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Jean M. Yarbrough
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Introduction

There he is, with George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, atop Mount Rushmore, their colossal faces chiseled into the South Dakota granite, looking out on America. For Theodore Roosevelt, the only one of the four presidents to have lived in the Dakota Territory and whose histories sang the glories of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, the site seems especially fitting. The monument, the cornerstone of which was dedicated in 1927 by President Calvin Coolidge, was the work of Gutzon Borglum, an Idaho-born artist working in the tradition of heroic nationalism. Borglum, the son of Danish immigrants, had already sculpted a giant marble bust of Lincoln that Roosevelt displayed while in the White House and won the competition to create a statue of General Philip Sheridan for the nation’s capital. For Mount Rushmore, the artist chose to memorialize those presidents who had founded, unified, and preserved the American republic, while extending its territorial reach. Borglum, who knew and admired Roosevelt, selected TR because he thought that the Panama Canal fulfilled the dream of Manifest Destiny and made the United States into a world power. Along with the four sculptures, the artist envisioned a Hall of Records, containing the most important documents of the republic so that thousands of years hence posterity would understand what “manner of men” the Americans were and why they had carved these gigantic faces on Mount Rushmore.

Borglum’s decision to include Roosevelt provoked criticism and controversy, with many complaining that not enough time had elapsed to allow the country to place Roosevelt’s presidency in historical perspective. But today, it seems fair to say that, of the four, Roosevelt has become, as he once observed of Lincoln, “the most real of the dead presidents.” During the decade or more that I have been at work on this book, I have been amazed at how familiar Americans are with TR, though mostly what they know are the highlights of his action-packed, adventure-filled life—Rough Rider, trust-buster, big-game hunter, explorer, Bull Moose—episodes gleaned from an endless stream of crisp, fast-paced biographies. With so colorful a subject, it is not surprising that his biographers have tended to
shy away from his political thought. When, on those rare occasions they
do wade into his ideas, they either mangle them or retail the standard pro-
gressive narrative. Without actually discussing the theories underlying his
policies, they assure readers that his actions were necessary to rein in the
“robber barons.” They fail to take the full measure of the New National-
ism and *a fortiori* the Bull Moose campaign. Withal, they accept at face
value Roosevelt’s insistence that he remained at heart a “conservative,” who
sought to avert all-out class warfare by adapting American institutions to
a changed political environment. But, for biographers, ideas clearly take a
backseat to Roosevelt, the man of action. For different reasons, academic
historians also have not regarded Roosevelt’s thought as worthy of serious
consideration. Richard Hofstadter set the tone in 1948 with *The American
Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*. In his chapter, “The Conser-
vative as Progressive,” Hofstadter conceded an “occasional insight,” but
dismissed Roosevelt’s collected writings as “a bundle of philistine conven-
tionalities, the intellectual fiber of a muscular and combative Polonius.” For
Hofstadter, a man of the left, Roosevelt’s belated embrace of progres-
sive ideals smacked too much of opportunism and compromise to be taken
seriously. TR had no positive impulses; he did not “bleed” for exploited
workers, but merely sought to avoid mob violence. There could be no more
damning assessment than to brand Roosevelt’s politics “conservative,” his
thought superficial. The charges stuck.

The publication of Roosevelt’s *Letters* helped to restore TR’s reputation
as a forceful president after it had fallen into disrepute following the do-
mestic and wartime successes of TR’s distant cousin, Franklin. Nevertheless, in his introduction to Volume 5 of the series, the principal editor, Elt-
ing E. Morison, wondered whether the Rough Rider would be “cast into
oblivion” as his age faded from historical memory. Roosevelt’s presidency,
Morison concluded, “did not contribute any of the massive formulations,
either of intellect or spirit, that appear in the national heritage.” In part, this
was because TR was by temperament a “conservative,” and conservatives
lacked “a body of principled theory” that might serve as a guide to political
action. In contrast to liberals, Roosevelt offered no “very cheerful or reas-
suring notions about the meaning of life itself.”

Despite these shortcomings, the associate editor of his *Letters*, John Mor-
ton Blum, made his own reputation by attempting to rehabilitate TR’s in
*The Republican Roosevelt*. But he did so by shifting the focus toward his use
of power to maintain stability and order. Assessing his political career, Blum
concluded that Roosevelt developed no new ideas after the age of forty, that
is, before he became president. Along with Morison (and Hofstadter, up to
a point), Blum argued that Roosevelt was essentially a “conservative,” who concerned himself very little with “happiness.” Indeed, by the end of his study he complained that Roosevelt had, among other sins, allowed his “visible conservatism” to degenerate “to a creed akin to fascism” (ignoring that fascism started out on the left as national socialism). Yet there he was in the preface to the second edition in 1962, conceding that his original characterization of Roosevelt as a “conservative” was “arbitrary,” and agreeing with Eric F. Goldman and George E. Mowry that Roosevelt was a “progressive,” in fact, “the most compelling” progressive of his day. This was not a recipe for intellectual clarity.

By contrast, Mowry’s two books were models of clear thinking: Roosevelt was a progressive, and progressivism was good. Mowry did not so much argue this point as assert it. Nor did he have to make an argument, for as David M. Kennedy has perceptively noted, “most American academic historians have thought of themselves as the political heirs of the Progressive tradition.” Now, of course, historians can (and do) work themselves up into a lather debating whether progressivism ever existed, or if so, what it meant and who belongs to it, but Kennedy’s broad point is that “academic historical writing” has “been largely monopolized by liberals,” or those on the left. That said, I have learned much from Kathleen Dalton, Martin J. Sklar, and John Milton Cooper, Jr., although I should quickly add that I have used their research to advance an argument they would not endorse. Dalton argued convincingly that Roosevelt continued to press for radical economic reforms after World War I broke out and he returned to the Republican fold. Sklar’s detailed examination of the regulatory policies Roosevelt supported, beginning in 1907 and continuing after he stepped down from the presidency, laid bare just how “statist” Roosevelt’s proposed policies actually were. Cooper’s insightful comparisons of the “warrior” and the “priest” offer a useful starting point for understanding the differences between Woodrow Wilson and TR.

Nevertheless, it is time to revisit the historiography of the progressive era and to hold it up to critical scrutiny. As a guild, academic historians have prided themselves on their openness to revisionist interpretations, yet the one subject that they have not been willing to reconsider is the progressive narrative itself. Most of the studies of this period, and of Roosevelt, start from the assumption that the political arrangements put in place at the time of the founding were inadequate to solve the problems of industrialization, urbanization, and mass immigration. Common law understandings and entrenched legal precedents, federalism, the separation of powers—to say nothing of the relatively unfettered operation of the markets—prevented
the United States from dealing effectively with the social and industrial problems it faced at the end of the nineteenth century. What America needed, as Herbert Croly argued in 1909, was not reform, but wholesale reconstruction. With few exceptions, this view has not been seriously challenged.\textsuperscript{10}

The discipline of political science is somewhat less monolithic, with American Political Development and political theory providing competing frameworks of analysis, and divisions among theorists offering additional food for thought. Here, too, I have profited from the work of colleagues in American Political Development, though the very nature of the subfield is that it studies, well, “development.” As with academic historians, scholars of APD generally assume that the founders’ constitutional arrangements embody no special wisdom, though they do help to explain the particular ways in which American institutions have evolved to meet new challenges. In this vein, Stephen Skowronek and Sidney M. Milkis, two of the leading scholars in this field, have further added to our understanding of American politics by highlighting the shift of power away from Congress and the courts to the executive and administrative agencies. Their studies focus, respectively, on “transformational” presidencies, or as in the case of 1912, a transformational election, where questions of direct democracy, the living constitution, the rhetorical presidency, the shape of the administrative state, and the nature of political parties were all up for debate. Milkis especially deserves praise for incorporating questions of political theory into his analysis, but they are not his central focus.\textsuperscript{11}

In my own subfield of political theory, I have profited from Eldon Eisenach’s study of the core beliefs of leading academic progressives, as well as from James T. Kloppenberg’s exploration of its trans-Atlantic dimension.\textsuperscript{12} Bridging APD and political theory, James W. Ceaser has traced the use of nature and history as competing foundational ideas in American Political Development and offered insightful reflections on the role of “public philosophy” in shaping institutional change.\textsuperscript{13} There has also been renewed interest in Woodrow Wilson by political theorists.\textsuperscript{14} But surprisingly, for one whose hold on the popular imagination is as great as his is, there have been almost no studies of the political thought of Theodore Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{15}

Outside of the academy, Roosevelt does not lack for critics on the right. In recent years, his ideas have come in for scathing critiques from libertarians, of which Jim Powell’s \textit{Bully Boy} provides an extended polemic.\textsuperscript{16} As such, it offers a provocative counterpoint to much of the existing academic literature, but Powell’s approach is not mine. Although I am a critic of progressivism and its relentless push toward greater equality in the name of social justice, I am not a libertarian. I believe that \textit{The Federalist}...
makes a persuasive case for “limited but energetic” national government, and especially a vigorous executive. There is a useful, indeed even necessary, place for regulation, at both the state and federal levels. But—with the exception of traditional state police powers operating at the margins—those regulations should serve the purpose of making free markets function more smoothly, not strangling them, or worse, attempting vainly to redeem human nature. The first object of republican government should be, as Jefferson announced in the Declaration, the protection of individual rights. At the same time, there are other goods—among them, greatness and excellence—with which the more thoughtful friends of democracy have concerned themselves, and these do not always fit together smoothly with the core commitment to equal rights. To his credit, Roosevelt sought to promote national greatness, though his conception of greatness tended to lay too much stress on conquest and “expansion.” As for domestic affairs, one need not be a libertarian to see that Roosevelt begins to go seriously astray from the economic principles of Alexander Hamilton and Abraham Lincoln during his presidency, and certainly afterwards. That is my point. My book is informed by the idea that the founders Roosevelt most admired provided political principles, suitably adapted, that were still useful in his day, as they remain in ours, had he seriously considered them. But for all his energy and intelligence—and Roosevelt possessed both in abundance—he seems not to have weighed this possibility. Perhaps that is because he never encountered a thoughtful treatment of American political principles in college or law school, and the ideas to which he was introduced (Teutonic “germ theory,” Darwinism, historicism, German idealism) could not easily be reconciled with the ideals of his heroes. So, even before he became a progressive, his views, while reflecting the main intellectual currents of the day, diverged in key respects from the views of the nationalistic founders he admired and Lincoln. In this most “Lincoln-like” sense, Theodore Roosevelt was never a “conservative.” Nevertheless, Roosevelt talked a good game. Consequently, he has for too long been given a “pass” by political theorists and students of American Political Development who have been inclined to take his admiring references to the more nationalistic founders and Lincoln at face value. Here, the contrast with Woodrow Wilson is especially striking. Unlike the Princeton professor, Roosevelt offered no scholarly critiques of the Declaration or the Constitution. At the very moment when Wilson was urging Americans to move toward a British-style parliamentary democracy, Roosevelt dismissed such calls as an “un-American” colonial throwback and instead exhorted college graduates to “Read The Federalist.” His biography of Gouverneur
Morris pronounced the Constitution that emerged in Philadelphia the best possible arrangement for America. As president, he turned to the writings of Lincoln for guidance and inspiration. Yet, these principles meshed uneasily with the competing intellectual arguments swimming around in his head. How did these conflicting stands play out at various stages of his long political career? What does his thought add up to, where does it fit in the American political tradition, and what is his legacy today? I am not offering an intellectual biography, but rather an analysis of Roosevelt’s political thought and what it means for republican self-government.

Chapter 1 examines the influence of Roosevelt’s education on his political thought. Although in his Autobiography TR famously insisted that “very little” of what he learned in college would be of use to him in later life, in fact, some of the ideas he was introduced to helped shape his political thought for years to come. Consulting the Harvard College catalogues from 1876 to 1880, I have gone back to school with Roosevelt, reading his course assignments and examining the views of his professors to gain further insight into his early political ideas. At Harvard, Theodore took only the one required sophomore course in history, where he was introduced to the Teutonic “germ theory” that would find its way into the histories that he himself would write only a few years later. He took two courses in political economy from a classical liberal perspective, but soon discovered that the Republican Party of the 1880s and 1890s had other ideas. He read classical Greek and German texts and studied evolutionary biology, all of which, at different times, would also shape his political thought. Most scholars pass over his brief stint at the Columbia Law School, but the courses Roosevelt took with John W. Burgess helped shape his intellectual horizon. Although Burgess and Roosevelt would diverge politically, Burgess’s ideas would find their way, first, into Roosevelt’s histories, and then later, during the heyday of his progressivism, in his references to a more “ethical state.”

Chapter 2 looks at Roosevelt’s political thought as it emerges in his historical writings, beginning with The Naval War of 1812, then moving on to his biographies of Thomas Hart Benton and Gouverneur Morris, and culminating in his epic Winning of the West. Although his biography of Morris was effusive in its praise of the Constitution, Roosevelt was far more interested in the growth and expansion of America than in its “founding.” The chapter compares the narrative that emerges in Thomas Hart Benton and The Winning of the West with the political thought of the founders he admired. Whereas Hamilton in The Federalist had emphasized the capacity of individuals to establish good government based on “reflection and choice,” Roosevelt chose to stress the three-hundred-year unplanned movement of
the English-speaking peoples as they spread out across America, unconsciously replicating their medieval Teutonic “folk moots.” In place of compact and consent in the service of individual rights, his was a narrative that focused on conquest and expansion for the sake of national greatness. In Roosevelt’s account, history, rather than nature, supplies the moral ground against which political action must be judged.

Chapter 3 considers Roosevelt’s early political career as a Republican reformer, beginning with his election to the New York Assembly in 1882 and ending with his election to the governorship of the state in 1898. I focus on Roosevelt’s political thought as he dealt with the practical problems of immigration, machine politics, civil service reform, and foreign policy. I also consider his role as a public intellectual reviewing important books of the day. Although during these years Roosevelt was outspoken in defense of the Framers’ Constitution, his political thought diverged from theirs in important respects. In contrast to the view of human nature that emerges in *The Federalist*, Roosevelt already showed signs of believing that individuals could act from disinterested motives, even as he conceived of the “law of nature” in harsh Darwinian terms. Roosevelt was also more hostile to the commercial republic and to the notion of commercial greatness than was Hamilton. After the official closing of the frontier in 1890, Roosevelt would seek national greatness in building up the navy, a vigorous defense of the Monroe Doctrine, support for war with Spain, and “expansion” abroad.

Chapter 4 examines Roosevelt’s brief stint as governor of New York, where for the first time he had the opportunity to wield executive power. Very quickly, he began to develop a theory of justice that would inform his exercise of power. Following the advice of Aristotle, whose works he had read and now quoted, Roosevelt would seek to avoid the extremes of mob rule and plutocracy, striking a “just balance” between competing political and economic demands. His biography of *Oliver Cromwell*—in many ways the most interesting of his historical studies—provided him with the opportunity to reflect further on the role of executive power in revolutionary times and the need, especially in republics, to cabin this power within a larger constitutional framework. Roosevelt’s assessment of Cromwell’s failings provides important insights into the problems with his own view of executive power as it unfolded during his presidency and afterward.

Chapter 5 considers Roosevelt’s gradual embrace of progressive thought during his presidential years. It focuses on his handling of the anthracite coal strike, his attempts to assert control over the corporations through antitrust and regulatory policy, his support for railroad regulation, conservation, and foreign policy. For most of his presidency, Roosevelt continued to
seek a “balance” between competing social classes and economic interests, though his understanding of where the balance should be struck changed dramatically during his last two years. In addition, he now had to consider the place of executive power within the republican constitutional order. In the coal strike, Roosevelt experimented with the idea that the emergency justified his use of extraordinary powers, invoking old common law doctrines as well as Lincoln’s actions during the Civil War as precedents. Later, emboldened by his landslide reelection and pushed leftward by insurgents within his own party, Roosevelt floated the idea that the nation possessed “inherent power” to fill in whatever gaps existed between federal and state power. When that argument failed to develop traction, he would offer his “stewardship” theory of presidential power. The chapter concludes with a comparison of Hamilton’s arguments in *The Federalist* and in the “Pacificus” papers in defense of energetic executive power and Roosevelt’s still more expansive views as he embraced the progressive agenda.

Chapter 6 explores Roosevelt’s bid to lead the progressive cause in his postpresidential years. Roosevelt returned from his European tour convinced that America must now catch up with “the world movement.” After he read Herbert Croly’s *Promise of American Life*, his policy prescriptions took on a sharper theoretical edge. The New Nationalism reflects this shift, effectively discarding the idea of balance in favor of the notion that government must discriminate in favor of its friends. Moreover, Roosevelt here fleshes out what he means when he says that property rights can only be justified by “service to the nation.” As the former president considers a primary challenge to Taft, he embraces the idea of direct democracy and supports the initiative, referendum, and recall, arguing that these mechanisms do not undermine constitutional government but are in fact necessary to restore it. As a corollary, he insists that these reforms make it all the more imperative for Americans to cultivate the right kind of virtues. Finally, in bolting the Republican Party and running on the Progressive Party ticket, Roosevelt comes out in favor of social security in the form of old age, unemployment, and health insurance. In defending these policies, Roosevelt asserts that he is acting in the “spirit” of Lincoln, a claim I challenge. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Roosevelt’s political thought in his final years, arguing that he viewed the American entry into World War I as a catalyst for even more far-reaching progressive reforms that would move the United States toward the social democratic model he thought was the wave of the future.

The Epilogue takes its inspiration from Roosevelt’s 1913 essay, “The Heirs of Abraham Lincoln,” tracing Roosevelt’s various “heirs” over the last hun-
dred years and assessing the intended and unintended consequences of the reforms he supported. Far from being “consigned to oblivion,” as Elting E. Morison speculated in the 1950s, Roosevelt’s political thought continues to resonate across the political spectrum as his “heirs” battle each other for a part of his legacy. The centennial of Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party run for the presidency provides a fitting opportunity to assess his political thought and to compare it with the American political tradition represented by his heroes on Mount Rushmore.
In the fall of 1876 a not quite eighteen-year-old Theodore Roosevelt ar-
ried in Cambridge to begin his formal education at Harvard College. As
it happened, his matriculation coincided, in a way that now seems telling,
with an event of considerable significance in the history of the republic.
From May through November of 1876 the attention of much of the United
States was riveted on the great Centennial Exhibition then being mounted
in Philadelphia. The first of the nation’s world’s fairs, this grand spectacle
was organized to commemorate the 100th anniversary of American inde-
pendence and succeeded in attracting more than 10 million visitors from
across the United States and around the world.

But the Philadelphia exposition was more than a centennial celebration.
The International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the
Soil and Mine, as it was officially called, gave vivid expression to the sci-
entific and technological aspirations of a newly reunified and energized
America—a nation eager to leave behind the divisions of the Civil War and
itching to take its place among the great powers of the world, a message
the exposition quietly reinforced by placing the United States at the center
of the show and arranging the foreign exhibitions by their distance from
it, with China and Japan furthest away. Overall, the Centennial offered
powerful testimony to Americans’ faith in progress and their growing con-
idence in the material bounty awaiting them in the near future. Visitors to
the sprawling fairgrounds in Fairmount Park could forget for a while about
the scandal-ridden Grant administration and the divisive politics of Recon-
struction, and instead wander from exhibit to exhibit, imagining a future
with such modern conveniences as Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone,
Remington’s typewriter, and the Singer sewing machine while sampling
such novelties as Heinz Ketchup and Hire’s Root Beer.

Yet amidst all this forward-looking bustle and energy, the Exposition
seemed to lose sight of what Abraham Lincoln regarded as the signal
achievement of American independence: the timeless truths enshrined in
the Declaration. Of course, on the Fourth of July, that document would take center stage, as it was read aloud by Richard Henry Lee, namesake of the Virginia signer, with the vice president of the United States presiding over the festivities. But this event, intended to pay homage to the nation’s founding principles, was not without its ironies. For a delegation of women suffragists, inspired and emboldened by Declaration’s commitment to equality and natural rights, had requested permission from the Centennial Commission to read their protest bill of rights at the close of the reading and had been politely, but firmly, refused. After Richard Henry Lee had concluded, the women, led by Susan B. Anthony, marched to the stage and presented officials with their declaration. They then withdrew to a platform that had been erected in front of old Independence Hall and read their protest aloud.²

In an even worse affront, the distinguished black orator Frederick Douglass, who had been invited to join the dignitaries at the opening-day ceremonies, was refused permission to the platform. Only after the personal intervention of New York Senator Roscoe Conkling was he finally allowed to mount the stage. And although arguably the most magnificent orator of the period, he was not invited to address the crowd.³ As in 1776, and again in the 1850s (and as it would during the civil rights marches in the 1960s), the Declaration spoke most powerfully to those who believed they were denied its full blessings.

Nor were the protesting suffragists and the treatment of Douglass the only discordant notes. The organizers of the Exposition, like an increasing number of educated Americans, seemed less interested in the Declaration’s understanding of limited government than they were captivated by the powerful model of the newly unified German state and the cutting-edge ideas emanating from the German university system. One small, but revealing, indication of the American fascination with Germany was that the organizers commissioned the German operatic composer Richard Wagner to write the “Grand Inaugural March” for the opening ceremony on May 10, attended by the President and Mrs. Grant.

But the German influence went much further and suggested an idea of progress at odds with the political principles the Exposition was at least nominally celebrating.⁴ Working closely with ethnologists from the Smithsonian, the organizers arranged the exhibits in the Main Hall according to race, with the United States as the hub, and Britain, France, and Germany given the most prominent locations. Thus, Britain and her colonies were grouped together as Anglo-Saxons, France and her colonies, Latins, and the German Empire, along with Austria-Hungary, the Teutonic races.
Within the American exhibit, the Indian displays were organized according to the German idea of *Kulturgeschichte* (history of culture), developed by Gustav Klemm, which in turn was part of his larger classification of mankind into “active” and “passive” races based on temperament and mentality. According to this framework, the Indians belonged to the dawn of human history, with, in the words of one critic, “their worth as human beings” being “determined by their usefulness as counterpoint to the unfolding progress of the ages.” Needless to say, the use of these crude racial categories could not be reconciled with the Declaration’s insistence that every human being was created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights.

The Centennial Exposition, therefore, reflected a growing conflict at the heart of America’s self-understanding as the nation moved into its second century: should the United States continue to revere—and act upon—the principles of the Declaration or should Americans throw their lot in with the emerging progressive worldview? And if so, which understanding of progress should they choose? As such, the Philadelphia exposition captured the same dilemma that would soon face the young Theodore Roosevelt, as he navigated the intellectual currents swirling about him when he arrived in Cambridge that fall.

Roosevelt was an instinctive patriot, whose upbringing and childhood reading had instilled a deep pride in the principles and practices of his country. He yielded to no one in his esteem for the valiant deeds of the men of 1776. Yet at Harvard, he would be introduced to new ideas from Europe that would challenge his received views of American history, American government, and the proper aims of politics. Over the next few decades, these arguments would pull both the country and Roosevelt toward opposite extremes: first, toward an intense, competitive individualism that marched under the banner of Social Darwinism, and then toward a more cooperative, collective vision that in time would become the ideological basis of progressivism.

Roosevelt’s intellectual development, rife with inconsistencies, tensions, and reversals, is best understood against this backdrop. Accordingly, his formal education takes on particular importance, in fact, a good deal more importance than he was willing to admit. Looking back on his college years later in his *Autobiography* after his failed Progressive run for the presidency in 1912, Roosevelt would claim that “very little” of what he had learned at Harvard had prepared him for the great role he would play in American politics. But that was clearly not true, for at various points in his public life Theodore flirted with many of the ideas he had absorbed in college,
incorporating them into his historical studies and applying them to practical political problems during the 1880s and 1890s. Moreover, although he said nothing in the Autobiography about his courses at the Columbia Law School, dwelling instead on what he considered the defects of the legal profession, in fact, his classes with John W. Burgess would introduce him to Hegelian state theory, important elements of which would find their way into Roosevelt’s later progressivism.

In short, Roosevelt would exhibit in his own life the same contradiction that lay at the heart of the Centennial Exposition. He never ceased to insist that George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were his heroes, and that The Federalist was the best book on political theory and practice ever written. He did so even though the new ideas he would come to embrace posed a fundamental challenge to the principles for which his heroes stood.

EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY AND SOCIAL DARWINISM

For a budding natural scientist such as Roosevelt, the first and most immediately influential of these was evolutionary biology. In 1859 Charles Darwin had published The Origin of the Species, which set in motion a scientific revolution that would throw into question the founders’ understanding of human nature and natural rights. Darwin did not, as is popularly supposed, discover evolution. What he did was offer a more compelling account of how evolution worked, displacing the earlier Lamarckian explanation that organisms evolved through adaptation that they then passed on to their offspring. Instead, Darwin argued that evolution occurred through a process of natural selection, that is, a brutal competition in which only the fittest survived. The Origin quietly unseated God as the Author of creation, substituting chance and relentless random mutations that favored one species over another in the unceasing struggle for food and place.

Although Darwin deliberately declined to discuss the evolution of man in the Origin of the Species, there could be little doubt where his argument was pointing. However, Theodore, who first read the book at the age of fourteen, may well have missed its larger implications. But if human beings had also evolved randomly, through struggle, it made no sense to speak of “the laws of nature and nature’s God” in any moral sense. In like manner, there was no room in Darwin’s theory for a “Creator” who endowed all men with certain inalienable rights, since evolution depended on chance. Indeed, it was no longer possible to speak intelligibly of natural rights because Darwin’s evolutionary breakthrough implied that there was
no such thing as a fixed human nature. It is, however, one of history’s little ironies that Darwin was born on February 12, 1809, the same day as Abraham Lincoln, America’s most brilliant defender of those very truths and one of Roosevelt’s greatest American heroes. In still another remarkable coincidence, the same year that *The Origin of the Species* appeared Lincoln was hailing the author of the Declaration for going beyond the original purpose of the document and including the “abstract truth” that all men were created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights.¹¹

As Darwin himself emphasized, the “struggle for existence” was only meant to explain how species had evolved; by his own admission, it had never occurred to him to apply the principle of natural selection to the dynamics of social life. Nevertheless, it did not take sociologists long to make the connection. Indeed, even before Darwin had published *The Origin of the Species*, the English thinker Herbert Spencer had already sketched out the social logic of “the survival of the fittest,” a term he first employed in 1851 in his *Social Statics*.¹² That work, which would find its way into American constitutional law during Roosevelt’s presidency when Oliver Wendell Holmes protested that the Fourteenth Amendment did not enact Mr. Spencer’s *Social Statics*, was the first to link limited government with evolutionary progress.

Unlike Darwin, Spencer regarded evolution as the working out of a grand cosmological design that would eventuate in “the ideal man” living in the “ideal civilization.” For the sake of that progress, government must refrain from interfering with the liberty of the individual. Taxation, he argued, should be only for the purpose of protecting the individual; it should not be used to fund education, the established church, or empire building. For the same reason, he opposed government efforts to regulate commerce. Each individual must be free to enter into whatever contract arrangement he wished. It was not the duty of the state to regulate hours, wages, or workplace conditions; nor should it legislate tariffs, regulate currency, establish national banks, administer a postal system, or undertake public works. Public charity was out of the question, though he did support private charity, principally for its salutary effect on the giver. Spencer also conceded that the state might punish those who unnecessarily polluted the environment, making it “detrimental to health or disagreeable to the senses,” but this was because such actions impinged on the rights of others.¹³

At the same time, he resisted all efforts to make the government responsible in any way for maintaining the physical or moral health of its citizenry. To attempt to regulate the sale of drugs or to license those who practiced medicine would interfere with the right of the individual to buy
what he deemed necessary and to seek advice from whom he pleased; it
would also restrict the right of the unlicensed practitioner to sell to whom-
ever wanted to purchase his goods or services. Moreover, once the principle
that the state was responsible for securing the health of the citizenry was
admitted, it would be impossible to set any limitations to its power. Gov-
ernment, he warned, would then become responsible for ensuring that all
the conditions essential to good health were fulfilled, including prescribing
the proper diet, amount of exercise, hours of sleep, and so on—in short, “a
universal supervision” of what was and should be private conduct.14

To the objection that the people, and especially the poorer classes, were
too ignorant or incompetent to make informed decisions and would there-
fore suffer if government did not intervene to protect them, Spencer ap-
pealed to the severe, but in his view, ultimately benign, discipline of na-
ture:

Nature just as much insists on fitness between mental character and
circumstances, as between physical character and circumstances; and
radical defects are as much causes of death in one case as in the other.
He on whom his own stupidity, or vice, or idleness entails loss of life,
must, in the generalizations of philosophy, be classed with the victims
of weak viscera or malformed limbs. In his case, as in the others, there
exists a fatal non-adaptation; and it matters not in the abstract whether
it be a moral, an intellectual, or a corporeal one. Beings thus imperfect
are Nature’s failures, and are recalled by her when found to be such.
Along with the rest they are put on trial. If they are sufficiently complete
to live, they do live, and it is well they should live. If they are not
sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die.15

Spencer conceded that it might be harsh that the artisan lacking in skills
should go hungry, that the laborer incapacitated by illness should suffer, or
that widows and orphans should be left to struggle to survive, but this was
to look at the problem from the perspective of particular individuals. When
considered from the perspective of “universal humanity,” these “harsh fatali-
ties” were actually beneficent, since they weeded out the “unhealthy, imbecile,
slow, vacillating, faithless members” of society and encouraged the multipli-
cation of the competent and provident. This process was both natural and
necessary; consequently, its “sufferings must be endured.” There was nothing
that statesmen, reformers, revolutionaries, or philanthropists could do to re-
peal the workings of nature. Nor should they try, since doing so would only
retard the “purifying process” on which progress depended.16
Yet intertwined with this fatalism was a curious optimism, for Spencer was confident that nature was gradually bringing about a new human being. As human beings entered the industrial age, the peaceful and cooperative virtues were gaining over the older martial and competitive ideals. Benevolence was on the rise so that as people adapted to this new altruistic environment, the interests of the individual and the interests of society would eventually converge. In the meantime, nature would continue to inflict its “salutary sufferings” upon the sick, the incompetent, the feeble, and the lazy, weeding out these weaker specimens to prepare for the “ultimate perfection.”

The brand of Social “Darwinism” that emerged in Spencer’s *Social Statics* was a strange amalgam of misery and pain in the service of its own vision of progress and perfection.

In America, Social Darwinism was most closely associated with the sociologist William Graham Sumner. Roosevelt would meet the Yale professor in the winter of 1879 when Sumner journeyed to Cambridge to deliver a talk on the subject of “The Relation of Legislation to Money” before the newly formed Finance Club, of which Theodore was an officer. An avid free trader and supporter of sound currency, Sumner ranged widely over the nature and history of money, setting forth the “abuses of legislation in regard to money.” Afterward, the Harvard Advocate praised the club for its enterprise in turning out “a larger body of students . . . than we have seen on such an occasion in Sanders for years.”

Although Sumner is often described by both his supporters and critics as a “classical liberal” in the tradition of John Locke and the founders, this characterization is misleading because it focuses exclusively on Sumner’s defense of limited government and individual liberty, while ignoring the Darwinian ground of his argument. In contrast to the founders, the only “laws of nature” Sumner acknowledged were those of competition and survival of the fittest. In the American context, Sumner was particularly keen to dispel the notion that human beings were endowed with natural rights. In keeping with his historicist approach, he was willing to grant that the appeal to natural rights had once played a valuable role in overthrowing feudal constraints and establishing the principle that all individuals were free and equal. But whatever constructive purpose the doctrine had once served was now long past. Those who argued for natural rights in the present day had expanded their meaning beyond all recognition, so that they became rights to whatever anyone wanted or needed. Acting on this “vicious social dogma,” they had turned the right to pursue happiness into a right to happiness itself and construed the necessity to labor to mean a “right” to set the terms of employment and the scale of wages in defiance of the natural
operations of the market. Moreover, the same logic was at work in the ever more expansive demands for equality. Since nature could not deliver on these claims, society would be forced to do so; natural rights would lead inevitably to socialism.

Yet Sumner’s objection was not simply that natural rights had strayed too far from their eighteenth-century moorings. His Darwinian view of nature was fundamentally at odds with the founders’ moral understanding of the “laws of nature and Nature’s God.” Consequently, Sumner argued, instead of securing natural rights, republican government should aim to protect civil liberty, which, unlike natural rights, was grounded in the evolving mores of a particular people as ratified by history and tradition. For Americans, civil liberty meant the freedom of each individual to use his energies to subdue nature and enjoy the fruits of his labor without being compelled to share them with others. Where civil liberty flourished, however, inequality resulted, and in an industrial society the inequalities would necessarily be great. Wealth was not wicked or evil, but rather the reward for self-denial and effort. As Sumner saw it, society had only two choices: liberty, inequality, and survival of the fittest or equality, the destruction of liberty, and the survival of the unfit. There was no third way.

The Yale sociologist had no use for social reformers and “sentimental philanthropists” who refused to look these “facts” squarely in the face. Instead, their first response was to ask what they could do about the problem, or more precisely, what the taxpayer could do about it. Elsewhere, he described the taxpayer as “The Forgotten Man.” All this reforming zeal Sumner traced to German Socialpolitik, which argued that the state should intervene to regulate the economy and redistribute wealth. But Sumner, who had himself studied in Germany, retorted, “the cruelest blow that can be aimed at one of these German phrases is to translate it into English, for then all the flatulency is let out of it. . . . It is astonishing how often what seemed a profound piece of philosophy turned out to be a bathos. ‘Social policy’ in English does not mean anything.” On similar grounds, he rejected the notion of the state as an “ethical person,” endowed with a higher cultural mission. For if the state could not add to the ethical energy individuals needed in times of social stress, then the “ethical state” was simply an empty phrase. At most, it meant nothing more than “the general advantage of the association and co-operation of men with each other.” On social matters, the proper government response was laissez-faire. Nevertheless, Sumner was at pains to distinguish between the “struggle with Nature for existence,” where interference was futile and counterproductive, and certain political ills, such as lynch-law, which resulted from the imperfections
and errors of social institutions or the malice of men. In the latter case, government interference on behalf of the aggrieved class was indeed justified. The problem was that people often confused the two classes of ills, concluding that because intervention was called for in the one instance it was also appropriate in the other. But, Sumner insisted, the remedy for natural ills was “manly effort and energy,” not social action.  

In economic matters, too, government should follow a policy of laissez-faire, though here again Sumner was careful to clear up any misconceptions. Laissez-faire emphatically did not mean that individuals should never interfere with the spontaneous workings of the economy. Businessmen and merchants, he thought, should certainly apply their minds “to trade and industry so as to develop and improve them.” What he objected to was having politicians meddle in their operations. Even if statesmen consulted with businessmen and tried to work cooperatively with them, the rules they laid down would necessarily “be rigid, arbitrary, hard to change, dictated by some dogma or ideal, and not such as the development of trade and industry would from time to time call for” if left to their own devices. He was particularly scornful of reformers who, acknowledging the complexity of the problem, nevertheless welcomed legislation as an experiment. The whole idea of experimentation displayed an astounding ignorance of how societies actually worked. For once the experiment entered the life of society it would be impossible to eradicate. In short, laissez-faire meant: “Do not meddle; wait and observe. Do not regulate; study. Do not give orders; be teachable. Do not enter upon any rash experiments; be patient until you see how it will work out.” The last thing to do was legislate.  

Recalling his Harvard education in his Autobiography, Roosevelt emphasized that his professors of political economy embraced the doctrines of robust individualism and laissez-faire that were “then accepted as canonical.” Indeed, as he now saw it, the defect of his education both at home and in college was that it had placed too great an emphasis on individual character and personal responsibility, a view he would later regard as inadequate because it ignored each man’s “collective responsibility” for the well-being of the whole. “Consciously or unconsciously,” he had been taught that the “whole duty” of a man was to make the best of himself and not to bother with improving the lot of others, except perhaps through old-fashioned charity (as his father had done). But Roosevelt’s characterization of his formative years was misleading in two respects: first, it played down how important these ideas had been for much longer than he was willing to admit, and second, it failed to distinguish between the individual responsibility he had been taught at home and the more radical Darwinian
underpinning of these ideas that he later adopted. Like Sumner, the young Roosevelt all too often viewed American history and public policy through the distorting lens of natural selection and survival of the fittest. If anything, given his longstanding interest in natural science, he was even more likely to see the political world in this light.

THE HEGELIAN MOMENT IN AMERICAN POLITICS

The challenge to the political philosophy of the founders came not just from Darwin and evolutionary biology, however. Since the end of the Civil War, a growing number of Americans had gone abroad to study. Even before the war, Europe had served as a magnet for southerners seeking a conservative alternative to the natural rights philosophy that predominated in America, but after 1865, northerners, too, began to flock to its universities. Indeed, because the United States had no graduate schools of its own, those Americans who wished to pursue advanced degrees were compelled to study abroad, with the overwhelming number of them enrolling at German universities, principally Heidelberg and Berlin. As Roosevelt himself would later note in a letter of congratulations to his former law professor, John W. Burgess, on the occasion of his inauguration as the first Theodore Roosevelt Professor at the University of Berlin in 1906, “Since the Civil War one of the marked features of our intellectual life has been the great exodus of students from our northern states to the German universities, together with the fact that these very men now control the higher education of the United States.” Roosevelt, who had been served up a hefty portion of Hegelian philosophy while Burgess’s student at Columbia, knew whereof he spoke. And although he himself had not studied abroad, many of the men and women who formed the intellectual base of the progressive movement and who later became his friends and associates had.

To be sure, Hegel was not all these Americans read, since after his death a reaction against his speculative philosophy had set in, favoring a new scientific spirit aimed at the analysis of practical social and economic problems (Socialpolitik). But Hegel’s turn from nature to history and his description of the state as the embodiment of the ethical life of the nation spoke powerfully to the generation of scholars that came of age after the Civil War. Hegelian philosophy, stressing the progressive unfolding of freedom in history, seemed to offer these Americans a way to make sense out of their own experience. With Hegel as their guide, they now saw the Civil War as a dialectical clash between the southern slaveholders’ “abstract right” and