victorians abed

william graham sumner on the family women and sex

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In reviewing G. J. Barker-Benfield's *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life,* Martin Duberman wrote that

> The book's most serious drawback is the impression it leaves that Victorian sexual ideology was monolithic—that the three doctors and writers whose careers he concentrates on represent the whole of the medical establishment (indeed the whole of American manhood). . . . The work of other scholars . . . could have alerted us to the dangers of letting aspects of Victorian sensibility stand for the whole of it.[1]

Duberman's criticism speaks for a number of students of American social history who in recent years have begun to question whether a Victorian consensus concerning sexuality existed. They believe that such an interpretation depends excessively on published materials, especially prescriptive literature written by physicians, ministers and moralists generally. We must, they argue, recognize the gap between prescription and behavior and learn how significant it was. By raising the issue, and sometimes by offering evidence, they suggest complexity rather than consensus, a spectrum of views and behavior that resulted from the needs of individual men and women.[2]

To resolve the issue, investigators must examine the assumptions, ideas, and, insofar as possible, behavior of significant numbers of nineteenth century men and women. It is probably safe to predict that any interpretation of a Victorian consensus on sexuality generally, or even about sexual relations specifically, will be considerably altered by such studies. Investigators may also discover that the views of many individuals were either inconsistent or changing, or both, and that attitudes and behavior were sometimes if not often at odds. The long term consequence of discrete studies should be a more sophisticated recognition of complex

patterns of Victorian thought and behavior concerning sexuality. Such tentative suggestions emerge when William Graham Sumner (1840-1910) is used as a case study of elite academic attitudes.

Examination of Sumner's life and thought reveals that significant tensions and inconsistencies appeared over long years as his early training in the absolute truths of Protestant Christianity, Madisonian republicanism and classical economics was outmoded by profound changes in American society and thought. For Sumner, industrialization, urbanization, and especially the rise of overwhelming economic forces directed by capital and labor seemed to threaten the stable, orderly, naturally hierarchical middle-class society that his laissez-faire liberalism posited as the ideal.[3]

But the ramifications of industrialization seemed also to demonstrate in society the validity of the new science of evolution. Paradoxically, Sumner, lifelong advocate of stability and the Golden Mean, found himself swept away in mid-life by the evidence and romance of Darwinian theory. Interrelated social and intellectual changes, then, required Sumner to spend much of his life trying to reconcile the attractions of both stability and change. Like other Victorians, Sumner also faced that difficult task of reconciliation where marriage, the family, and sexual roles were concerned. And, as in other areas of his thought, ambiguities and contradictions derived from his divided allegiance to both the status quo and the new science of change.

Like other contemporary conservatives one of Sumner's solutions was to use biological theory and science generally in the service of the sexual status quo. After Sumner converted to evolution he tried to transfer the methods and prestige of biological science to the developing social sciences, especially "societology." As a self-styled "scientist of society," Sumner's views were often hardly distinguishable from those he had earlier held as a consequence of his training in traditional absolutes. Although it would be incorrect to impute conscious dishonesty or hypocrisy, it is true that Sumner sometimes used the shield of science to defend against social changes, including changes in sexual roles, that he considered undesirable.

It would be equally incorrect to infer that Sumner always used science to buttress his prejudices. Despite fierce loyalty to a vision of society that was in important respects conservative and traditional, Sumner was perhaps equally devoted to the ideal of truth objectively discovered through scientific method. The scientific ideal at least sometimes impelled Sumner to reject or ignore traditional social dogmas, including those concerning sexuality, and to follow truth through the thickets of change.

Furthermore, other and older loyalties led him in the same difficult paths. As an academician Sumner's allegiance was always to rationality and intellectual honesty. As both a sociologist and social commentator Sumner was preeminently a libertarian who advocated equal opportunity

for all in the interest of self-realization. Significantly, he believed that only a world view focusing on self-realization was consonant with evolution. Although he automatically thought of men, he nevertheless consciously recognized at times that women must also enjoy the right to realize themselves as fully as possible. Finally, Sumner's enduring ideal of the middle-class family in a middle-class society influenced him to oppose the double sexual standard.

Sumner did not, then, answer questions about sexuality as a consistent conservative. He did not, that is, always employ science, or his position as an academician and pioneer sociologist, his libertarianism, or his social preferences in conservative or illiberal ways. Caught as he was between loyalty to traditional views and the need to seek new truths about sexuality that social and intellectual change created, Sumner's experience questions the assumption of a stable Victorian consensus on sexuality.

Sumner's training in orthodox social views began, of course, with his parents, who were English immigrants from yeoman and working class origins. His father, whom Sumner memorialized as the "Forgotten Man" who worked and paid taxes to support the follies of others, was honest, disciplined, temperate, religious, hard working, and ambitious, a good husband, father and family man. Sumner, rising from such lowly but respectable origins, made his way with distinction through Yale and major European graduate institutions to a successful career as a Yale teacher and writer in economics, political science, history and sociology. Sumner's admirers attributed his success to his exercise in academic life of those admirable traits his father had exhibited as a railroad mechanic. Sumner was disciplined and hard working, over a long career learning a dozen languages and studying a dozen hours daily. He broke down in his early fifties, but thereafter did prodigious research in the new discipline of sociology and wrote *Folkways*. He was intellectually honest and courageous; in an age before the concept of tenure was established he repeatedly risked being fired from Yale for outspoken views, which he considered his duty as one of America's intellectual elite and a scientist of society to publicize. Sumner was temperate and disciplined, avoiding excesses except concerning work and attacking stupidity. After considering the cost one day, he quit cigars cold. To his many admirers among Yale's students and alumni Sumner was, above all, a man—masculine, rational, scientific, kind and protective to women and children, fair, even in intellectual combat, to other men. His retirement eulogy noted that "it is the virility of this great teacher that has impressed so many generations of Yale students."[4]

While young, perhaps reflecting a repressed emotional life, Sumner was cold, snobbish and studious. Observers often saw an unbearably self-righteous, moralistic prig. Then at thirty he found Jeannie Elliott, a charming, quick-minded New York City merchant's daughter. In courtship letters Sumner revealed his sense of self to her as never to others.

He thought himself lonely and reserved, perhaps even cold and hard:

> I suppose I am, or was. Why should I not be? I lived for years almost entirely alone. Sometimes I passed whole days without speaking a word to anybody—not because I was morose but because I did not have occasion or opportunity. But I assure you that I am not incapable of tenderness and affection.

Sumner also revealed ambition and concern with status. He was not, he wrote, ashamed of his parents, although he had risen above them socially. Yet when Edgar Wells had courted Jeannie, Sumner had envied him his Secretary of the Navy father, for

> when a man is at all capable of helping himself, his father can help him very decidedly, if he is a man of position and influence. I have never had any of that help. As your mother said to me, all the position I have I must win myself. Well, we will see what I can do.

Although overwhelmed by love, Sumner also showed himself prudent, writing that he was concerned that they have enough money to save even a little, as he was accustomed to do. It was shameful that neither preaching nor teaching paid well, and sad that he would have no inheritance, but with Jeannie's small income they might total $2400. "I can live on 1200 if you can."

Still money and worldly success were not prime objects:

> I will not give way to . . . weakness if I can help it and I want you to help me. You have ambition for me, but you must take care, darling, that your ambition is for me to do all my duty to the *best of my ability,* and not that I should win reputation and success. I want you to be a *conscience* to me and keep me right.

Jeannie Elliott, Sumner expected, would as a loving, proper wife manage cleverly the income and success his hard work would achieve.

As a proper husband Sumner would protect Jeannie by providing well, and by shielding her from unsavory influences. Of his brother's wife, Sumner wrote, "He would have made a splendid husband for a really good and refined woman but all the influence that this woman has had upon him has been bad. One thing which seemed to me a great obstacle in my love for you was the thought of ever bringing you and her together."

Although protective, Sumner treated Jeannie as intelligent. But not as an intellectual equal. He had, after all, studied in Europe when few men and fewer women attended even college. He once told Jeannie that "When I had grown out of the taste for croquet and gossip I should not have thought of women anymore." But he also argued that

> Some men repeat a kind of maxim that one "ought not to argue with ladies." . . . Why not argue with them? If they

> have any brains they ought to be amenable to reason just as much as men. . . . I never treated you so. Don't you remember what ponderous subjects we talked about even in the first calls which I made on you last fall?

Still, he intimated that Jeannie could not entirely understand a certain novel, and of the Franco-Prussian War he wrote, "I wish that I could talk with you about all this. You cannot be expected to understand it all. It requires attentive study of history and great philosophical insight to see it in all its bearings."

Sumner's wife responded to long years with an ambitious, intellectual and properly protective husband by becoming increasingly weak and dependent. The salient fact is that Jeannie Sumner, reared in easy circumstances, married to a devoted man who was nevertheless absorbed in college and national affairs, became, like many similarly situated nineteenth century middle-class women, in Page Smith's phrase, "delicate and ailing." Friends and relatives wrote of her "invalidism" and of rest sanitariums. A dim image emerges of a charming and intelligent lady who suffered almost continuously from severely limited energies and from "nervous exhaustion." Although she was not entirely housebound and traveled with Sumner on occasion, he went much alone. From letters dotted with pet names, assertions that he would "want to do nothing but kiss you for twenty-four hours after we meet," and apologies for being away ("I send you a thousand kisses to make up for it. You can distribute them where they will do the most good."), it seems that Sumner did not willingly leave Jeannie. But he did, of course, leave.

Sumner's personality and his wife's long term delicate condition and frequent visits to health resorts certainly strained their marriage, sometimes severely. Yet it is perhaps instructive to recognize that the Sumners struggled somehow to maintain and to revive an affectionate and humane relationship. In his latter days Sumner actually enjoyed retirement, for it allowed late breakfasts and long hours with his wife. To be more with Jeannie he moved his work downstairs from the third floor study.

Whatever the burdens of marriage, Sumner apparently carried them with good grace, for the family, at least ideally, was a refuge from the harsh realities of academic and public conflict. Sumner distinguished sharply between the professional realm of men and the social, which focused primarily on wife and sons and a few relatives and friends. Hard and cold in man's world, in the family he was a solicitous husband, thoughtful host, concerned father. In 1896, Sumner wrote a classic letter of advice to his elder son, Eliot:

> You know that I have never wanted you to suffer by poverty or to go in for anything luxurious. Try to settle yourself . . . in rooms and board on the same principles and I will meet the expense. I have never felt any dissatisfaction about your demands on me for money, except in regard to one or two extra things like society expenses, etc. But I think

> nothing of those things now. . . . Be economical, but live as you have been brought up. . . . Write to your mama every Sunday or oftener and to me whenever you like. Let me know all the *cold* facts—how it seems, etc., etc. I should be glad if you would take me into your confidence. If I know the facts I can do a great deal probably. . . . Remember all I have said to you about seizing your chances energetically, about being enterprising, and about women.

Sumner's role as father was to protect the family, but also to prepare his sons for the world of men.

In the professional world Sumner expressed in more sophisticated detail attitudes like those he revealed in private life. His sociology taught that humankind had always been impelled by four "drives" or "motives"—hunger, sex, vanity and ghost fear. The first two were preeminent, but all were "intertwined" in the life of individual and race. Driven especially by the motives to survive and to reproduce, men had faced the struggle for existence against nature and the "competition of life" among men and other animals. Gradually individuals had learned through harsh and bloody experience to achieve personal ends by coming together in "antagonistic cooperation." Over eons, through unimaginable hardships, men had thus risen through savage, barbaric, pastoral, and agricultural stages, the four major levels of human life. In addition to the common idea of stages, Sumner accepted a nineteenth century distinction between "militarism" and "industrialism." Militarism encouraged atavistic social tendencies—war and imperialism; hierarchical class structures; monarchical, absolutistic governments; romantic, chivalric, glory-ridden attitudes; submission to traditional authority and custom. Conversely, industrialism fostered admirable qualities of contemporary "high civilization"—peaceful industry within free enterprise capitalism; laissez-faire republicanism that protected liberty under law; a middle-class society that championed popular education, science, rationality, monogamous marriage and the family. The key lesson was that man's long rise from savagery to civilization had been achieved, not by lone individuals, but cooperatively, socially. According to Sumner's sociology, society began within the primitive family.

The family originated in need, the need specifically of a woman encumbered in the struggle for existence by an infant. Woman had had to overcome fear of submitting to the male so that she and her child might be fed. The man had offered protection in return for coerced labor. From these aboriginal beginnings—protean examples of antagonistic cooperation—had developed all the complexities of human society. For Sumner the family was the "cell," "core," or "ganglion in which individual and social meet."

In the meeting the individual's purpose was egoistic—to satisfy the basic motive of self-preservation and, ultimately, self-realization. Curiously, however, from egoism had come altruism. Brought into the family

by self-interest, the individual had gradually recognized the necessity of sacrificing for others, for offspring. Thus, "in the satisfaction of the selfish . . . the society is produced unawares." As a young clergyman Sumner had sometimes advocated altruistic, charitable sacrifices as evidences of Christian behavior. But later as a convert to naturalism and sociology he insisted that "All self-sacrifice is of the nature of suicide. It is not conservation of the energy possessed in order to be, but expenditure of it, lessening the power and chance to be." Nevertheless, he approved of parental sacrifices for children as natural and inevitable. "The more they sacrifice the more they love and the more they love the more and longer they sacrifice. This is . . . the cause of much which makes life worth living."

The patterns of Sumner's thought generally and his sociology specifically reveal a search for harmony in all phenomena. He found it in the family by recognizing that, especially in high civilization,

> the later marriage, the fewer children, their better quality, conjugal affection, cooperation of parents in work and sacrifice for offspring, and their intense satisfaction in vigorous and hopeful children constitute the most perfect and advantageous societal harmony which men have won. . . . The individual and the societal elements are pulsations of the same process consisting of alternate concentration and diffusion.

Natural law demanded both that the individual seek self-realization and that he sacrifice for offspring. But the paradox was resolved when the individual realized that egoistic satisfaction and love grew from parental sacrifices. By perceiving that in the ideal family egoism and altruism were harmonized Sumner both avoided the conclusion that natural law was inconsistent and found the Golden Mean.

As a sociologist, Sumner attempted to act scientifically by presenting evidence about the nature of society dispassionately and objectively. Not infrequently, however, as with the family, his subjective preferences broke through, even if normally in the guise of scientific data. Beginning descriptively with the primitive family based on self-interest and economically determined factors, Sumner concluded with a late-Victorian ideal—the family as a center of love, a retreat from the world's harsh struggles.

It may be that Sumner's idealization of marriage and the family was intensified by the reality of his own difficult home situation, but it was also characteristic of Sumner to maintain that reality and his ideal were synonymous. In the ideal modern family altruism was linked to interest by the father's relationship to the world. He who had taken a family and the "most awful responsibility" of parenthood had "given hostages to fortune." A man sought success and property, the "first and broadest interest of man," not merely for self-satisfaction, but to protect his dear ones. The modern family intensified

> a man's feeling of cohesion with his own wife and his own

> children, aside from and against all the world; and his and their interests . . . are set in more complete indifference or more pronounced antagonism to those of other people than any other social arrangement. . . . The selfishest man in the world will pour out his money like water on his children. A man who fights all the world with pitiless energy in the industrial conflict, will show himself benevolent to his family. It is for them that he fights.

Sumner, like other defenders of capitalism, found that socialists inevitably attacked property and the family in one breath, for the two were "inextricably interwoven." The conflict with socialism was crucial, Sumner believed, for "Doctrines about marriage which are not admissible in public are the logical and necessary complement of socialism about property." Opposing a socialistic reversion to some form of free love or group marriage was the monogamous family, "the grandest and most powerful monopoly in the world," "the greatest barrier to socialism which exists," the bulwark of the entire private property structure:

> Property and the family stand or fall together; we must either maintain them both with the individualists, or overthrow them both with the socialists. . . . It may be that in some abstract sense the earth was given to all mankind. What I want is a piece of it with which to support my family.

Sumner always taught that individual attempts to satisfy interests produced mass phenomena. Thus from each man's concern to protect loved ones by seizing a piece of the action had come mankind's progress from savagery to civilization. "If each generation spends itself to advance the next, we see the motive force of a constantly advancing struggle against nature. . . . the never-ending struggle on which all civilization depends." As in classical economic theory, to which he adhered, Sumner's sociology concluded of the family that atomistic pursuit of self-interest led to the social good.

A generally consistent economic determinist, Sumner held that institutions and social forms followed and served interests, especially the basic human motives. Thus the family had probably preceded the marriage form. Sumner taught that the four motives, especially hunger and sex, were relatively constant, but that folkways and institutions changed as environmental conditions varied. Thus polyandry, polygamy and monogamy had prevailed in various societies and ages as men had adjusted institutions in seeking to satisfy basic drives. Marriage was therefore "artificial and cultural," an "unnatural institution" or "human convention" produced by civilization. The various marriage forms indicated great changes in the mores, but when he spoke descriptively Sumner questioned whether change equalled progress. "We try to arrange polygamy, polyandry, exogamy, endogamy, group marriage, etc. in an evolutionary scale. We do not succeed."

Perhaps more often, however, Sumner tended to seek progression, even if not clearly unilinear, in marriage forms. Then he inferred that originally, in the primitive matriarchal horde, sexual relations had been promiscuous. Patriarchy had originated in agreements, perhaps usually made by women under duress, to cooperate in the struggle for existence. Men, holding the earliest conceptions of "property" and "service," had made women their "drudges and slaves." Sumner believed monogamy had originated in "love," in the man's desire for one woman above all others in the horde, in his desire to possess her alone, to free her from sexual responsibilities to the group. "Hence love tended to monogamy and to dissolution of group marriage and [the] mother family." Thus the triumph of "individualism against collectivism." Whether for exploitative or loving reasons, clearly the patriarchal family and monogamy had eventuated from the man's dissatisfaction with his position in a conservative matriarchal society, which "lacked integration and discipline," and from his desire to, in some sense, possess woman. Sumner did not explain how individual women came under duress, or why they chose monogamous drudgery over life in the matriarchal horde. But, however originated, Sumner regarded the change from "mother-family" to "father-family" as probably "the greatest and most important revolution in the history of civilization . . . because the family . . . is such a fundamental institution that it forces all other societal details into conformity with itself." Similarly, the emergence of monogamy, which had ultimately elevated women and offered the best care and training for children, was "the greatest step in the history of civilization." Masculine individualism had prevailed over feminine socialism. Sumner had integrated an ideal conception of the family into the framework of his sociology.

As with the family, so with monogamy. Sumner attempted to be a scientifically neutral sociologist, but he repeatedly praised modern monogamy. Only in contemporary high civilization was marriage characterized by "conjugal affection," and "a fusion of the life and interest of two persons," instead of by lustful and exploitative relationships. For Sumner, modern monogamy linked with "industrialism," capitalism, the middle class, and despite his strong criticism of religion as antagonistic to society's interests, with primitive Christianity and Protestantism. The origins of "sacramental monogamy"—the source of modern "pair marriage"—were in the mores of "the humble classes in which Christianity found root." This was apparently because of religious idealization of marriage and because the poor could not afford concubinage. Protestantism, Sumner wrote,

> produced its ideal of marriage and the family by abandoning and ignoring the plain doctrines of the New Testament about virginity and assuming rationalistic ground. It did not see its ideals in celibacy but in the family; it was and is middle-class; its ideals are domestic and conjugal, and it has produced, as one of its triumphs, conjugal love, which

> is an absolutely modern novelty. . . . This ideal, although by no means impossible, is as rare as it is beautiful.

Like his view of early Christianity, Sumner's attitude toward contemporary middle-class marriage was both descriptive and normative. His age had no more staunch defender of middle-class mores and society, but Sumner attempted to examine the middle class scientifically. In *Folkways* he approved of "the modern sentiments of love and conjugal affection" produced by the "system of the urban-middle-capitalist class." But he explained that it had arisen especially in the world's newly discovered areas where the new industrial environment had favored the lower middle classes. "This has brought into control the mores of those classes, which were simple, unluxurious, philistine, and comparatively pure, because those classes were forced to be frugal, domestic, careful of their children, self-denying, and relatively virtuous, on account of their limited means." Despite personal preference, Sumner's economic determinism and understanding of evolutionary theory forced the conclusion that "when the economic facts which now favor the lower middle classes pass away and new conditions arise the marriage mores will change again." But for the moment middle-class mores prevailed, and Sumner defended them with his considerable resources of tongue and pen:

> The family in its best estate . . . we may contemplate with the greatest satisfaction. When the parents are united by mutual respect and sincere affection and by joint zeal for the welfare of their children, the family is a field of peace and affection in which the most valuable virtues take root and grow and character is built on the firmest foundation of habit.

Since the monogamous family was central to civilization, Sumner repeatedly cautioned readers, especially the young, against romantic, improvident marriages. He warned also that, once entered, the state of matrimony could not be expected to govern itself. Thus, "it is not impossible that the children reared in a Turkish harem may have a happier fate than the children of a monogamic household in which the parents quarrel or are divorced." Late in life Sumner concluded that "Perhaps the family still shows more fluctuation and uncertainty than any other of our great institutions," that it had lost ground as a conservative force, and that the school now rivaled its influence. But he saw little reason for alarm if parents were sensible, sacrificing, and of good character. An undated note concluded similarly that "The family institution never was as strong as it is now in spite of the harm of loose and easy divorce."

Divorce drew Sumner's attention because "it is a question that ramifies through the whole society." He consistently opposed easy divorces based on "frivolous or grotesque" reasons, for they would weaken monogamy, would become "a series of alternate insults to church and state," and "would mean, at last, that people might pair off for as long as they should

see fit to stay together. . . . It is certain that when divorce is difficult man and wife try to compose their difficulties and that they often can and do succeed." Nevertheless, for his era Sumner was not extremist, rejecting absolute injunctions against divorce as an unscriptural "ecclesiastical whim" invented by "celibate or fornicating priests." Indeed, divorce was the necessary consequence of monogamy, and especially of its idealization:

> With the rise of pair marriage came divorce for the woman, upon due reason, as much as for the man. Hence freer divorce goes with pair marriage. . . . The more poetical and elevated the ideas are which are clustered around marriage, the more probable it is that experience will produce disappointment.

Sumner maintained that adultery, the dangers of vice resulting from too stringent divorce regulations and the individual's need for self-realization must be considered in establishing divorce policy. Although he preferred that prospective partners select each other carefully, he recognized that mistakes were inevitable and that "pair marriage, by its exclusiveness, risks the happiness of the parties on a very narrow and specific condition of life. The coercion of this arrangement for many persons must become intolerable." For, "Each mortal has but one life to live. Doctrines which would teach that a mistake must be irremediable are inexcusable." Rejecting absolute standards, Sumner took the enlightened position for his time that laws which ignored contemporary social conditions and mores caused only trouble, and that the state's divorce policy should follow expediency and practical wisdom. He did, however, take comfort in 1906 by noting that earlier "scandalous cases" had provoked a tendency to "revoke certain concessions" in divorce matters.

Sociological discussions of family, marriage and divorce inevitably led Sumner to consider the status and nature of women. As he wrote repeatedly, in high civilization the "unnatural institution" of monogamy had elevated women from the low position they had endured through ages of savagery and barbarism. Even polygamy had been an improvement over being man's drudge. But men, Sumner insisted, had not created the "frightful inferiority of woman." Her "primitive inferiority" resulted from biological law, because "Maternity is a burden on women to which men have no parallel." Finding themselves naturally inferior in the struggle for existence, women had necessarily submitted to male dominance. Then they had come to accept subordinate status and sometimes even to glory in it. Especially in the wealthier classes, "The interest of men and the vanity of women . . . cooperated to establish the folkways which lowered the status of the latter." But, Sumner asserted, "In general, the status of women has been controlled, in all civilization up to the highest, by their power to help in the work of life. Where women have had important functions they have been valued; where they have needed protection and support . . . they have been treated with contempt."

An economic determinist and libertarian, Sumner wasted no sympathy on the sluggard, man or woman, who cooperated in losing liberty by escaping responsibility and work.

Woman's status had been established by natural law. Over eons male egoism and female vanity had ratified the law through artificial institutions. But presently the great economic forces of industrialism were abrogating the terms of the ancient contract between the sexes. Modern industrialism had especially stirred the ambition of middle-class women by offering them education and careers, had

> dislodged marriage from its supreme place in their interest and life plan. This is the greatest revolution in the conditions of the marriage institution, except the change from the mother-family to the father-family . . . in all history. . . . Women have such a deeply rooted love of children that alluring opportunities for marriage easily win them away from other careers, but the importance of the fact that for great numbers of them it is no longer the sum of life to find husbands can be easily appreciated. . . . Moreover, modern life, especially in cities, offers a great number of interests and enjoyments which make domesticity less attractive for either sex. . . . Here, then, we have a whole set of influences which are unfavorable to marriage and which do not by any means belong to societal decay.

Sumner's comments about changing relationships between the sexes were insightful, but, not surprisingly, did not lead to equalitarian conclusions. For he had been reared in an age that accepted male dominance in a naturally hierarchical man's world. When not yet thirty, in 1869, Sumner wrote that problems of rearing children would be much "aggravated . . . should mothers, instead of giving themselves to the motherly office in training their young, become wranglers in politics, voting at the polls, and putting themselves up for office." Of the liquor question and prohibition he commented dryly in 1898: "That the women would better that matter by going into it, I do not believe." A few years later he complained that new ways created confusion: "The old way was that one will (the woman's) always was bound to yield. Since that no longer seems right, the modern way is endless discussion, a defeat for one, and all the inevitable consequences in daily experience and effect on character." Sumner objected not only to equalizing, but to romanticizing woman's role:

> It seems clear that pair marriage has finally set aside the notion . . . that women are bad by nature, so that one half of the human race is permanently dragging down the other half. The opposite notion seems now to be gaining currency,—that all women are good, and can be permanently employed to raise up the men. These fluctuations only show how each sway of conditions and interests produces its own fallacies.

Sumner did not, of course, oppose more civilized conduct toward

women. Quite the contrary: "The current saying that the status and treatment of women is an index of civilization is only partially true; the same might be said of the treatment of slaves or beasts, the fact being that it is the treatment of those who cannot fully defend themselves which is the index." Similarly, he wrote that the duty of government was to protect "the property of men and the honor of women." But Sumner rejected equality between the sexes with the same argument he employed generally. Equality opposed natural law, weakened the race in the struggle for existence and the quest for a higher civilization. Sumner once wrote that, given two sexes, a struggle for "supremacy" was "inevitable," for sexual equality, as in all human relations, was "a dream not of this earth."

It is significant for Sumner's views of both women and nature that in discussing the latter he often used the imagery of sexual force and conflict. Sumner sometimes presented nature as an impersonal force, but often Nature appeared as Woman. Sometimes she was blind but implacable natural Justice, sometimes passive Earth who "submits to him who most energetically and resolutely assails her. She grants her rewards to the fittest, therefore, without regard to other considerations of any kind." Nature, however, was generally less submissive; if men wanted her rewards she had to be assaulted, wrestled with and conquered. Nature was a "hard mistress" from whom men must "extort" subsistence.

Although often implying that only repeated struggles could establish the dominant sex, Sumner more often posited peaceful antagonistic cooperation between the sexes. In so doing he applied much the same concept of division of labor, drawn from classical economics and buttressed by biological analogies, that he used in discussing relationships between individuals and groups—such as capital and labor—who played specialized roles while cooperating antagonistically. In *Folkways* he cited Harry Campbell's *Differences in the Nervous Organization of Man and Woman* in arguing that biologically based sex differences proved "equality" was irrelevant, since men and women were "independent and complementary." He argued similarly in a manuscript that

> Men and women are creatures of wide difference. A man and a woman cannot look at life from the same standpoint,—therefore they never can understand each other. . . . The great modern question has been: Are they equal? The real question is: Are they alike? It is certain that they are not. . . . The life of one moves in periods of rhythmical rise and fall; the life of the other knows no such pulsations.

For Sumner biological law determined social fact:

> Power in the family, in industry, in civil affairs, war, and religion is not the same thing and cannot be. Each sex has more power for one domain, and must have less power for another.
>
> . . . . . .

> Woman bears an unequal share of the responsibilities and duties of sex and reproduction just as certainly and justly as man bears an unequal share of the responsibilities and duties of property, war and politics. The reasons are in ultimate physiological facts by virtue of which one is a woman and the other is a man.

As in the world generally, so in monogamy, which Sumner idealized among other reasons as creating the ideal marriage relationship. "Some other kinds of wives are greater than their husbands, and some are lower; the monogamic wife alone can have an independent and co-ordinate sphere, on an equal footing with her husband, yet different from his sphere." Sumner preferred that this idyllic relationship derive from uncoerced and peaceful antagonistic cooperation. But, anticipating dissatisfaction modern women might feel, he occasionally appealed to incontrovertible biological facts, which showed that, even in industrial civilization, "Man has the odds." If pushed too far toward absolute equality of status, men might retaliate with bachelorhood and renewed concubinage.

Natural law seemed to prove that woman's place was in the home. Yet modern industrial facts daily suggested otherwise, creating an unresolved conflict in Sumner's thinking. For he was caught, like others of his age, between traditional attitudes and roles and a rapidly industrializing, urbanizing society. A perceptive social analyst, Sumner often commented insightfully and sensitively, especially when he shifted from biological to environmentalist interpretations. In 1888 he wrote, "The women of to-day are the true descendants of their great-grandmothers who were captured and reduced to drudgery; the men of to-day owe their ideas about women, and the women of to-day owe their ideas about themselves, largely to the traditions of the times I have mentioned." And in 1909, over twenty years later, he commented that

> Man was regarded as independent and complete in the first place and the woman was brought to him as a helpmeet or assistant; at least as an inferior whose status and destiny came from her position as an adjunct. . . . We have abandoned part of the harshness of this construction of the status of woman and all the unkind deductions from it; the moral inferences, however, remain, and we regard them as self-evident and eternal.

Whether Sumner recognized himself as influenced by the lag of ideas he did not say. Over a long career he repeated and sometimes firmly asserted many current assumptions about the nature of men and women. Sometimes he cited "authorities" on sex differences—Havelock Ellis, Patrick Geddes and various anthropologists—or the assertions stood alone. Whatever his sources, Sumner tended to view women as conservative, traditional, persistent, enduring, stable, societally inclined, adaptable, conforming, psychologically dependent, little philosophical or analytical, maternal and fashion conscious. Of Thomas Jefferson, Sumner wrote,

"He showed the traits which we call womanish. He took counsel of his feelings and imagination." Conversely, men tended to be enterprising, energetic, variational, individualistic, egoistic, reasoning, intellectual, relatively more powerful, courageous and pugnacious as a consequence of the struggle for existence, and perhaps instinctively polygamous.

It must immediately be said that Sumner was aware of the difficulties of distinguishing between nature and nurture. Of female characteristics he wrote,

> All the treatment to which woman has been subjected has been such as would make her submissive, docile, dependent, inferior, deceitful, dissimulative, false, intriguing, capricious, etc. . . . It would follow, however, that they have been what the men have made them. If the men should change their policy the women would change their character in time but the results of the past would long remain as survivals.

In *Folkways,* after citing authorities on sex differences, he observed, "The traits are certainly handed down by tradition and education. Whether they are evolutionary is far more doubtful." Sumner often called up biological determinism when asserting that women's characteristics and roles were natural and immutable. But sometimes, as in the examples cited, he was able to recognize environmental influences, a tendency that has been attributed to "reformers."

Sumner was, then, no simple minded purveyor of popular prejudices. He was, rather, a transition figure whose professional observations led toward conclusions against which his sex role training encouraged him to rebel. For example, he once wrote of equal educational opportunity, "My own view is that Yale College ought to be open to all mortals who want to study, black, white, red, yellow, male, female, handsome, ugly, etc., etc." Yet when a female graduate student attended class for several weeks he carefully edited his remarks until she left, whereupon he returned to open discussion of sexual folkways.

Sumner saw dimly the future of relationships between men and women. But he clung nevertheless, even if paradoxically and precariously, to traditional role conceptions, buttressed by the supposed dictates of natural law. Much the same was true of his views of sex. A proper Victorian gentleman who was nevertheless dedicated to truth as expressed in scientific sociology, Sumner was led to the verge of accepting the more liberal attitudes of his age toward sexual matters.

As a scientist of society Sumner discussed sex in the context of man's four basic motives. At times he represented hunger and sex as equally preeminent, but at others hunger, the drive for self-preservation, seemed most basic. He then examined the sex drive as secondary to or deriving from hunger, as when he followed Geddes and Thomson's *The Evolution of Sex* in explaining of sexual reproduction that "The hungry sperm cell seeks and pounces on the fat ovum, which, being fat, is less eager."

Similarly, when discussing sex in a sociological context he generally assumed that

> In proportion as hunger and nutrition are satisfied the sex appetite rises and absorbs the care, effort, and ambition of the individual. This is true whether we think of a savage who has won food enough, or of the civilized man who, having wealth and satiety on the side of property, turns his care, effort, and ambition to love.

Paradoxically, however, despite the bourgeois implications of the above, he regarded the sex drive as "a mighty passion which defeats reason." And although tending to regard hunger as most basic he also believed that "The sex passion affects the weal or woe of human beings far more than hunger, vanity, or ghost fear. It has far more complications with other interests than the other great motives. There is no escaping the good and ill, the pleasure and pain, which inhere in it."

Because the sex appetite was so strong it always threatened to harm both individual and society. Thus even the earliest societies had been driven to reflect on sexual matters and, through the agency of ghost fear, to form sexual folkways and mores. Society's purpose in regulating the sex drive had been not primarily moral, but pragmatic, concerned to preserve and advance the race. Men had learned it was "necessary to put all which would excite sex passion under a ban if society is to be vigorous for labor and reproduction." Thus the stringency or laxity of sexual taboos depended on environmental conditions and population levels. Although tending to regard the workings of natural law as "good," Sumner excepted the sex drive:

> The passion tends to excess. What is "natural" is therefore evil. . . . Perhaps it is the only case in which man is driven to error and evil by a great force in his nature, and is thus forced, if he would live well, to find a discipline for himself in intelligent self-control and in arbitrary rules.

Given the penalties of uncontrolled passion, Sumner preferred to accept society's controls, "not because these are always wise and right, but because they are better than anarchy and disorder."

In discussing sex and the individual Sumner assumed that each person sought self-realization, attempted to fulfill himself as completely as possible. In so doing the individual faced limits of time and energy. Only a brief moment was his between birth and death in which to follow a myriad of possible avenues to self-realization. And, Sumner believed with many of his age in an Iron Law of Energy, that a man had only a finite store of "vital energy" to expend upon the way. A man used up his vital energy in obvious and inevitable ways—in getting a living, reproducing, rearing children. A hard working scholar, Sumner cited a writer on the possibility that the vital energy in "sexual force" might be "transmuted into energy of will and of mind." Sumner believed, that is, that like

society the individual must perforce establish priorities in budgeting his sum of vital energy, for "duty. . . . is never a line of unbridled self-indulgence in any function, but a focusing of energy towards purposes; and this implies that all functions must be co-ordinated. Then they mutually limit each other."

To follow the path of duty in sexual matters was especially difficult because

> The sex appetite is entirely egoistic and self-regarding . . . in the fact that when aroused and active it precludes reflection and intelligent self-control. It is predominant for the time over everything else in the organism. It sweeps the individual away in intoxication. Past and future, law and authority, precedents and consequences are alike forgotten. It is indisputable that under the dominance of the sex passion the individual is more absolutely self-absorbed than at any other moment of life, certainly the man. The sense of power and dominance gives the highest sting of enjoyment. The man is most man, the woman most woman at the moment. All this is perfect without any reference to procreation.

Duty was doubly onerous for those individuals who most intensely sought to realize themselves, for "License in sex relations goes with license in pursuit of gain or in ambition. . . . The useful [is] not possible without the excessive." The individual's dilemma was that in following the path of duty to realize himself completely he unavoidably came upon the chasm of excess. But not to fall was also a duty to self and society.

Sexual excess, Sumner held with many in his age, led to physical, mental, moral, individual, and social vice, disease, and decay. A population must be "vigorous for labor and reproduction," Sumner believed, but, "the sex passion in its unbridled satisfaction is destructive to the individual adult and therefore to the society, because . . . it enervates in mind and body the active and responsible . . . members of the society." Sumner rejected as "totally false" the "socialistic—more properly anarchistic—view . . . that it is a crime against oneself to deny satisfaction to any natural appetite."

Yet, like many contemporaries, Sumner believed not only that excessive sexual activity was debilitating, but that so also was excessive sexual restraint. He repeatedly and scornfully attacked the Christian ascetic tradition. Of the Virgin Mary he wrote, "The husbandless wife and virgin mother became the patroness of virginity, wifehood, and motherhood, all at once. [Thus] piety and sensuality were interwoven. . . . The glorification of virginity is an absurdity. Is the race to cease to be?" He wrote similarly in *Folkways* that "The notion of merit and power in renunciation is heathen, not Christian, in origin. The most revolting application of it was when two married people renounced conjugal intimacy in order to be holy." And he pointed also to relationships between sexual and other extremes, especially in Christianity. It was "ascertained fact that

asceticism, cruelty to dissenters, fanaticism, and sex frenzy are . . . interlaced in the depths of human nature." Finally, he argued that while the Judeo-Christian tradition was hostile to sensuality as heathenish, "We distinguish between luxury and pleasure on the one side and sensuality on the other, and repress the last for rational, not ascetic, reasons." Sumner's most basic impulse regarding sexual passion, as with the passions generally, was to channel it through the faculties of the will and the reason.

To channel, but not to dam. Sumner rejected both Don Juanism and Christian asceticism. For either extreme ensured "pathological" sanctions:

> On the side of indulgence. . . . instead of satisfaction there is a fever of desire fed by new invention. On the side of restraint there are all the extravagancies of asceticism, which is also fed by ever new inventions, because the satisfaction palls upon the sight of conscious virtue. Between these two poles the function and the vice oscillate forever.

"The truth is," *Folkways* held,

> that license stimulates desire without limit, and ends in impotent agony. Renunciation produces agony of another kind. Somewhere between lies temperance . . . but . . . wherever the limit may be set . . . the antagonistic impulses appear again . . . producing pitfalls of vice and ruin, and ever renewing the strain and torment of the problem of right and duty.

The chasm of excess, then, lay on either side. Sex was "bounded at both extremes . . . by penalties. It must be, and yet must be curbed. The highest moral discipline, therefore, grows out of it." In sexual matters, as generally in his thought, Sumner advocated the Golden Mean. From seeking moderation in all things a man became a civilized, disciplined human being.

Disciplined, civilized sexual life was possible, of course, only within monogamy. Sumner once speculated that for physical health promiscuity might be best, since many men and women "suffer from not enough sex activity" because of "Malthusian restraints in marriage," but he concluded that individual suffering was balanced when restrained, monogamous sexual relations produced the best offspring. Thus was the goal of harmony reached. "The happiness of the adults and the welfare of posterity must be harmonized. . . . Those restrictions in marriage . . . for the vigor of the offspring are also for the welfare of the parent; whereas other things are vice. . . . The sanctions are pain, disease, weakness, and death." Sumner knew that human beings had rarely risen above the level of egoism and lust in their sexual relations, but he was assured that civilized sex was possible within the monogamous family:

> The mental reaction of man on his own earthly career has reached its greatest triumph in the subjection of the sex

> relation to unwritten laws of propriety, decency, and restraint, in which the selfish passion of the adults has been disciplined by a thousand injunctions and prohibitions while the social function of child-begetting has been raised to a selfish enjoyment, reacting not through the senses but through the most refined capacities of enjoyment of which civilization has rendered man capable.

When Sumner differentiated between monogamous men and women in discussing sexual matters he tended to follow tradition, but not entirely so. He discussed men, of course, almost entirely as heterosexuals, referring rarely to homosexuality and then only pejoratively concerning historical practices. Despite his attraction to civilized sex, Sumner's sexual man tended to be the dominant, aggressive male who "initiates and pursues," while his woman was "game pursued," who felt an almost instinctive physical dread of the male, and who, a student understood Sumner to say in lecture, was "dangerous" to her husband "at certain periods." Although he employed such stereotypes, Sumner consistently rejected the double sexual standard as outmoded in modern middle-class industrial society. As he wrote in *Folkways,*

> The "good husband," as correlative to the good wife, belongs to modern pair marriage. The erotic element has been refined and suppressed, or at least disavowed. The ideals which have been accepted and favored have disciplined and concentrated masculine waywardness, and they have made the sex sentiments more durable. All this has integrated the family more firmly.

Significantly, also, in writing that "thousands of men and women suffer from not enough sex activity" in marriage because of "Malthusian restraints" Sumner implicitly denied a widespread if not universally accepted assumption that women were essentially unfeeling sexually.

Sumner's comments on prostitution also indicate his ability at times to reject stereotypical attitudes. Although he believed that "In all periods of societal decay the behavior of women and the degree of their respect for the sex mores tell most upon the rate of decline," thus putting the burden for preserving or destroying civilization on women, and although he may have suspected that "extreme sensuality" was an "hereditary defect," he nevertheless rejected deterministic hereditarianism and proposed an environmentalist explanation for the prostitute. "Her career will be determined by what we must call accidents. . . . They belong under tradition and nurture. . . . It depends on the conjuncture into which we fall whether we turn out criminals, drunkards, prostitutes, and paupers, or philosophers, clergymen, missionaries, and moral teachers." Prostitution was "due to poverty and to a specious argument of protection to women in a good position." Though the evil was ancient, Sumner believed that modern moral influences were alleviating it and producing a new view of prostitutes as human beings with the right to seek self-realization, not merely as objects for others to use:

> Never until the nineteenth century was it in the mores of any society to feel that the sacrifice of the mortal welfare of one human being to the happiness of another was a thing which civil institutions could not tolerate. It could not enter into the minds of men of the fifteenth century that harlots, serfs, and other miserable classes had personal rights which were outraged by the customs and institutions of that time.

As a social and sexual elitist Sumner consistently rejected absolute egalitarianism—whether in the market or the home. But as a libertarian he as consistently advocated that each individual, whether prince or prostitute, must have the right to seek his or her highest potential, even though potentials varied. His libertarianism at times allowed Sumner to see beyond his established views on sexuality. Yet, as he always insisted, each man was a child of his age, and, although he tended to except himself, Sumner was certainly a child of an upwardly mobile nineteenth century American middle class.

As both a private and public man, Sumner exhibited a range of personality traits that reduce to disciplined self-control and masculinity. In sexual terms those traits emphasized control, through the faculties of will and reason, of the overwhelming passion associated with sex. That emphasis has been recognized in the ethic of a rising middle-capitalist class, which, out of a sense of moral duty and the recognition that such a course led to success and respectability, idealized delayed gratification in both economic and sexual matters and attempted to follow a rationalized life pattern within the framework established by private property capitalism and the private, monogamous, urban family.

For his class, as for Sumner, disciplined control would neither allow the sex passion utterly free rein nor check it entirely. In a society that lacked a highly effective birth control technology Sumner's stress on the delicate balance men and women must maintain between sexual extremes, in order to avoid disease and disaster, reflected the strong sexual anxiety that many of his age and class apparently felt. So also, it appears, did his role as Yale's prime example of Anglo-Saxon academic *machismo*. For many years Sumner impressed students with his intellectual vigor. And in his lectures on sociology he taught them his views on sexuality. But it may be that equally influential was their perception of the "virility" of his personality. Sumner, one of Yale's more popular and impressive teachers, must have been a comforting model, proof that one could be both an academician or educated man of affairs and a dominant, superior male.

Sumner's libertarianism, his understanding of evolutionary theory as supporting individualism and self-realization and the academic and scientific ideals of honesty and objectivity that he attempted to follow in his sociological studies did, however, force him to modify his emphasis on dominant male and subordinate female roles in significant if incomplete ways: by admitting that women should have somewhat broadened op-

portunities for self-realization; by supporting pragmatic and humane divorce policies, which would benefit women as well as men; by virtually rejecting the double sexual standard, because he idealized middle-class marriage and family life; by speaking out strongly against the degradation of prostitutes; and by recognizing women as sexual beings, although perhaps not quite as sexual as men.

Finally, what of the issue between consensus and complexity? When scholars have learned more about sexuality in the Victorian age, it may well be found that Sumner, a "conservative," more nearly fits common patterns of that day than "liberals" or "reformers." But the latter, of course, was also "Victorian." And Sumner, despite his conservative anxiety to reconcile stability and change, and his opposition to fundamental, structural changes in America's political and economic institutions, was nevertheless sometimes able to adjust his thinking about sexuality in ways that even a liberal could approve. Perhaps further study of individual responses to forces for change in Victorian sexuality will reveal that, even if sometimes reluctant and inconsistent, complex adjustment was truly the Victorian mode.

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footnotes

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1. "The Horrors of the Half-Known Life," *New York Times Book Review*, January 18, 1976, 4, 15.

2. See, for example, Carl N. Degler, "What Ought To Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review*, LXXIX (December, 1974), 1467-90; Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies*, III (Fall, 1975), 5-14; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman and the New History," *Feminist Studies*, III (Fall, 1975), 185-98; Sarah J. Stage, "Out of the Attic: Studies of Victorian Sexuality," review essay on Carl N. Degler, "What Ought To Be and What Was," John S. and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, and Ronald G. Walter, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*," *American Quarterly*, XXVII (October, 1975), 480-85. In this study "sexuality" refers to such matters as the family, marriage, divorce, and the status, roles, and nature of men and women, as well as sexual relations. Thus the focus is somewhat broader than that of most of the discussions cited, which tend to concentrate on sexual attitudes and behavior, especially in relation to women. This study has profited from the writings of scholars cited above and from those of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, Janice Law Trecker, Page Smith, Elaine Showalter and English Showalter, Ann Douglas Wood, Lois Banner, William E. Bridges, Sidney Ditzion, Joseph F. Kett, Barbara Welter, Ben Barker-Benfield, Christopher Lasch, William L. O'Neill, Annette Kolodny, Jill Conway, Michael Gordon and M. Charles Bernstein, Rosalind Rosenberg, Kenneth M. Roemer, Peter T. Cominos, John S. Haller and Robin M. Haller, Steven Marcus, John C. Burnham, Norman E. Himes, Keith Thomas, Robert E. Riegel and Brian Harrison. For complete documentation of secondary and primary materials that space limitations do not allow here, readers may write to the author.

3. For discussion of Sumner's views on science, politics, society, and related matters, see my "William Graham Sumner 'On the Concentration of Wealth,'" *Journal of American History*, LVI (March, 1969), 823-32, and my forthcoming study of *William Graham Sumner*.

4. Note from [Clarence Day] to Albert Galloway Keller, n.d. MSS are in Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, unless otherwise indicated. Where necessary for clarity I have altered punctuation and spelling in manuscript material. Except where otherwise noted, biographical information is taken from the following: Harris E. Starr, *William Graham Sumner* (New York, 1925); Register of Walton Le Dale, 1821, County Records Office, Preston, England; "Sketch of

William Graham Sumner," *The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays*, Albert Galloway Keller, ed. (New Haven, 1914), 3-13; William Graham Sumner, "Autobiographical Sketch of William Graham Sumner," *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays*, Albert Galloway Keller, ed. (New Haven, 1913), 3-5; Albert Galloway Keller, *Reminiscences of William Graham Sumner* (New Haven, 1933); Letters from Sumner to Jeannie Elliott, 1870.