

Protestant Traditionalist Conservatives and Capitalism during the Gilded Age: or When Conservative Protestants Were Not Libertarians

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In postbellum America, the Second Industrial Revolution dramatically reshaped the nation's economy. The nation was awash in natural resources, especially from the recently acquired western territories. New capital investments in the coal, oil, and steel industries, as well as railroads, expanded the market for consumer goods. The migration of recently freed slaves and the immigration of Europeans enlarged the supply of laborers needed in these expanding industries. The tumultuous upheavals surrounding the Second Industrial Revolution also gave rise to critics of capitalism as evidenced by the rise of Communism, Socialism, Christian Socialism, and the (largely Protestant) Social Gospel in postbellum America.

In the face of these critiques, a new conservatism emerged which defended laissez-faire economic policies and a minimalist view of the state. During the Gilded Age, however, there remained also a small but influential group of traditionalist conservatives who defended the right of private property and promoted individual and national virtue as essential to private and corporate prosperity. They did not fully embrace the new laissez-faire conservatism without qualification. Unlike the proponents of the new conservatism, they assumed an organic understanding of the nature of civil society and expressed doubts about the growing secularization of economic theory. Although defenders of capitalism, their traditional Protestant theological commitments sometimes put them at odds with the new form of economic conservatism. The vision of capitalism advocated by these Protestant traditionalist conservatives, however, would eventually be eclipsed by the champions of the new laissez-faire conservatism. An examination of the defense of democratic capitalism among this influential group of

Protestant traditional conservatives sheds light upon an often-overlooked moment in American history.

Introduction

The Second Industrial Revolution of late 19th century America occurred at a time ripe for dramatic economic growth. Following the Civil War, innovations in power, transportation, and communication fueled this growth. New sources of power—coal, gas, and oil—helped generate new developments in transportation, production, communication, heating, and lighting that reshaped both homelife and industry. Innovators and entrepreneurs created new technologies and products that improved people’s lives as well as businesses. Steam engines liberated people from their dependence upon wind and water to generate power. The revolution in transportation made it possible to distribute goods in unprecedented ways. Between 1850 and 1861, railroad companies laid more than 20,000 miles of track. By 1900, they had built more than 200,000 miles of track. Railroads, moreover, introduced a new form of business to the American economy: the corporation. The spectacular expansion of the railroads coincided with the growth of the postal system. Between 1828 and 1887, the number of post offices rose from 7,651 to over 55,000, the miles mail traveled annually increased from 3,608,540 to more than 257,000,000, and the number of postal employees grew from just under 27,000 to 100,000. These revolutions, in turn, sustained the development of the new industrial economy and also reshaped the relationships between labor and capital and businesses and government.¹

¹Wayne Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 2, 57; Maury Klein, *The Genesis of Industrial America, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-3.

During the Gilded Age, the U.S. economy grew exponentially. In 1860, the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (in 1999 dollars) was approximately \$2,738. In 1900, it was roughly \$4,592. While Britain's GDP was about 30 percent higher than the U.S. in 1860, in 1900 it was only 10 percent higher. The qualitative changes to America's economy, however, were more significant than the quantitative development. The American GDP was approximately 40 percent above the western European average and the U.S. per capita output growth rose an average of 1.5 percent per year between 1860 and 1900.²

The new industrial economy also transformed where and how average Americans worked and lived. In 1870, agriculture employed approximately 50 percent of the workforce. By 1920, that figure dropped to 25 percent. Because of technological innovations, such as the McCormick Harvester, agricultural production nevertheless increased. Between 1869 and 1919, the agricultural workforce rose only 0.9 percent annually, but output increased 2 percent per year. Economic opportunities in the nation's growing industrial sections encouraged greater immigration. Between the Civil War and World War I, an estimated 26 million immigrants arrived in America. During the Gilded Age, the U.S. emerged as the world's preeminent manufacturing nation. The U.S. produced approximately 7 percent of the world manufacturing output in 1860. That number leaped to 24 percent in 1900.³ These economic changes also produced urbanization. In 1860, there were 16 American cities with populations of more than 50,000, containing 50 percent of urban inhabitants. By 1920, more than half the U.S. population

² Robert Whaples, "United States: Modern Period," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History*, ed. Joel Mokyr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003): 5:167-69. [entire article: 5:167-74]

³ Whaples, "United States: Modern Period," 5:169-70.

lived in urban environments and there were 144 cities with populations over 50,000.⁴ The days of the independent and self-sufficient farmer or craftsmen were quickly coming to an end.

The new industrial economy gave rise to more than cities and dependent wage laborers. It also produced economic turmoil and conflict. Because of the mechanization of industry, unskilled or semi-skilled workers replaced skilled workers. Both skilled and semi-skilled laborers alike often fought to preserve their wages. The Gilded Age was punctured by numerous labor strikes. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, Haymarket Square in 1886, and the Pullman Strike in 1894 are just a few of the notable conflicts between labor and capital. These strikes, moreover, were remarkably violent. The Homestead Steel Strike in the summer of 1892, for instance, resulted in 16 deaths, several dozen injuries, and the arrest of almost 200 strikers. In the end, the union was broken.⁵

Amidst the massive rise in dependent wage earners, the growth of corporations, and violent labor conflicts, new economic theories surfaced that undermined the new industrial economy. Marxism, Socialism, Christian Socialism, and the Protestant Social Gospel offered, albeit in varying degrees, a radical critique of the industrial capitalism reshaping the American economy and presented alternative visions of what a more just economic order might look like. Significant divisions certainly separated these alternatives. Marxists, for instance, rejected the Christian theism that shaped the Protestant Social Gospellers. On one point, however, these

⁴ Susan B. Carter, Michael R. Haines, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright, "Race and Ethnicity: Population, Vital, Processes, and Education," *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, ed. Susan Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1:20-22.

⁵ Paul Kahan, *The Homestead Strike: Labor, Violence, and American Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

alternatives shared a common point of agreement: each envisioned a robust view of an interventionist state.⁶

The New Secular Conservatism

In the face of these dramatic economic and social developments, a new laissez-faire conservatism emerged to champion an unfettered capitalism. Three features distinguished the new conservatism from the laissez-faire capitalism that Whigs traditionally held during the antebellum period. The new conservatives were unapologetic defenders of a minimalist state and, correspondingly, advocates of a radical individualism. The third distinctive trait of the new conservatism was its secularism. Summarizing the central characteristics of the new conservatism, the historian Richard Hofstadter notes that it “appealed more to the secularist than the pious mentality, it was a conservatism almost without religion.” It represented a body of beliefs, Hofstadter added, “whose chief conclusion was that the positive functions of the state should be kept to the barest minimum, it was almost anarchical, and it was devoid of that center of reverence and authority which the state provided in many conservative systems.”⁷ Although built upon the laissez-faire doctrine of classical British political economy, it was distinctive in its secular, scientific, and even Darwinian attributes.⁸

Andrew Carnegie, who owned the Bessemer steel plant in Homestead where the violent strike took place in 1892, embodied the new conservatism. An admirer of Herbert Spencer and

⁶ Gillis J. Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 99, 106.

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (1944; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1955), 7. See also, Richard Hofstadter, “William Graham Sumner, Social Darwinist,” *New England Quarterly* 14 (1941): 457-77.

⁸ Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism*, 106.

Charles Darwin, Carnegie expressed little interest in the conventional Christianity of his day.⁹ In a June 1889 essay, “Gospel of Wealth,” published three years before the bloody strike, Carnegie argued that the best way to close the gap between the rich and poor was through privately-managed philanthropy rather than state or federal means of redistribution. Carnegie insisted that the rich had an ethical obligation to share their wealth through charitable philanthropies benefiting the public. Carnegie’s essay elicited responses from numerous Protestants. The prominent Congregationalist theologian and president of Dartmouth College, William Jewett Tucker, challenged the steel magnate’s easy assumptions about the market’s moral neutrality. Tucker also criticized the social Darwinian presupposition at the heart of Carnegie’s treatise. To Tucker, Carnegie’s assumption that “wealth is the inevitable possession of the few, and is best administered by them for the many, begs the whole question of economic justice now before society, and relegates it to the field of charity, leaving the question of the original distribution of wealth unsettled, or settled only to the satisfaction of the few.” Carnegie’s plan, in Tucker’s eyes, would essentially create “a vast system of patronage.” The plutocracy found in Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth,” moreover, contradicted American democracy because its economic feudalism replaced justice with charity. The economic problems facing American society, Tucker contended, could not be solved by charity alone. The real question, he concluded, concerned the distribution rather than the redistribution of wealth.¹⁰

⁹ Andrew Carnegie and John Charles Van Dyke, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 22-23, 75-76, 206-207, 333-37; Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism*, 108-109; Peter Krass, *Carnegie* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 7-9, 112-13, 148, 151-52, 154, 185, 192, 219, 423, 442.

¹⁰ Andrew Carnegie, “Wealth,” *North American Review*, June 1889, 653-64; William J. Tucker, ““The Gospel of Wealth,”” *Andover Review* 15 (1891): 645; Joseph Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 805-15; Arthur Mann, *Yankee Reformers in the Urban Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1954), 77.

While Carnegie might have practiced the new conservatism, the prolific William Graham Sumner popularized the thinking of the new conservatism. The one-time Episcopal parish priest returned to his alma mater Yale in 1872. As chair of political and social science, he exercised an immense influence as a champion of the new conservatism. He never formally renounced belief in God nor gave up his ordination. But his theism quietly receded while materialism gained greater credence in his worldview. As he once explained, “I never consciously gave up a religious belief. It was as if I had put my beliefs into a drawer, and when I opened it, there was nothing there at all.” Sumner extended the classical economic theory, especially its emphasis on the necessity of individuals to pursue economic self-interest free from any state-imposed restraints, in a new direction. It was a direction directly inspired by the influence of Darwin and Spencer on his thinking. Sumner gradually embraced a naturalistic view of the world that operated solely under the direction of natural forces and laws. One biographer describes Sumner as a “conservative social Darwinist” and pointed to Sumner’s advocacy of eugenics as evidence of it. Sumner not only accepted Darwin’s theory of natural selection—he called it the “best” theory devised to date—but incorporated it in his political economy. The British atheist and sociologist Herbert Spencer had an equally profound impact upon Sumner’s thought. Sumner admired the rigorous logic of Spencer’s sociological method, especially his insistence that the discipline offered a neutral, or value-free method, of understanding how society progressively develops.¹¹

Sumner’s 1883 work, *What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, nicely summarizes the new conservatism. Sumner advocated free-market economics completely free from any moral considerations or restraints. And he embraced an utterly minimalist view of the state. He rejected

¹¹ Bruce Curtis, *William Graham Sumner* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 72-72, 88, 84; Harry E. Starr, *William Graham Sumner* (New York: Henry Holt, 1925), 543.

as “a fallacy and superstition” the notion that the state “owes anything to anybody except peace, order, and the guarantees of rights.” The “hardships of human life,” he insisted “are natural” and “part of the struggle with Nature for existence.” Thus, he concluded, “We cannot blame our fellow-men for our share of these.” Society, he added, needs to be free from “meddlers” and he singled out social reformers who advocated an interventionist view of the state in curbing personal behavior through prohibition laws or in regulating the economy for particular distain. Instead, he promoted laissez-faire economics freed from any other consideration beyond self-interest. Laissez-faire, as he put it, simply means “[m]ind your own business. It is nothing but the doctrine of liberty.” Private charity was the only just way to aid the poor. He categorically rejected any role for the state in assisting the poor out of poverty. He ridiculed the “social doctors” who flock to the “man who has done nothing to raise himself above poverty” and bring “the capital which they have collected from the other class” to “give him what the other had to work for.” According to Sumner’s social contract theory, people have no moral obligation to the community. “There is no injunction, no ‘ought’ in political economy at all,” he insisted. “Let every man be happy in his own way.” Liberty was not based upon “a metaphysical [i.e., theological] or sentiment thing” but upon a “cold, mathematical fact.”¹² Sumner was a genuine radical. By dismissing moral considerations from the field of economics, Sumner overturned more than eighteen hundred years of Christian thought.

¹² William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883; repr., Caldwell, ID: Claxton Printers, 1974), 11, 17, 104, 21, 13, 23, 132, 134, 104; Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism*, 110-11. For critiques for Sumner’s book, see “Rowland Hazard, “What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,” *Andover Review* 1 (1884): 159-74; “Notices of New Books,” *New Englander*, 1 November 1883-829-31.

The Traditional Protestant Perspective on Capitalism

While the views and practices of Carnegie and Sumner would eventually come to prevail among conservatives, a small but influential group of traditional conservatives presented an alternative to it during the Gilded Age. Like antebellum Whigs, they advocated laissez-faire capitalism. These conservatives, however, did not form a single coherent “school” of thought. But they did share several foundational convictions that differentiated them from the new conservatism. They continued to embrace an organic view of society. They also considered the state a moral agent. Traditional Protestant theology, moreover, informed their political philosophy at numerous points. The historian Henry F. May once described some of them as proponents of “clerical laissez faire.” For at least a generation, their views dominated American economic teaching.¹³ The remainder of this paper will focus upon one stream within this collection of traditional conservative. It will explore the views of those associated with the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and Princeton Theological Seminary. The purpose of this paper, in other words, is not to evaluate the soundness of these Princetonians’ interpretation of the Bible or their views of capitalism. Instead, its goal is far more modest; it will simply highlight the important role that theological beliefs played in their defense of a sort of capitalism.¹⁴ Unlike the new conservatism, the traditional conservatives professed a commitment

¹³ Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 14. See also, Charles D. Cashdollar, “Ruin and Revival: The Attitude of the Presbyterian Church Toward the Panic of 1873,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 50 (1972): 229-244; Herbert G. Gutman, “Protestantism and the American Labor movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age,” *American Historical Review* 72 (1966): 775-77. On the larger historical context, also see Irwin Unger, “Money and Morality: The Northern Calvinist Churches and the Reconstruction Financial Question,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 40 (1962): 38-55; Philip M. Katz, “‘Lessons from Paris’: The American Clergy Responds to the Paris Commune,” *Church History* 63 (1994): 393-406; Michael Les Benedict, “Laissez-Faire and Liberty: A Re-evaluation of the Meaning and Origins of Laissez-Faire Constitutionalism,” *Law and History Review* 3 (1985): 293-331.

¹⁴ The following analysis depends heavily upon Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism*, 99-127 and Gary Scott Smith, *The Seeds of Secularization: Calvinism, Culture, and Pluralism in America 1870-1915* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1985), 126-40.

to historic Protestant Reformed theology. But they were more than just Christian in their personal piety. Certain Reformed theological convictions explicitly informed their thinking about economics, politics, and society. The same was true of certain elements from the 19th century Whig-Republican intellectual tradition.

REJECTS SCIENTISM

The Princeton traditional conservatives rejected the new conservatism's foundational assumption that economics was a science devoid of moral considerations. In an 1892 essay, "Christianity and Social Problems," published in the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, Charles A. Aiken repudiated scientism.

When men maintain that economics is a science of natural fact and law, from which all moral considerations are to be as rigorously excluded as from our study of the growth of the wool on a sheep's back, it is time for Christian to call for a more serious and satisfactory dealing with the question: "How much is a man more value than a sheep?" (Matt. xii.12). Where men are confessedly dealt with as "animated tools," the cast-iron law of inhumanity needs to be tempered by the Golden Rule. When merchants and manufacturers, grinding the faces of the poor, insist that they must act on "business principles," Christianity does well to call for the revision of those principles.¹⁵

According to the longtime Professor of Christian Ethics and Apologetics at Princeton Seminary, the scientism of the new conservatism simply overlooks the critical role that historic theological convictions should play in sound economic principles.

Criticisms of the new conservatism, however, did not mean that the Princeton traditional conservatives doubted the value of capitalism. In fact, they were ardent defenders of capitalism

¹⁵ Charles A. Aiken, "Christianity and Social Problems," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892): 80. Aiken also wrote that Christianity "resents with indignation the claim of the politicians and economists who warn ethics and religion away from their domain." Aiken, "Christianity and Social Problems," 76. Lyman Atwater told Princeton students that there "can be no sound science of Political Economy which ignores these moral relations of man. There is a good deal of Political Economy in the 'Sermon on the Mount.'" Lyman Atwater, *Ethics and Political Economy from Notes Taken in the Lecture Room of Lyman H. Atwater* (Princeton, NJ: Printed for Private Circulation Only, 1880), 105. On Aiken's social philosophy, see Earl William Kennedy, "William Benton Greene's Treatment of Social Issues," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 40 (1962): 92-112.

and their Reformed theological convictions suffused their defense. A brief review of their defense demonstrates this point.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

To the Princetonians, the right of private property, as the theologian Charles Hodge explained, “is the will of God.” This foundational principle, Hodge explained, meant that “God has so constituted man that he desires and needs this right of the exclusive possession and use of certain things.” Because God made “man a social being,” God “has made the right of property essential to the healthful development of human society.” God has also “implanted a sense of justice in the nature of man, which condemns as morally wrong everything inconsistent with” this right. The Bible, Hodge added, “has declared . . . any and every violation of this right . . . sinful.”¹⁶ To Hodge, the right to private property is not absolute, but limited by certain theological commitments. According to the Presbyterian theologian Louis Voss, the Eighth Commandment taught not only that socialism’s demand for the abolition of all private property is just as unbiblical as the [Sumner-like] assertion that “[m]y property is mine; with it I may do as I please.” To Voss, both views stand:

in conflict with the biblical principle, that all property is a trust. But there is a human right to property. This is threefold. It is (1), either the right of acquisition, or (2), that of inheritance, or (3), that of donation. Any encroachment upon these rights is a transgression of God’s law, whether it is through fraud and deceit, or with an appearance of right (by twisting the law, or taking advantage of its letter, while its spirit is violated).¹⁷

¹⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1874; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): 3:421. According to the Presbyterian minister George F. Greene, the “desire of the average man to hold property as a personal possession is due to the primal instinct of acquisitiveness, which is as God-given as the instinct which leads the robin and his mate to build a nest for the exclusive use of their own brood.” For this reason, Greene deemed socialism “a reform against nature.” George F. Greene, review of “If Christ Were King; or The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth,” by Albert E. Waffle, *Princeton Theological Review* (1913): 351.

¹⁷ Louis Voss, “The Old Testament in Its Relation to Social Reform,” *Presbyterian Quarterly* (1896): 446-47.

Theological beliefs, in short, informed the Princeton traditionalist conservatives' understanding about private property.

THE DIVINE DUTY OF WORK

To the Princeton traditional conservatives, God called individuals to work and thereby contribute to the fulfillment of the cultural mandate of Genesis 1. They did not see labor as an activity bereft of spiritual or moral purpose. If someone wanted to eat and provide for his or her family, it was morally incumbent upon that person to work. Lyman Atwater, a professor of logic, metaphysics, ethics, economics, and politics at Princeton, wrote that it was “the immutable law of God” that ““He that worketh not, neither shall he eat.”” Workers are “justly entitled to the fruits of their own labor; and to such fruits of the labor of others, as others are pleased freely to give them, either in exchange for their own, or gratuitously.” The Princetonians, however, did not single out the working classes for particular chastisement. Atwater wrote: “Let all, whatever sphere or occupation, whether intellectual or material, do their best, and put to the most effective use the faculties and opportunities which God has given them.” The wealthy, Atwater insisted, had a particular responsibility to “train themselves, not for a life of idleness, but for the noblest use of their means; in bringing a revenue not merely of comfort and improvement to themselves, but of blessing to man and glory to God.”¹⁸ The conviction that private property and work were divinely sanctioned formed key foundations upon which these traditional conservatives built their view of capitalism.

¹⁸ Atwater, Lyman, “Our Industrial and Financial Situation,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 4 (1875): 517-18, 528.

PERSONAL VIRTUE AND CAPITALISM

Like other Gilded Age Victorians, the Princeton traditional conservatives emphasized individual responsibility to provide for oneself and one's family. To Protestant Victorians, character represented a set of eternal and fixed values, such as dependability, honesty, respectability, conscientiousness, dutifulness, and self-control. Character formed a type of cultural capital that both the working classes and upper-class Victorians could pass on to their children to enable them to prosper in the nation's burgeoning economy of production. Atwater, for example, lauds the "laboring class" who become "capitalists to some extent" by saving their money, buying a home and other property and he castigated the indolent, especially those who squander their money on alcohol. By promoting virtue, the Protestant traditional conservatives helped advance the economic rationality essential to 19th century capitalism.¹⁹

One of the more forceful advocates of laissez-faire capitalism, Atwater reasoned that capital "furnishes sustenance, material, tools, and machinery to the laborer, without which he would be essentially helpless and impotent." Capital "sustains, reinforces, and rewards labor" and thus creates industry and makes "it a thousand-fold productive." Without capitalism, he concluded, "all the means of supporting culture or civilization, any form of human progress, material or spiritual, social or individual, [are] gone."²⁰ Christianity, Aiken reasoned, "maintains the rights and expounds the uses of property and capital, and that in the interests of the masses, as well as in that of the prosperous classes."²¹

¹⁹ Atwater, "Our Industrial and Financial Situation," 528. On the relationship between 19th-century Protestant views of personal virtue and capitalism, see P.C. Kemeny, *The New England Watch and Ward Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 112-16.

²⁰ Atwater, "Our Industrial and Financial Situation," 519.

²¹ Aiken, "Christianity and Social Problems," 78-79. In a footnote, Aiken approvingly quotes Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*: "Pope Leo XIII . . . says with good reason: 'Our first and fundamental principle, when we undertake to alleviate the conditions of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property.'" Aiken, "Christianity and Social Problems," 79.

ORGANIC VIEW OF SOCIETY

The Princeton traditional conservatives embraced the organic view of society of classical republicanism. On this count, they represented thick lines of continuity with the antebellum Whig tradition. “Social life,” Aiken claimed, is “the ordinance of God.” As he explained, “This divinely ordained society is an organism which becomes more highly and variously complex. Its primary, permanent and indestructible elements—the family, the State, the Church—providing for home life, civic life, and the religious life of men, in fellowship with God and with one another, continue to the end, fulfilling their appointed office.”²² Aiken shared the institutional focus of his understanding of the foundational building blocks of society with other traditionalists at Princeton. The traditionalists’ organic views of the state, moreover, stood in sharp opposition to both collectivist and individualist understandings. Socialists, in the eyes of traditional conservative Protestants, threatened to destroy the foundational structure of civilization in its attack upon the family. As one Presbyterian minister complained, atheistic Socialism “disavows the sacredness of family relations and marital vows” that were widely considered essential to the well-being of civil society.²³ The Princeton traditionalists also rejected the hyper-individualism of the new conservatism. Like early Whigs and also Federalists, the Princeton conservatives expressed doubts about the Lockean social contract theory that had invigorated new conservatives such as Sumner. Writing in the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1918, William Benton Greene, who succeeded Charles A. Aiken as the Archibald Alexander chair of Christian Ethics at Princeton Seminary, rejected the notion that the state is founded upon

²² Aiken, “Christianity and Social Problems,” 81. See also, William Benton Greene, Jr., “The Church and the Social Question,” *Princeton Theological Review* 10 (1912): 378.

²³ William N. Sloane, *Social Regeneration: The Work of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1902), 23-24. See also, James MacGregor, “Socialism,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892): 35-63.

a “Social Compact.”²⁴ Instead, he contended, “The order of nature in the sphere of human society included certain great forms of existence—the family, the nation, the church.” These institutions were “not conceived by us” but “are found by us already instituted in the divine purpose and in the constitution of society.”²⁵ The organic view of society distinguished the Princeton traditional conservatives from the new conservatism in important ways.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE FAMILY

Because of their organic view of society, Princeton traditional conservatives identified both the family and the state as important mediating institutions. To them, the family represented a constitutive part of God’s natural order and they pointed to the opening chapters of Genesis to support this conviction. In his 1891 Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary, *De Civitate Dei: The Divine Order of Human Society*, University of Pennsylvania professor of social science Robert Ellis Thompson argued that 50 years ago political theorists “held that society had been created by a civil compact.” No sociologist today, Thompson insisted, would sanction such a theory “so destitute of historical foundation.” Today, he argued, the “patriarchal theory” found in Genesis, “with certain modification” is “universally accepted.”²⁶ The Princeton theologian Archibald Alexander Hodge amplified the conviction that the family is a foundational institution of a civil society because it was created by God. He viewed socialism as a threat to the family and ultimately the civic order. According to a radical individualistic view of marriage, the relationship was simply a social contract between two autonomous individuals and could be dissolved by the couple’s free choice. Because of the crucial role that the institution of marriage

²⁴ William Benton Greene, Jr., “The Crisis of Christianity,” *Princeton Theological Review* 17 (1919): 347. See also, William Benton Greene, Jr., review of “The Nature of the State,” by Paul Carus, *Princeton Theological Review* 3 (1905): 339-40.

²⁵ William Benton Greene, Jr., “The Christian Doctrine of War,” *Princeton Theological Review* 16 (1918): 96.

²⁶ Robert Ellis Thompson, *De Civitate Dei: The Divine Order of Human Society; Being the L.P. Stone Lectures for 1891, Delivered in Princeton Theological Seminary* (Philadelphia: J. D. Wattles, 1891), 82.

enjoyed in his organic view of society, Hodge insisted that the state should “[p]rohibit divorce” and “hold sacred the marriage ties.”²⁷ To Hodge and other traditionalists, the family was a constitutive part of the natural order. Among its many benefits, marriage provided couples with a place to enjoy intimate affection. Children raised in two parent homes also prospered because they typically enjoyed greater stability. The family, in short, was an essential institution of civil society.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STATE

The traditional conservatives of Princeton also held a different view of the state than the emerging new conservatism. To be sure, these conservatives typically advocated a limited view of the state. William Benton Greene, Jr., for instance, worried that if the state appropriated “the instructions of production” and controlled “the distribution of products,” then “why should” it “not arrogate supremacy in other spheres” of life as well?²⁸ Although some largely advocated a minimalist view of the state like the new conservatism, they still viewed it as a moral agent which played a critical role in fostering community in a civil society. The theologian Charles Hodge called the government “a Divine institution.”²⁹

Perhaps because the Lockean social contract theory was seen as the basis of southerners’ secessionist justifications, the Princeton traditionalists resisted libertarian individualism and maintained a high view of state like their Whig predecessors. Writing in the *Presbyterian Review*, one traditionalist called the Jeffersonian conception of society “crude in the extreme”

²⁷ Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1887), 330; Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism*, 115. Robert Ellis Thompson, likewise, considered weak divorce laws a danger to civil society. “[L]ax divorce laws,” he wrote, “are unchristian and unphilosophical at once. . . . If logically extended,” it “would put an end to every social relationship, and furnish an absolution from every social duty. Thompson, *De Civitate Dei*, 59.

²⁸ William B. Greene, Jr., review of “Christianity and the Social Crisis,” by Walter Rauschenbusch, *Princeton Theological Review* 5 (Oct 1907): 702.

²⁹ Charles Hodge, “The War,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 35 (1863): 147.

because it views society “not [as] an organism, but a collection of units.”³⁰ Robert Ellis Thompson’s Princeton Stone Lectures nicely illustrates this point. “The state, the body politic, has its roots in our human nature. It is thus mediately the creation of God, who has made our human nature what it is. It is by our nature, not by any deliberate choice or act of volition, that the state exists.” Aristotle, Thompson observed, made this point when he proclaimed that “[m]an is by nature a political animal.”³¹ Atwater also described the state as “divinely appointed” and “the great social organism” responsible for “the temporal affairs” of society. As such, he argued that the state should uphold, for instance, Sabbatarian blue laws and teaching of a non-sectarian form of Protestant morality in public schools.³² To the Princetonians, in sum, individuals did not create the state through a social contract. They viewed the state as a constitutive part of God’s divine ordering of the world, not as a necessary evil.

UNIONS AND COOPERATION

The Princeton traditional conservatives’ perspective on labor unions and strikes illustrates both their commitment to free-market economics and how they differed from the new conservatism. Because of their organic view of society, these traditionalists still advocated the antebellum Whig conception of class cooperation. Moreover, theology suffused their views regarding unions and strikes. A 1872 essay entitled “The Labor Question in Its Economic and Christian Aspects” by Atwater exemplifies these points. The “law of liberty,” he said, “is the true condition for the highest efficiency and productiveness of labor and capital.” Just as manacles impair the working power of the human body, all restrictions upon the use of capital or labor “by

³⁰ George Monro Grant, “Progress and Poverty,” *Presbyterian Review* 34 (1888): 192.

³¹ Thompson, *De Civitate Dei*, 89.

³² Lyman Atwater, “Civil Government and Religion,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 5 (1876): 198, 199, 201-204, 226-35. See also, Lyman Atwater, “Taxation of Churches, Colleges and Charitable Institutions,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 4 (1874): 347.

monopolies, strikes, [or] trade-unions, . . . impair the united product of both.” Atwater, however, did not oppose labor unions *per se*. “Now to associations for mutual protection and improvement between tradesmen or craftsmen of a given kind, or of several kinds, there can be no objection; everything is in favor so long as they do not trench upon the fundamental principles of morality, economics, and the rights and welfare of men and of society.” Atwater envisions capital and labor working in cooperation with each other in a way that benefited both as well as society at large. The “increase and mutual co-operation of” capital and labor “serves in a still higher proportion to increase the produce of both and the consequent reward of each.” Capital should be free “to see their way to the largest profits” and labor should be “perfectly free to follow its chosen occupation” and to “fix its own terms, prices, hours, and other conditions.” Atwater readily recognizes the interest of the laborer to secure “as high wages as he can” and of the capitalist “to give as low wages as he can.” This apparent antagonism, he reasoned, was “inevitable” but it did not “invalidate” the “mutual oneness of interest between labor and capital.” Atwater also saw a place for the state to regulate the market in order to safeguard youths from exploitation on “hygienic, sanitary, and moral grounds.” Although clearly a proponent of capitalism, his commitment to *laissez-faire* had limits.³³

Atwater, not surprisingly, categorically opposed labor unions’ use of strikes to secure larger wages. He described the “war of labor against capital” as both “insane and suicidal.” In his mind, strikes were ultimately “a war of labor against labor.” Among the long list of criticisms Atwater leveled against the use of labor strikes three stand out. Here again, his organic view of the nature of society informed his views of unions and strikes. He decried unions’ use of “lawless violence” to prevent individuals from exercising their “God-given” right to work. While

³³ Lyman Atwater, “The Labor Question in Its Economic and Christian Aspects,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 1 (1872): 477, 484, 475, 478, 477.

strikes cost both capital and labor income, it hurt strikers more. Strikes cost capital income which they could invest in future production. But the price paid by laborers was higher in Atwater's estimation because they had to deplete their savings in order to survive. It also raised the prices of products, such as coal, which they needed. While capital could recoup its losses by raising prices, it meant that laborers also spent more to get by. In the long run, Atwater reasoned, strikes cost laborers their personal capital more than business owners. Because strikes could not alter the immutable laws of supply and demand they ultimately depressed wages. Atwater also objected to strikes' use of coercion to force businesses to pay their laborers the same wages regardless of their skill level or work habits. Moreover, he found it unfair to youths who were seeking to work as apprentices to master craftsmen to be kept out of a particular industry because a union had artificially capped the number of members a business could employ. He called it a "form of sheer, unmitigated robbery" to prevent "men from using or developing their gifts and faculties."³⁴

Atwater offers a series of solutions to ease the strain between capital and labor. His theological convictions and organic view of society shaped each one. When it came to the question of compensation, he insisted, the "principles of Christianity" must inform both capitalists and laborers. "Let the capitalist remember that, whatever be the requirements of civil law, he is bound by every moral and Christian obligation to give the laborer a fair and righteous share of the rewards of production." The "constant demand of Scripture" calls laborers to work "faithfully and cheerfully." By applying the "very first principles of Christian morality" to their relationship, all "collisions" between capital and labor will "diminish" and "make them friendly coadjutors." He also viewed profit-sharing as an excellent way to generate a "cordial

³⁴ Atwater, "The Labor Question in Its Economic and Christian Aspects," 475, 482-83, 484-85, 486-87.

cooperation” that benefitted all parties. Atwater considered savings banks a wonderful way for laborers to accrue enough money to own homes and small businesses themselves as well. Savings banks helped workers invest in the capital which directly supported their labor and thus gave them even more incentive to pursue amicable relations. The Princeton traditionalists’ organic view of society promoted community, whereas the new conservatism’s libertarianism undermined the social conservatism by its hyper-individualism. It threatened to break down the traditional conservatives’ celebration of community and the communal demands of duty on the individual. “Like all organisms,” Atwater explained, “all the parts are mutually means and ends: all working for each, and each for all.”³⁵

THE MORAL DANGERS OF UNFETTERED CAPITALISM

Although defenders of capitalism, the Princeton traditional conservatives rejected the Gospel of Wealth glorified by Andrew Carnegie. These traditional conservatives expressed a good deal of wariness against the dangers of wealth. “How many of our Napoleons in business who . . . attained fabulous wealth,” Atwater warned, “have proven Napoleons, also, in making this success a pinnacle from which to plunge themselves down to a corresponding ruin.” Quoting the Apostle Paul, Atwater added, “For the love of money is the root of all evil.”³⁶ The Princetonians also cautioned the church against siding with the rich and powerful over the poor and weak. The theologian Charles Hodge called it a “monstrous doctrine” that “the strong are always right; that those who succeed ought to succeed; that we must always take sides against the afflicted and downtrodden.” Such reasoning, he deemed, “simply diabolical.”³⁷ According to

³⁵ Atwater, “The Labor Question in Its Economic and Christian Aspects,” 488, 489, 491; Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism* 124. In *De Civitate Dei*, Thompson wrote, “The conflict between the forces grows out of a mutual distrust, rather than any economic or social necessity. Neither can engage in the work of production without the other. Both capital and labor are sterile until they come into co-operation.” Thompson, *De Civitate Dei*, 280.

³⁶ Lyman Atwater, “The Late Commercial Crisis,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 3 (1874): 126.

³⁷ Hodge, “The War,” 145-56.

Charles A. Aiken, “Nothing is more contrary to the spirit of Christianity than contempt for the working classes and their occupations.”³⁸ The church, insisted James McCosh, the moral philosopher and president of the College of New Jersey, could not favor the rich over the poor. Instead, he believed that the church was called to be “the great peacemaker on earth” and play the role of a “mediator” between capital and labor.³⁹ The Princetonians, however, expressed more than a few misgivings that the church was not effectively reaching the poor with the gospel and exhorted it to redouble its efforts to evangelize working class people.⁴⁰

Although proponents of capitalism, the Princeton traditional conservatives rejected speculating in the stock market. Following the financial panic of 1873 and the subsequent economic depression it created, these traditional conservatives denounced speculation as a pure and unmitigated evil. Writing in 1874, Atwater described ventures in speculation as violations of “the known laws of nature and providence.” There is “no reasonable foresight of the result, and no contribution to any useful result.” Speculators never actually plant crops, build machines, or transport goods. Speculating, consequently, violated the producer ethic that traditional Protestants venerated. Not surprisingly, Atwater concluded that speculating was “simple gambling, and if made on borrowed money, this is gambling on other people’s money.”⁴¹

Atwater also expressed serious misgivings about the growing gap between laborers and those in management of major corporations. Since inflation weakened the buying power of the dollar, especially among the working class, he marveled that corporate leaders had the audacity

³⁸ Aiken, “Christianity and Social Problems,” 76.

³⁹ James McCosh, “Relation of the Church to the Capital and Labor Question,” in *National Perils and Opportunities* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1887), 216.

⁴⁰ McCosh, “Relation of the Church to the Capital and Labor Question,” 221-22; Atwater, “The Labor Question in Its Economic and Christian Aspects,” 492.

⁴¹ Atwater, “The Late Commercial Crisis,” 125. See also, Lyman Atwater, “The Currency Question,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 4 (1875): 736.

to vote themselves such “a high-flying “income. “[N]o man’s services are in these times worth to any company \$30,000 per year.”⁴² To them, the wealth gap seemed more than troubling.

THE SUPREMACY OF THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

Some historians have portrayed 19th century Calvinists like those at Princeton as indifferent to the labor conflicts of the day or as apologists of property rights and the status quo.⁴³ While the Princeton traditional conservatives did offer a robust defense of capitalism, they always placed it within a larger theological framework shaped by historic Christianity. To them, this world matters and capitalists and laborers had a God given calling to use their resources and talents to cultivate culture. The accumulation of capital is necessary, James McCosh reasoned, to “a nation’s prosperity.” Capitalism, he added, “is required in order to give work and food to the laborer and his family, and to foster trade and commerce, with all the blessings they bring.”⁴⁴ However much the Princeton traditional conservatives prized free trade, they valued the gospel message even more. Although Marxists might dismiss Christianity as an opiate of the masses and the new conservatism simply ignore any discussion as pious cant irrelevant to economics, to the Princeton conservatives the message of eternal hope through Christ’s substitutionary atonement ultimately trumped the temporal interests of both laborers and capitalists. As Lyman Atwater put it, “Whatever any lay up on earth, let them first of all lay up treasures in heaven, which they shall have at the resurrection of the just, which is imperishable and unalienable.”⁴⁵

THE DEMISE OF THE PRINCETON TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVES

⁴² Lyman Atwater, “The Great Railroad Strike,” *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* 6 (1877): 739-40.

⁴³ Charles Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 15-16; May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America*, 83, 193.

⁴⁴ McCosh, “Relation of the Church to the Capital and Labor Question,” 217.

⁴⁵ Lyman, “Our Industrial and Financial Situation,” 529. See also, Aiken, “Christianity and Social Problems,” 82; Greene, “The Church and the Social Question,” 397-98; McCosh, “Relation of the Church to the Capital and Labor Question,” 220-24.

The vision of capitalism advocated by these Princeton traditionalist conservatives would eventually be eclipsed by the champions of the new laissez-faire conservatism. The new, secular conservatism eventually replaced traditional conservatives in the early 20th century for two reasons. During the early 20th century, a “Great Reversal,” as historians have come to name it took place within Protestantism. As Protestant churches engaged in deep and lasting theological debates over the truthfulness of historic Christianity, a division between theological conservatives and liberals emerged. Since theological liberals typically advocated an activist state to solve the nation’s pressing social problems (the Social Gospel most obviously manifested this tendency), theological conservatives abandoned the tradition’s long-time commitment to social reform and focused exclusively upon personal evangelism.⁴⁶ Traditional Protestants, in other words, disengaged from the broader questions involving economics and politics. At the same time, as professionalization and academic specialization reshaped American higher education, theological convictions in matters of economics and politics—like those expressed by the Princetonians—were increasingly marginalized as irrelevant. The secularization of higher education, in short, helped to push theological considerations to the sidelines.⁴⁷ During the Gilded Age of 19th century America, however, the traditional conservatives of Princeton offered an alternative to the new secular conservatism that was deeply formed by their Reformed theological convictions. Today, however, many conservative Christians have largely embraced libertarianism and the secular economic theory.

⁴⁶ Daniel L. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 85-93; Gary Scott Smith, *The Search for Social Salvation: Social Christianity and America, 1880-1925* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

⁴⁷ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); P.C. Kemeny, *Princeton in the Nation’s Service: Religious Ideals and Educational Practice, 1868-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism*, 126.