major political problem as well as a medical one. Here the word political can and should have a broad meaning, characterizing the socially organized distribution of misery and happiness in any human society. This distribution is of course the consequence of far more than the workings of political institutions as they are ordinarily perceived and described. Those concerned with and affected by AIDS have long been active. The recent outburst of the black Ethiopian Jews in Israel (*New York Times*, 29 January 1996, p. 1) introduces a distinctly new feature in the tragedy. For the first time, a large group of people—vastly more than just those threatened by the disease—have expressed resentment at being victimized, and have specifically challenged the social distribution of this especially horrible form of human misery. Whether this challenge will amount to anything constructive is almost impossible to determine now. That, in some form, it will be a legacy to the next century does seem sure.

Fundamentalism became a worldwide concern during the last decade of this century. The rise of this concern has been rapid. When I stressed
this threat to free institutions in the Tanner lectures at Oxford in 1985, I
was dismayed by the total incredulity so politely expressed in a seminar
on the lectures. Now before me as I write is a scholarly review of an 852-
page book that is the fourth volume in what is known as the Fundamen­
talism Project, all edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (See
Contemporary Sociology 25 [January 1996], 35). This huge academic enter­
prise with its long list of contributors provides solid evidence for the social
acceptance of fundamentalism as a contemporary problem, and an intracta­
ble one at that. Once a form of social behavior has passed a threshold
and become a problem, one can ordinarily judge the problem’s intracta­
bility by the number of pages devoted to it and the number of people
interested in it.

On inspection I was unable to find more than a few nuggets of useful
information, while the rest struck me, quite possibly in error, as either
common knowledge available in the New York Times, or the work of area
specialists with defensive overtones and limited general relevance. If this
evaluation seems ungenerous, the passage of time can correct it. Very
likely this enormous study will be available a generation or more from
now for comparison with reality. That will be the real test. Those who
examine these volumes then will have to determine their intellectual shelf
life.

Let us now ask what fundamentalist movements want and how they
propose to get it. In the first place they create a largely imaginary past of
harmony, obedience to legitimate authority, sexual virtue, devotion to­
wards the supernatural, and recognition of the importance of hard work.
These are of course the traditional conservative virtues stressed in every
major civilization: the Islamic world, Hindu India, Confucian China (not
the Taoist current, which is one of delightful mockery), and Confucian
and Shinto Japan. This fundamentalist view, however, is a caricature of
the traditional virtues cobbled together for political purposes. Fundamen­
talist leaders also display the traits stressed by the great nineteenth-century
Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt’s “terrible simplifier.” Social remedies
are reduced to crude and hostile slogans like “the Jews.” The movements
display an antirational and anti-intellectual current usually much cruder
than presently respectable versions of the same doctrines. They are hostile
to foreigners and display a notable inclination toward violence.

Not all of these characteristics appear in all fundamentalist movements.
Certainly not with equal emphasis. The really significant one, I suggest,
is the use of a glorified past as a blueprint for a utopian future. Even the
future may not be all that crucial, in that leaders have no great interest in
it. What they are really after are good sticks to beat the present. The emphasis on the political use of the past also brings causal connections to the surface: fundamentalism is most likely to put in an appearance when the conventional virtues are in deep trouble. (They are always in considerable trouble. Otherwise it would not be necessary to take so much trouble inculcating them.) They are in deep trouble when the connection between virtue and its reward becomes more and more difficult to discern.

The emphasis on a "useable past"—ironically, once upon a time, the slogan of left historians—also reveals that decisive elements of fundamentalism have occurred in the past in a way that sheds light on future possibilities. The deservedly famous book by Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939), presents a sardonic picture of Augustus trying to carry out a moral revolution and restore ancient Roman virtues by enlisting Vergil, Horace, and others—hardly public relations hacks—to provide the inspiration. This case, and similar ones to be found in the British and Japanese empires—and for that matter even that of Pericles in the Athenian empire—display important shared features. One could call these features fundamentalism from above—back to basic virtues!—or simple military patriotism. In any case the connection with violence used by and for the state is very plain in fundamentalism from above.

How about fundamentalism from below? It would be easy to catalogue the type of miseries that favor the growth of fundamentalism, such as elderly people who have been left behind in a market economy and are lonely and crave both human companionship and the solace of religion. But it may be more useful to say a few words about a major near contemporary political figure, Mao, because the contradictions in his career are also contradictions in what we are trying to understand. Whether or not he deserves the label fundamentalist is really a secondary matter, though there is considerable evidence to support that view. I shall draw heavily here on David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994) though many other sources have influenced these comments.

Mao’s utopia was in the future not the past. Formally that rules him out of the category of fundamentalist. But does it really? His image of an egalitarian cooperative future is, at least in my judgment, about as far from any prospective reality as any fundamentalist picture of idyllic farm life in pre-industrial America. Mao, of all world leaders, was certainly one of Burkhardt’s great simplifiers. Clearly he was anti-intellectual in two senses. He distrusted people who just did mental work as opposed to manual work. He was also highly suspicious of anyone whose ideas might
compete with his own. Whether one can consider Mao antirational is a more difficult question to answer. He had an earthy appreciation of technology. There was none of the late twentieth-century antiscientific and antirationalist strain in Mao. Yet his extreme no-nonsense, no-fancy-new-theory way of thinking is an intellectual pattern quite congenial to the fundamentalists left behind and confused by contemporary intellectual trends. A Chinese nationalist under a paper-thin Marxist veneer, Mao was no ordinary hater of things foreign. Here, too, however, his attitude appears to have been extremely instrumental. Foreign things and people were welcome only so long as they would promote his changing conception of the revolution.

As for the use of violence, more and more evidence has been coming out about the large numbers of people who died as a result of Mao's policies as well as about his personal ruthlessness in using the secret police to destroy his enemies. This behavior brings to mind that of God in the Old Testament, certainly a major figure for western fundamentalist movements. Mao was also a "back to basics" figure in Marxism, as nearly all distinguished leaders of the movement have been at some time. Mao had little or no use for the leaders of the USSR, not even Stalin, and for good political reasons. Yet he used Marxism as one justification among others, for his policy of breaking with the first socialist state. One goes back to alleged basic truths, in order to establish a new orthodoxy.

On the basis of this evidence I suggest that there is such a thing as leftist fundamentalism with strong chauvinist overtones, and that Mao presents a good model of it. He is a better model than Lenin because he did succeed in mobilizing masses of Chinese for the sake of revolution. If he had died in 1949 at the moment of revolutionary success, he would have joined the pantheon of the great liberators of mankind. As a matters now stand, leftist fundamentalism is very much out of fashion. But there are already signs that overtly reactionary fundamentalists are casting about for popular grievances on which they can ride to power. Conceivably the ghost of Mao, properly recostumed to suit the occasion, could again become a force with which to reckon.

From the standpoint of estimating the main contours of human affairs a generation and more from now, there is precious little to be gained in seeking more detail about fundamentalism and its prospects. Though vulnerability to this political plague is greater in the poorer parts of the globe, the prosperous West is far from immune. Viewed from a distance the politics of the end of the twentieth century begins to look like a sea of
smoldering ashes, known as institutions, with scatterings of sparks from fundamentalist movements. No doubt that is a gross exaggeration, though hardly more so than the packaged optimism of some second tier western politicians.

Fundamentalism, after all, is only one trend among many, even if it is the most ominous. In taking one last look at the bequests of our century to the next it is appropriate to mention again the encouraging ones. As C. Vann Woodward remarked, the inevitable needs all the opposition it can get because it is generally unpleasant. There are good reasons for holding that some major scourges of the twentieth century, Stalinism, Fascism, concentration camps, and world wars may sharply diminish. Unemployment poses a much bigger question mark, especially for nonwestern countries. Even for them it is impossible to rule out the prospect that the horrors of poverty and disease may, in say another half century, be brought under control by methods that are not altogether repressive. All this, one has to grant without the usual bromide that it can happen only if there are enough men of good will.

The reason for rejecting that condition is simple. Along with the rise of antirationalism, the decline in the influence of good will is the most obvious of the threatening trends in the last years of our century. Good will refers to rough and ready rules found in many cultures. Fairly often religion endorses them, though usually only for persons of the same religion. By and large its essence, for the purposes at hand, is to give the other person or group a leg up or "a break" when there is real trouble, and to treat other people as human beings so far as possible within the constraints of a social relationship and without concern for the color of their skin. How widely these ever applied in the past and the extent to which they can be applied in the present are legitimate and very important questions beyond any discussion here. It may also be a bit unfair to assert that the decline of good will is obvious when there are so many books about cultural decline, the end of community, the rise of mass society, and the like. The trouble is that the diagnoses and remedies in these works— to restore or establish community, religion, free enterprise, bigger and more loveable capitalism, neo-socialism, fundamentalism with a human face and so on—are so dubious that they are difficult to take seriously.

This writer has no special diagnosis and remedy for the decline of good will and other maladies. But one last comment, very much in the spirit of William Graham Sumner, must therefore serve to bring closure. The
generalization about human affairs that has probably the most empirical
evidence behind it holds that human beings find it extraordinarily difficult
to work together peacefully for shared and humane purposes. Yet some­
how they manage now and then to do so, if often under duress and
despite their inclinations.