THE ORGANIC-PROGRESSIVE PRINCIPLE IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT AND INTERNATIONALISM OF WOODROW WILSON

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This is an investigation of the intellectual roots of the political thought and internationalism of Woodrow Wilson, the twenty-eighth president of the United States. Exposed to the influence of Darwin, Wilson believed that politics had to be redefined as an evolutionary process. The older mechanical understanding of politics was to be replaced with an organic understanding of political development. This allowed Wilson to synthesize a concept of politics that included elements from the Christian tradition; the English Historical School, particularly Edmund Burke; and German idealism, including G.W.F. Hegel. However, because he placed a heavy emphasis on Burke and Hegel, Wilson moved away from a natural rights based theory of politics and more towards a politics based on relativism and a transhistorical notion of rights. Wilson had important theoretical reserves about Hegel, as a result, Wilson modified Hegel’s philosophy. This modification took the form of Wilson’s organic-progressive principle. This would greatly affect Wilson’s ideas about how nations formed, developed, and related to one another. This study focuses on Wilson’s concept of spirit, his theory of history, and his idea of political leadership. The organic-progressive principle is key to understanding Wilson’s attempts to reform on both the domestic and international levels.
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CHAPTER 1
ORGANICISM AND PROGRESSIVISM IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF WOODROW WILSON

Introduction

This dissertation is an evaluation of the conceptual basis on which Woodrow Wilson built his understanding of politics and how this influenced his view of international relations. I propose that at its core, Wilson adhered to a view of politics that was based on a modified form of Hegelian historicism that was born out of German idealism. The important caveat is that Wilson did not import Hegel’s ideas into the American context without modification and with such modifications Wilson could combine several different intellectual traditions into his political thought. It is this synthesized thought that this research examines. I call Wilson’s modification to this basic Hegelian framework the organic-progressive principle, and I believe that this was the foundation of Wilson’s political thought.

The organic-progressive principle stems from Wilson’s belief that Darwin’s theory of evolution was a justification of Hegel’s explanation of history. The rationalization of history was that it was an evolutionary process. Darwin and Hegel fit hand-in-glove in Wilson’s conception of politics, and this belief was reinforced by Wilson’s acceptance of the work of Edmund Burke and other Anglo writers who shared Burke’s conviction that society could be best described as organic. Also, included in Wilson’s conception of politics was his strong religiosity. Through some creative
interpretations, Wilson was able to use elements of the Christian tradition to buttress his political ideas. Overall, Wilson drew from several intellectual traditions from which he synthesized his vision of politics.

From this position, Wilson reasoned that societies, and the governmental institutions that were the political expressions of a given society, were in a state of flux. In the American case, this meant that the Constitution had become an outdated document. Wilson did not believe that a Constitution needed to be a written document, although from time to time it could take that form. The written form merely captured the spirit of the society when it was set to paper (Wilson [1908] 2002). In an institutional sense, the Constitution had served a purpose when it was written, but American society had undergone substantial changes. The institutional structure articulated in the Constitution, particularly the Separation of Powers, was ill-suited to manage the new complexity of American society. The United States had to progress by reorienting its political institutions. Wilson felt that the solution was to turn the American federal system into a parliamentary system based on the English model. Wilson first made this argument as a young man. On July 4, 1876, when he was an undergraduate at Princeton, he wrote the following in his diary:

The One Hundredth Anniversary of American Independence [:] One Hundred years ago America conquered England in an unequal struggle and this year she glories over it. How much happier she would be now if she had England’s form of government instead of the miserable delusion of a republic. A republic too founded upon the notion of abstract liberty. I venture to say that this country will never celebrate another centennial as a republic. The English form of government is the only true one. (Bragdon 1967, 23)

In this comment, it is possible to see his love of the “English form” and the call for
institutional reform. The “miserable delusion of a republic” was one in which political
decisions were not transparent and politics were extremely contentious.¹ Politics seemed
more based on individual self-interest than that of civil duty or a sense of morality. The
criticism of abstract liberty that Wilson referred to came from Edmund Burke, and it
would remain an essential part of Wilson’s criticism of American government. Only a
movement towards better governance, or progress, would save the nation in Wilson’s
estimation.

I argue that several years later, Wilson would apply this same logic to the
international situation. The great Wilsonian international project centered on the
transformation of the international arena. Wilson outlined this project in a speech before
Congress on January 22, 1917:

The question upon which the whole future peace and policy of the world depends
is this: Is the present struggle for a just and secure peace, or only for a new
balance of power? If it be only a struggle for a new balance of power, who will
guarantee, who can be guaranteed, the stable equilibrium of the new arrangement?
Only a tranquil Europe can be a stable Europe. There must be, not a balance of
power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized
common peace. (Beets 2008)

Wilson was trying to shift the European international system from one based on what is
known in international relations as a realist system. Realism is based on the principle of
national self-interests. In its place, Wilson hoped to establish what is known in
international relations as a liberal system. Liberalism is based on the cooperation

¹ Wilson, like many Americans in the 1870s and 1880s, viewed American politics as a Byzantine labyrinth
of power politics. This was a period of blatantly corrupt Gilded Age politics. In 1876, Grant’s scandal
ridden administration was coming to a close, and Reconstruction was ending. The United States was
approaching an uncertain Presidential election between Hayes and Tilden. When this election was held, it
was inconclusive due to disputes in the electoral vote that lasted for months. It was finally settled through a
brokered Congressional agreement that was less than transparent. This partisan deal would become known
as the Compromise of 1877.
between nations and the benefits that can be derived from such cooperation. In this case, the benefit was a scheme of collective security aimed at reducing the chance of another major conflict. Here, it is possible to see that Wilson believed that the purpose of government could not be based solely on self-interest. I believe Wilson’s prescription for the domestic problems that the United States faced in the late 19th century was very similar to the course that he prescribed for world politics in the post-World War I period. The League of Nations would be a parliament of nations that would ensure an arena to debate issues and ensure transparency in those deals.

Here again, progress in institutional development was the key to peace and stability. There is little doubt that Wilson’s desired peace was a noble one, particularly in light of the great conflict that was still unfolding in 1917. This contemplated change from realism to liberalism targeted the fundamental workings of the international system that had been finely tuned by European diplomats over the past century, since the Congress of Vienna. Because of the destructiveness of the conflict that was taking place, taken as evidence of the failure of this European diplomatic system, an American president was now suggesting that the entire system be realigned following what Wilson called a “moral diplomacy.”

Wilson’s internationalism, his notion of how societies were initially formed, functioned, and would relate to one another in the modern age, flowed directly out of his concept of the state that was achieved by coupling together a Hegelian notion of progressivism and a Burkean ideal of the organic nature of society. Wilson drew this idea of the organic society out of his unique definition of Darwinism and coupled it to
Burke creating his conception of the influence of science on the study of politics. However, this innovative view must be weighed against Wilson’s notion of Christianity and its connection to idealism, out of which he formed an idea of spirit. It was from this mix of ideas that Wilson believed he had struck upon the best explanation to describe the arc of political development that human societies and the international system was travelling.

Woodrow Wilson’s political thought was based on the concept that human societies and the states that derive from them are organic in nature, and this organicism was a vital characteristic that lead to the continued progress of those political communities. Because of its importance, I call this Wilson’s organic-progressive principle. Wilson was spurred on by the idea that government resulted from an ongoing evolutionary process. The organic nature of society acted as an engine that allowed for change. No healthy society was stagnant, according to Wilson; it was a moving and teeming entity. The great transformation that Wilson saw in international relations was a result of the dynamic power of organicism. Wilson believed that he lived in a time when enough nations had reached the point in their evolution that they could move from an international system based on the balance of power to one that Wilson envisioned to be a community of power.

I argue that Wilson’s internationalism can be best understood as an application of his organic-progressive principle. Despite the conglomeration of seemingly diverse sources that Wilson felt obliged to cobble together, the organic-progressive principle was fundamentally an example of historicism. Historicism can take many forms, and the
organic-progressive principle was the particular brand that Wilson constructed. In order to understand Wilson’s political thought and the view of the world that it informed, it is necessary to dissect it and examine its constituent parts. Once Wilson formed his intellectual framework to understand how states form, operated, and maintained themselves, it was not a difficult leap to create a basic understanding of how states related to one another and what that process would look like in a more rational future. This view would become known to later generations as Wilsonian; however, its definition would blur over time.

The Meaning of the Adjective Wilsonian

The designation Wilsonian is bantered about in international relations and foreign policy decision-making; it can be used either in a complementary or pejorative manner. The positive use of the term denotes a commitment to democratic values or human rights. The negative connotation suggests naiveté, undue moralism, or utopian idealism. Presidents as varied as Jimmy Carter and Richard Nixon have described themselves as Wilsonian in their international outlook. The word is used so much that its meaning has become blurred, and it is difficult to know what is meant when the descriptive Wilsonian is used (Steigerwald 1994). Since such a diverse group aspired to the mantel of Wilsonian, it raises the question, who can justify their claim to the title, if any?

In order to find meaning in the word “Wilsonian,” it is necessary to try and wipe away the encrusted interpretations which have been heaped on the original usage and have diluted its meaning. The question that is posed by this is how did Woodrow Wilson
construct his concept of the state and the international system. In order to do this, it is necessary to return to the source and examine the internationalism of Wilson. The larger question before us is whether this Wilsonian construction is adequate to support the outcomes that Wilson believed were beneficial to the international community and the continuing progress of humanity.

The question is why Wilson believed it possible to undertake such a radical restructuring of the international system. Wilson did not form his theory on international relations in 1917 as a result of the First World War. As president, Wilson came to office with almost no practical diplomatic experience, but because of his academic background, he did have a theory of international relations based on his study on the nature of the state. Thus, Wilson’s internationalism did not develop suddenly; he had no eureka moment; instead, the ideas that supported his internationalism came out of an mental construction that Wilson had laid the foundations of and built up for decades. It will be necessary to examine this synthesis of ideas in order to understand what Wilson was trying to create, what he believed to be a new and historically appropriate mode for ordering the international system. It is only after this examination that it will be possible to see if the Wilsonian mantel can still be rightfully used in any meaningful way.

This is not an easy task, for time and human memory have the ability to bend and distort the past. To be able to mold a meaning or lesson out of history and redirect it into a specific agenda is a powerful political tool. This can be done consciously as an act of political calculation for effect, or it can be done unconsciously without an intention to disregard the historical record. No matter the motive, the effect is the same. It distorts
and simplifies, making it impossible to fairly judge an idea on its own merits. Woodrow Wilson’s long career as an academic before he became a politician, and not long after that president of the United States, allowed him a long time to develop ideas that informed his view of the proper course for his new internationalism. However, the connection between Wilson’s thought as an academic and the link to his internationalism has not been fully explored and understood by scholars. As a result, Woodrow Wilson’s theory of international relations and the intellectual framework which served as its lens has fallen victim to this phenomenon of distortion.

It has been over one hundred years since Wilson first began to express his ideas about how nations should interact with one another, yet these theories are still extremely controversial. As the debate about Wilson’s political thought and its implications on the relations between nations churns along, some try to discredit while others try to claim the mantle of Wilson and his internationalism. Certain parts of Wilson’s thoughts have been emphasized, other parts downplayed; still other parts have faded into the background. Wilson’s ideas have been so manipulated that it has become difficult to gain a basic knowledge of what he considered to be the fundamental mechanisms that governed the relations between nations. By investigating Wilson and his political thought, it might be possible to restore precision to the use of the term Wilsonian as a descriptor.

The Impact of Evolutionary Thought

In order to understand how Wilson constructed the intellectual framework that supported his organic-progressive principle, it is necessary to find the common thread
that held this all together: the idea that human social development could best be
understood as an evolutionary process. This evolutionary thinking led directly to his
conceptualization of society as an organic entity. The foundation of understanding
Wilson’s political thought, including his internationalism, was his belief that society was
organic, and the changes in social institutions were akin to biological evolution. In the
latter half of the nineteenth century, the focus on this evolutionary understanding of
society came out of the biological sciences and was particularly inspired by Charles
Darwin’s theory. Darwin theorized that over several generations, a given species will
undergo morphological adaptation in response to environmental pressures. Wilson came
of age in the wake of Darwin, and the intellectual community that Wilson was a part of
was undergoing a massive realignment to integrate evolutionary ideas even into fields of
enquiry that were, in many instances, several degrees removed from biology. Darwin’s
Theory of Evolution was narrowly focused on the biological sciences, but in the latter
half of the nineteenth century, this notion of evolution was absorbed by the social
sciences and caused a myriad of theories of the state to be proposed.

Wilson was swept up in this intellectual avalanche like many scholars of the
period. His internationalism was part of his larger struggle to describe the origin and
functions of the state in an evolutionary context. He accepted the concept of evolution as
a general explanatory rule for politics and viewed this as the great discovery of his age. It
is important to understand that Wilson cited Darwin because Wilson saw Darwin’s theory
as a break in the historical conceptual notion of society. Wilson declared that before
Darwin societies were viewed as mechanic; after Darwin, it was possible to re-
conceptualize society as organic. This shift from the mechanical to the organic allowed Wilson to posit a new dynamic of the state. Darwin denoted a paradigm shift in political thinking for Wilson. Darwin made it possible to think in evolutionary terms, and those evolutionary terms resulted in the idea of the organic society. When this type of evolutionary notion was applied to politics, the concept became the primary mover of social norms and institutional development. However, this transition to an evolutionary process was not a painless one for Wilson because it failed to explain everything that Wilson believed needed to be included to understand the state and its place in human history.

Wilson refused to believe that the evolutionary process was merely a violent and brutal struggle when it was applied to humanity. It is important to understand what Wilson did not take from Darwin. Darwin saw the world as a violent place; species were involved in a brutal struggle to survive, and many individuals did not survive this process although the species could continue. Applying this idea to the international arena results in a world where nations are locked in conflict with one another in an ongoing fight for survival. If Wilson took all of his cues from Darwin, then Wilson would have been a very different thinker. However, the influence of the Christian tradition and the German Idealists engendered in Wilson a sense of human dignity the countered the darker parts of Darwin. Wilson did not see this Darwinian conflict played out at large between the nations as the future. Instead, the Wilsonian project was an attempt to invert this, at least on the political level.
Wilson viewed evolution as a process that led to the betterment of humanity. Evolution was an essential progressive process. It was this belief that separated Wilson from the Social Darwinists of his day. Evolution was the means, but not the end. Wilson did not view it as an unrelenting, mindless, and continuing adaption to exogenous forces. In this way, Wilson made a major concession that made evolution more than a scientific theory. Evolution was not merely change over time that was caused by organisms response to environment pressures. He accepted the process of evolution, but not the reasoning behind it. This opened a door for Wilson that other evolutionary minded scholars had locked to them. There were American scholars who took Darwin and applied his ideas to politics in a similar vein as Wilson. However, Wilson tended to read English instead of American authors. (Pestritto 2005) Walter Bagehot was one of Wilson’s favorite authors. Bagehot used the vocabulary of Darwin to describe how the English government worked and continued to develop. Wilson’s *Cabinet Government in the United States*, written when he was an undergraduate and published in the *International Review* in August of 1879, was largely modeled on Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*. In a few places, Wilson nearly copied Bagehot’s text; the only changes were replacing England or English with America or American. (Bragdon 1967, 60).

There was a moral dimension that Wilson had to account for in order to satisfy his concept of politics. America has always been a religious society, and politics and religion have been entangled throughout the nation’s history. A large part of American political theory deals with how political thought navigates through this religious landscape. Wilson, the son of a minister, was deeply influenced by his concept of faith
and especially the moral obligations that were tied to it. The idea that society was guided by natural laws, akin to the laws found in the physical sciences, was accepted in certain academic circles in Post-Civil War America. Consequently, natural laws were believed to be benevolent because they were commonly associated with the belief that they were an extension of God’s will. Evolution was introduced into this environment. Darwin’s Theory of Evolution resulted in great debate amongst religious Americans and eventually caused a schism in American Protestantism between modernists and Biblical literalists.

The opposition between evolution and religion was (and still is) a debate with biblical literalists, while modernists, like Wilson, took a different tack. The latter group coupled scientific ideas, including Darwinism, to their pre-existing religious belief. Wilson connected his religiously informed moral dimension of politics to the concept of evolution, and this resulted in the idea of progress. He viewed this progressive ideal in metaphysical terms that removed it from mere scientific empirical observation.

This created a strange contradiction in Wilson’s political thought. In many ways, it was an American problem of trying to maintain a balance between religiously infused politics and the moral basis that such a belief provided with a politics that was derived

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2 The effect of the advances in science, especially Darwinism, on American religious beliefs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a complex topic and can only be mentioned here. Because of his connection to the Presbyterian Church, Wilson was immersed in this controversy from a young age. Different faith traditions and denominations engaged in different strategies ranges from rejection to acceptance. Those denominations that were more accepting of scientific views had to modify their understanding of the Biblical text, believing that this modernization of their beliefs would make their faith more intellectualized and therefore more resilient in a society that was more informed by a growing scientific knowledge. This was especially true among Protestant denominations that become known as “new,” “liberal,” or “modern”. This was also related to the development of the Social Gospel theology, an idea that Wilson would synthesize into his political thought. For an outline of this debate see Ahistrom 1972, Religious History of the American People Volume II; Roberts, May, 1949 Darwin and the Divine in America; Protestant Churches and Industrializing America; and Hutchinson, 1976 The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism
from a rationality that emerged out of the European Enlightenment. This was problematic given the unrelenting pressure to use scientific ideas, like evolution, to create an understanding of politics that was comparatively as rigorous as those disciplines from which the theories came. Wilson was in the first generation of American scholars who considered themselves to be political scientists (though this was before political science became a largely empirical discipline). He used what he believed to be scientific methods to form his basic understanding of political development, yet the end goals of politics was not completely explainable via empirical observation. He was using a methodology designed to find facts but still needed to have value. The concepts and methodologies that Wilson tried to incorporate into his political thinking were moving toward this fact-value distinction, but Wilson was not able to make that break. As is shown, Wilson was not a Social Darwinian, but he had to account for evolutionary thinking in social phenomena because it was evolution that provided Wilson a justification to re-forge the concept of the state as organic.

Woodrow Wilson’s starting point was the ideal that human societies evolved. From this axiom, Wilson concluded that for something to evolve, it had to be organic. Therefore, society should be viewed as organic. As Wilson wrote,

The government of the United States was constructed upon the Whig theory of political dynamics which was a sort of unconscious copy of the Newtonian theory of the universe. In our day, whenever we discuss the structure or development of anything, whether in nature or in society, we consciously or unconsciously follow Mr. Darwin; but before Mr. Darwin, they followed Newton. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 55)

Wilson believed that the older Whig Theory of politics, specifically that articulated by the founders, was mechanistic, static, and wholly unsuited to evolutionary explanations of
development. This was Wilson’s initial point of intellectual departure.

Also, it is interesting that Wilson observed that those in the older generations ascribed to the dominant scientific theory of their day. Wilson and scholars of his generation, were engaging in the same process except the dominant scientific theory had changed. This might have been Wilson’s interpretation of the call that Tocqueville made in *Democracy in America* for a ‘new political science’ (Tocqueville 2000, 7). In this way, Wilson might have been able to have a sense of continuity in the changes that he was contemplating. Wilson did not think that what he was doing was particularly innovative. The mixing of science and political theory was nothing new according to Wilson. In fact, Wilson was following the lead of other great American political thinkers, but because of achievements in human understanding, the conclusions that Wilson would draw would be different than those of the past.

The idea of history was tied into Wilson’s political thinking. He wrote in the introduction to his book *The State*:

> As fragments of primitive animals have been kept for us sealed up in the earth’s rocks, so fragments of primitive institutions have been preserved, embedded in the rocks of surviving law or custom, mixed up with the rubbish of accumulated tradition, crystallized in the organization of still savage tribes, or kept curiously in the museum of fact and rumor swept together by some ancient historian. Limited and perplexing as such means of reconstructing history may be, they repay patient comparison and analysis as richly as do the materials of the archaeologists and the philologist. The facts as to the origin and early history of government are at least as available the as facts concerning the growth and kinship of language or the genesis and development of the arts and sciences… (Wilson [1898] 1903, 1)

History was the social equivalent of the fossil record. Instead of bones of long dead animals and the imprints of extinct plants, human society remembers outmoded forms of political organization. Within history was the evidence of the development of political
institutions in a given society. Each one of these institutions was necessary at a specific point in history but was replaced in time with other versions as situations changed. After allowing for the occasional institutional coelacanths or relics, political development continues on. Wilson’s concept of the political evolutionary process made him especially attuned to other political thinkers who conceived of society as organic.

Wilson looked for examples of evolution, and the organicism that he believed that it demanded, in an explanation of the political world. He found this link in the work of Edmund Burke. In his reading of Burke, Wilson found something akin to the evolutionary process in Burke’s premise that society was organic and not mechanistic. It was a way to link Darwin to Burke. Burke became one of Wilson’s intellectual heroes of the first order. Wilson held Burke in such high regard that he would grant Burke the sobriquet of the *Interpreter of English Liberty*. This was the name of an extended essay Wilson wrote on Burke. (Wilson [1896] 1971, 104-160) Although Burke is commonly thought of as the father of conservatism, Wilson would massage Burke into a progressive thinker. This was possible because Burke did not contest the fact that societies change over time. What Burke did debate was what the best and most constructive form that change should take, and this was the debate that Wilson believed he was continuing. Wilson often would invoke Burke’s concept of adjustment as a justification for his political thought (Cooper 2009).³

Burke believed that an organic understanding of politics was so descriptive that it

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³ Adjustment was foundational to Wilson’s political thought. In *Constitutional Government in the United States*, Wilson would define political liberty as “the right of these governed to adjust government to their own needs and interests” (pg 4) Without the ability to adjust the relationship between the government and the governed liberty itself would be impossible. This is a point that will be more developed later.
should not be considered a political philosophy, but a mere observation. Burke contested the “rights of man” theory that was promulgated by the French Revolution. In *Reflections on the French Revolution* Burke describe how he did not share in the popular enthusiasm for the events taking place in France:

I should therefore suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I was informed how it had been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order: with civil and society manners. All these (in their way) are good things too; and without them, liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and is not likely to continue long. The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: We ought to see what it will please them to do… (Burke [1790] 1970, 9)

Liberty without the guidance provided by a well-established civil society was a dangerous concept to Burke. Burke made the analogy to a madman being freed from his sanatorium cell. Without any other limitations, such an individual could not be considered to be truly free. He was a danger to himself and possibly others. A civil society would curb the harmful excesses that might accompany liberty, especially to a people unaccustomed to them. This is Burke’s argument that liberty does not equal license. A person imbued with liberty is not without responsibilities to their society; otherwise, the very fabric of their society would be in jeopardy. Government could not ensure rights if society faced this type of atomization.

Burke concluded that civil society with a healthy respect for the institutional

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4 Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was written in the early days of the French Revolution when the transition for the Ancien Regime to the new republican government had not yet taken its violence and anarchical turn. There was much popular support for the Revolution at this time. Burke feared outcomes of the Revolution had not yet transpired. Burke’s reflections were also predictions of what he believed would happen as a result of the unfettered application of the rights of man theory to a state with a weak civil society.
constraints that government provided is the check that allowed for people to be free, while at the same time, allowed society to continue to function in a meaningful way. This was according to Burke the “real rights of men.” (Burke [1790] 1970, 149) He would state that society had a critical political purpose.

If civil society be made for the advantage of man, all the advantages for which it is made become his right. It is an in institution of beneficence; and law itself is only beneficence acting by a rule. Men have a right to live by that rule; they have a right to justice; as between their fellows, whether their fellows are in politic function or in ordinary occupation. They have a right to the fruits of their industry; and to the means of making their industry fruitful. They have the right the acquisition of their parents; to the nourishment and improvement of their offspring; to instruction in life, and to consolation in death. Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself; and he has a right to a fair portion of all which society, with all its combination of skill and force, can do in his favour. (Burke [1790] 1970, 149)

Civil society not only protects the rights of the individual, but creates a beneficial environment for all individuals to share in. If everyone was free to do whatever they wanted, then no one could be ensured that their rights would be respected by others. Burke argued that civil society provided the bulwark that defended the rights of the individual. Burke did not believe in the specific rights that were central to the Rights of Man Theory; instead, he focused on the relationship between the individual and the institutions of their society which he believed could ensure self-preservation and happiness. Burke made an appeal to classical liberalism- the only restriction that government should place on the individual is when in the exercise of their liberties they infringe on the rights of another. Burke believed that this was possible without the addition of the Rights of Man theory.

Burke’s notions were attractive to Wilson from a young age and were important
to the formation of his political thinking. Wilson saw this relationship between the individual and society as an evolving concern. According to Wilson’s conception, such a relationship could not be static and, therefore, had to be organic. Of course, this assumed that an organic system had to be dynamic. Moreover, the importance that Burke placed on institutions was an idea that Wilson could readily absorb. However, Wilson saw causal link between the individual and the institutions of society running both ways. Just as the individual had to act within the limitations of society, society had to respond to changes in the environmental pressures that it encountered. This interdependence was a major characteristic of a self-governing organic society for Wilson. By its very definition, an organic society would strive to be self-governing in Wilson’s estimation.

Wilson’s anglophilia made Burke and other English authors (who Wilson read as agreeing with Burke’s analysis) appealing. This group of English writers was part of what the political scientist Ronald Pestritto called the English Historical School. This is a useful, but problematic designation that Pestritto assigned to a loose coalition of English writers including Burke, Walter Bagehot, and Herbert Spencer (Pestritto 2005). It is helpful in discussing Wilson because the ideas of these three political observers appear across Wilson’s writings, and it is useful to think of them as an unit. The ‘historical’ in the English Historical School comes from Leo Strauss’s description of what he called the historical school. According to Strauss:

The historical school emerged in reaction to the French Revolution and to the natural right doctrines that had prepared the cataclysm. In opposing the violent break with the past, the historical school insisted on the wisdom and on the need of preserving or continuing the traditional order. (Strauss 1950, 13)

Pestritto took Strauss’s idea and created a sub-set of English historical writers to
distinguish them from other writers in the historical school. It is arguable that these English authors were writing in a uniquely ‘English’ context and had specific issues with which they had to deal with that other writers outside of England did not. According to Pestritto’s definition, the English Historical School rejected the Rights of Man Theory and, instead, believed that “political principles ought to be grounded in the concrete historical reality of one’s own time and place” (Pestritto 2005, 11).

The English Historical School, is a title that is helpful in that it is convenient, but it is a bit misleading because there were substantial differences between these men, and they probably would not have associated themselves in a single school of political thought. This designation is a methodological distinction. However, as important as that is, it is critical to note that this does not mean that these authors agreed with one another as to the policy prescriptions they made. The policy recommendations proposed by these authors varied greatly from strict laissez-faire to statist policy. With this caveat in mind, this designation is still useful, and I will use this label to refer to this group of Anglo political thinkers.

Wilson believed that all politics was organic, and he derived this belief from an application of the organic society theses as articulated by the English Historical School. The most notable of these thinkers in Wilson’s theory of the state was Edmund Burke. It is possible to understand Wilson’s connection to the English Historical School as being primarily through Burke, with the remaining authors of secondary importance. Wilson would refer to Burke’s concept of adjustment over his career in both academics and politics. Wilson conceptualized that any healthy society was continually undergoing a
process of adjustment. The way Wilson understood adjustment was that it was a process of thousands of small, often imperceptible changes taking place between the members of a political community. These manifold changes interacted with one another in numerous and untold, ways which was collectively the basis for a social consensus. According to this Wilsonian understanding, it is this adjustment that creates social norms and makes a society receptive to new political ideas, institutions, and policies.

The organic-progressive principle which Wilson developed was a conglomeration of ideas that he absorbed from three intellectual traditions which had influenced him during his formative years. As has been noted, the English Historical School was important in directing Wilson’s concept of society, but as has already been mentioned, there were two other sources that had an influence on Wilson’s thinking. One was the Christian tradition and the other was German idealism. These both appealed not only to Wilson’s evolutionary sensibility, but to his moral concerns. The Christian tradition was viewed by Wilson as a progression of humanity towards salvation. German idealism was a progression of humanity towards freedom. All three of these intellectual traditions have an organic element at their centers. Remember that Wilson equated organicism with the concept of evolution. It was this that enabled him to tie these three traditions together in the way that he did. This could be problematic since the evolution of human potential takes different forms in each of the three traditions, but Wilson would argue that those differences really were not differences, and when that argument failed, he would minimize them to the point that they did not merit consideration. It was the
common denominator of organcism in each of these traditions that attracted Woodrow Wilson to them.

In the three sources of Wilson’s political thought, the English Historical School, Christian tradition, and German idealism, the organic element is the animating force that moves events along. Wilson believed that since all of these traditions contained an organic element, it denoted a general agreement between them. Although all three were incomplete in explaining human behavior, Wilson seemed to believe that they all pointed to a larger and more complete truth that was yet to be fully revealed. This was the historical struggles towards the most effective forms of political institutions that would be the most beneficial towards society as a whole. Wilson believed that his recognition of this fact was an important step forward in identifying an axiom that would better explain the human understanding of political organization.

In terms of his internationalism, Wilson believed that ensuring the peaceful co-existence of nations would be most beneficial to their societies, but this like any other political reform could, not be achieved without leadership. Because this struggle would be carried out on the world stage, it would be aided by a cadre of individuals who would provide political leadership not only in their own society, but they would also have an effect on humanity’s progress. These individual were what Hegel called world-historical figures, and Wilson accepted this concept. (There is a discussion of Wilson’s idea of political leadership in a later chapter). These individuals would consciously or unconsciously help to move their respective societies along the arc of history. The efforts of these individual would be of great benefit to their societies and humanity in general.
German Idealism and Progress

The progressive side of the organic-progressive principle came from Wilson’s exposure to German idealism, particularly the political thought of Hegel and Kant. Wilson was attracted to Hegel’s systematic thinking as it applied to politics, and it is possible to see Wilson’s idea of progressivism aligned with the Hegelian notion of progress. Wilson’s progressivism was inspired by Hegel’s comprehensive view of the long arc of human development. The organic society provided Wilson with a mechanism that exposed political communities to continual change. As a community changes, social norms change as well, and political institutions develop in concert with this changes.

Wilson came into contact with German idealism formally and in a systematic way when he attended graduate school. From Wilson’s writings, it appears that he was already well acquainted with at least the basic elements of German idealism. This would make sense since Wilson had more than likely gained exposure to these ideas from his prior education. One of the first books he checked out from the Princeton Library as an undergraduate was Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, and by the time Wilson went to law school, German idealism had already begun to permeate American jurisprudence. (Bragdon 1967, 22) Also, Wilson continued reading outside of school. His decision to go to Johns Hopkins was more than likely influence by his already substantial intellectual capacities. Wilson had a strong disposition to accept the principles of German idealism because they seem to fit naturally into his concept of the organic society. Burke and the English Historical School helped to create in Wilson’s mind the image of a malleable society that was capable of change. However, that change needed to be in positive
direction because change for the sake of change without leading to discernable improvement was a waste of a society’s energy and potentially dangerous to the sinews that held society together (Wilson [1913], 1961).

In his mind, Wilson needed order, and he did fear that movement could easily be confused with real improvement. Wilson addresses this danger in is 1912 presidential campaign:

Now, movement has no virtue in itself. Change is not worth while for its own sake. I am not one of those who love variety for its own sake. Most of our calculations in life are dependent upon things staying the way they are… Change is not worth while unless it is improvement …All progress depends on how fast you are going, and where you are going, and I fear there has too much of this thing of knowing neither how fast we were going or where we were going. (Wilson [1913] 1961, 37-38)

It was in German idealism that Wilson found a satisfactory explanation that gave history a positive direction. It gave Wilson the “where,” although perhaps not the speed, but moving slowly down the right path was always better then proceeding quickly down the wrong path. Therefore, the “where” or the direction of the movement would be the priority between the two and German idealism provided this for Wilson. This explanation appealed to his scientific and religiously informed sensibilities. Remember, Wilson’s strong religious convictions gave him a belief that humanity was moving towards its own betterment with the ultimate result being salvation. However, salvation as a purely religious function would not be until some distant point in the future in Wilson’s estimation. This day of reckoning would be an extraordinary event, but it did not fit into the normal course of human history nor impact the natural functions, like politics, of human society. Wilson believed it bordered on sacrilege to simply wait for the
millennium. Although his faith was important to him, I believe that Wilson needed something more tangible than faith to give his pre-existing political thought an direction that would separate it from the brutality of the evolutionary process.

He found what he was looking for in German idealism, primarily in Hegel’s theory of history. It helped Wilson in providing a secular description of a process that he was familiar with in a religious sense. Hegel had said that the rational flows out of the irrational. From this, Wilson could conclude that the core truths of religion that he was exposed to as a youth were more fully explained in the secular process that he found in Hegel’s theory of history. Religious and secular understanding of history could be self-reinforcing. This allowed Wilson to conflate organicism with progressivism. In Wilson’s mind, these two became the same; otherwise, the explanatory power of his conception of society would not be sufficient to meet his expectations.

Wilson attended Johns Hopkins University in the early 1880s. Hopkins was a new school built on the then innovative idea of the German research university. This was a new educational concept that had only recently been imported to the United States. As a graduate student at Johns Hopkins, Wilson met in what was known as the Historical Seminary Room. This was a large conference room where history and political science classes were held. (This was before history and political science were seen as completely separate disciplines and courses overlapped.) In a picture taken of the interior of the room at about the time that Wilson would have been a frequent denizen, one can see painted across the front wall in large letters the mantra “History is past Politics and Politics present History” (Bragdon 1967, fifth picture plate following page 98).
FIGURATIVE OR PERHAPS LITERAL WAY, WILSON MUST HAVE READ THE WRITING ON THE WALL DURING HIS TIME IN GRADUATE SCHOOL. IT WAS A MESSAGE THAT WILSON HAD ALREADY TAKEN TO HEART, ALTHOUGH HE WOULD HAVE TO MODIFY SOME OF THE METHODS HIS PROFESSORS TAUGHT. OVERALL, THIS EXPOSURE TO HISTORICISM WOULD ACT TO AID WILSON IN REFINING HIS IDEAS THAT RESULTED IN HIS ORGANIC-PROGRESSIVE PRINCIPLE.

WILSON’S UNDERSTANDING OF PROGRESSIVISM CAME FROM THIS RARIFIED ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT AND WAS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER POLITICAL MOVEMENTS COMMONLY ASSOCIATED WITH PROGRESSIVISM THAT WERE TAKING PLACE IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE SAME TIME. THESE DOMESTIC POLITICAL MOVEMENTS WERE NOT ANTECEDENTS TO WILSON’S DEVELOPMENT OF HIS INTELLECTUAL FRAMEWORK THAT WOULD RESULT IN THE ORGANIC-PROGRESSIVE PRINCIPLE. IN GENERAL, THESE MOVEMENTS INCLUDED BOTH AGRARIAN POPULISM AND INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM. IN WOULD SEEM THAT IN THE SPIRIT OF PROGRESSIVISM WILSON WOULD BE A SUPPORTER OF BOTH OF THESE MOVEMENTS, BUT, IN REALITY, HE WAS NOT. MOREOVER, WILSON WAS SUSPICIOUS OF BOTH OF THESE MOVEMENTS THROUGHOUT HIS ACADEMIC CAREER.

WILSON BELIEVED THAT THE AGRARIAN POPULISTS WERE POLITICALLY NAÏVE AND INTELLECTUALLY UNSOPHISTICATED. THEIR GROWING ELECTORAL SUCCESSES IN THE 1880S MADE THEM POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS IF THEY EVER GAINED A POSITION IN WHICH THEY COULD MAKE IMPORTANT POLICY DECISIONS. DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION MEANT THAT THE PEOPLE VOTED FOR THE BEST MEN, BUT THOSE MEN WERE FROM THE EDUCATED ELITE, NOT THE FARM. THIS WAS AN ELITE VERSION OF BURKE’S TRUSTEE THEORY OF REPRESENTATION. WILSON CONSIDERED THE UNIONIST MOVEMENT TO BE JUST AS DANGEROUS IF NOT MORE SO BECAUSE UNIONS POTENTIALLY THREATEN SOCIAL DISRUPTION AND UNTIMELY REVOLUTION. REVOLUTION WAS THE ANTITHESIS OF WILSON’S CONCEPT OF THE ORGANIC
society. Slow change that was acceptable to the society as a whole, not demands spurred on by civil violence, would move that society into a more just order. Foreign-born industrial workers fighting Pinkertons and strike breakers could not be the road to reform and social improvement in Wilson’s view. He might have understood the impulse, but he did not condone the activities of the Unions. This was not what Hegel’s theory of history predicted, so Wilson was indifferent to these movements at best. Wilson saw socialism as a sincere but misguided alternative to his form of progressivism. The problems that gnaw at socialists could be solved with proper ‘adjustment’ of the laws of the nation. (Wilson [1913] 1961, 36)

It was not until Wilson ran for president that he would try to make his peace with these movements, but this was more for political expediency then any deep seated intellectual desire. Large numbers of the Democratic Party’s constituents were in these movements, and Wilson’s chance of winning the White House depended on attracting them to his campaign. Most notably was the ally with William Jennings Bryan. Before his political career, Wilson had spoken poorly of Bryan and his brand of populism, but the two men joined forces in 1912 and, after his election, Wilson appointed Bryan his Secretary of State. Bryan, a pacifist, would resign the position in 1915 during the war scare after the sinking of the Lusitania. (See Kazin, 2006 for a more detailed account of Wilson relationship to Bryan) This is why the New Freedom, Wilson’s name for his presidential campaign, was largely an economic program that tried to address the problems of the members of these movements in an indirect way. It is possible to connect Wilson’s economic attitude to that of the German Idealists, particularly Kant.
Susan Shell made the observation that Kant believed that there would be material inequality in society; therefore, the goal of government was not to level the economic situation between every individual, but to ensure legal equality for all regardless of a person’s social-economic condition (Bloom 2003, 272). This is the idea of the equality of opportunity rather than the equality of results. This is helpful in understanding why Wilson viewed the *New Freedom* not just as an economic program but a call for government action infused with a moral element. This attempt to unify Wilson’s ideas with populists and labor was never completely successful and Wilson was never completely comfortable with the political alliance he had made to win the presidency.

As Niels Thorsen noted in his book *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson*: Wilson did not inspire the mood of social activism and political reform usually associated with progressivism. In fact, most historians agree that he converted to the progressive temper rather late and largely for opportunistic reasons, but he eventually came to have great influence on the progressive agenda, and he enacted many of the reform proposals that were considered part and parcel of the progressive movement. (Thorsen 1988, ix)

Thorsen is correct in the sense that Wilson was slow to come to progressivism, as it was perceived in the American political sense and the political action that such a stance entailed; instead, Wilson had come to understand progressivism in the intellectual sense long before that. That understanding had been building in his mind since he was an adolescent. With his final exposure to German idealism, the American progress movement or, as Thorsen defined it, “the outrage over the social of large-scale industrial capitalism must have seemed somewhat provincial” (Thorsen 1988, ix).

Hegelian progressivism was framed in an epic way that made it applicable to not just one political community or any one special interest, but to all. The concerns of
farmers and industrial worker were not to be overlooked, but they were only a small factor in the larger unfolding of history. Wilson the thinker saw history in its full glory, but he would not have been able to affect that history if Wilson the politician did not deal with specific political issues. Hegel provided a universalizing idea and this helped to facilitate Wilson’s understanding of society and its relation to history; however, the relationship was harder to apply to the mundane issues of the price of a bushel of wheat or a workers hourly wage. Wilson was not blind to the link between the political and the economic. However, when Wilson thought of economics it was always via macro, not micro, analysis. This was characteristic of Wilson’s thinking in general. Wilson enjoyed inductive thinking, using big and sweeping ideas, and his mind was always ready to tackle large problems. His career in leadership reflected this, from the university, to the state, to the nation, and, finally, the world. International politics would be the largest canvas that Wilson would have the opportunity to work on. Wilson would take his economic attitude, based on a legalistic perspective, that he displayed in his domestic policy and transfer it to this foreign canvas.

Wilson has been called a “historical thinker,” because his political notions were not separated from his sense of history (Latham 1958). Both Burke and Hegel focused on history as the engine of change and political development, albeit in different ways. A part of Wilson’s problem was that he was trying to combine different concepts of history and politics. For all of Wilson’s emphasis on the importance of history and political development, his notion of the relationship between time and change was never well elaborated or systemized. In some instances, the amount of time which was necessary for
a society to grow was a protracted process taking years, decades, even centuries. Yet, in other instances, the amount of time was compressed. Because Wilson failed to explain his exact position, there are several cases where it is confusing to consider the effect of this relationship between time and change. This is an issue that I return to later.

The Implication of the Organic-Progressive Principle on Wilson’s Political Thought

The organic-progressive principle that Wilson fashioned to include the multiple concepts that he used in his political thought was not without costs, and there are several issues that arose from it. The first of these dealt with the issue of the source of rights. By hybridizing Burke and Hegel, Wilson moved away from the idea of natural rights. For Wilson’s organic-progressive principle to work, rights had to have a historical, not natural, basis. If one believed that rights had a natural basis, then those rights would be based on values that transcend history; therefore, the values that established the basis for human rights remain the same no matter where one was in history. Governments have not always recognized these rights, but they have always existed. The belief in transhistorical, or natural, rights creates a criterion by which one can judge the legitimacy of government. If a government recognizes those rights then that is a properly functioning government. However, if this government fails to uphold those rights then that government is no longer legitimate.

Burke moved away from the Rights of Man theory, a key to the understanding of government as a social contract. He argued against the idea of specific rights that applied to all people, all of the time. However, Burke did not do away with the idea of rights. He
still had a generalized notion of rights. In Burke, rights were maintained by the interactions within civil society, not by some appeal to the abstract notion of rights. Burke made this argument because he believed that individuals on the whole were not rational. All Individuals retain the right to self-preservation and happiness in Burke, while rationality was a quality that was developed only by a few. Wilson accepted Burke’s rejection of natural rights for this much looser notion of rights. Wilson moved away from the idea of transhistorical rights towards a historically based notion of rights (Pestritto 2005). He did this because it would not be possible to support his organic-progressive principle without doing so.

Woodrow Wilson framed his political argument in terms of freedom and the rights that produced it. Freedom is a central pillar in American political culture, so the fact that Wilson often spoke of it may not seem surprising. However, his conceptualization of freedom and the rights that ensured it were drawn from a different place than early notions of freedom in American history. For Wilson, freedom was a concept that was moderated by the civil society in America. It was the organic relationship, not the social contract, which ensured the pillars of self-government in the United States. Americans had to recognize this fact and allow government to grow and transform in a natural and organic way.

Because Wilson held an evolutionary view of institutional development, it might seen that it would be difficult for him to argue that the final end point of that development would be human freedom. But, like Hegel, Wilson could argue that history’s ends were somehow preordained, and that end was one in which the struggles of
history would cease and the result would be a world in which humanity would be free. In this theory of history, the idea that there is a system of immutable natural rights robs history of its purpose. Organicism becomes more questionable, if not unnecessary, if one adheres to the belief in natural rights because the idea of freedom does not need to grow from one generation to the next. Wilson’s evolutionary views meant that he believed that the concept of freedom developed and was passed down from one generation to the next. This would be something akin to a genetic characteristic being passed from parent to child. Neither Darwin nor Wilson explained it in exactly these terms since the puzzle of inherence via DNA would not be solved by Watson and Crick until the 1950s, but the very concept of evolution would need some vehicle to transmit the improvements from generation to generation. However, both men were aware of breeding, and breeding experiments provided practical evidence of such a mechanism existed, although the scientific explanation was still decades away. (Darwin discussed breeding in the *Origin of Species*, and Wilson grew up in the agrarian society of southern United States where such knowledge was common.)

The concept of natural rights is problematic for a system like the one Wilson produced. If Wilson had accepted natural rights, it might have been possible for him to argue that a society still developed in some way, but the paramount reasoning behind the organic society would be greatly weakened in such a scheme. Also, the concept of progressivism in its philosophical sense disappears as well. One need not take a journey if one is already at his or her destination. If rights are natural, then they are discovered. If rights are transhistorical, then they are developed. Wilson rejected the idea of
transhistorical rights and replaced it with a historical basis for rights leading to his conflation of organicism and progressivism. Otherwise, there would have been nothing to stop his evolutionary ideas from moving down the path of Social Darwinism. Change without a positive purpose was something that a man so entrenched in the Christian tradition could not conceive. Wilson needed to maintain a sense of human dignity, no matter its source, be it religious or secular. However, Wilson did not simply depend on a religious justification. Wilson would use religious and secular reasoning to support his claim. It created a dual explanation, either one could independently explain what Wilson was trying to explicate. However, Wilson tied the two together create a self-reinforcing, but parallel scheme

Wilson could have stayed within the parameters that Burke laid out to maintain rights, but he did not. Perhaps because Wilson did not feel that Burke made a strong enough argument to support progress. Instead, Wilson turned to idealism. He shifted the sources of rights from the natural source prescribed in the Rights of Man theory to the Kantian idea of human dignity and freedom. The idealistic definition of freedom was centered within human history and provided a clear direction towards the better.

Wilson’s source for human rights was freedom, as found in Kant and Hegel. This was the idea that each individual was a free and sovereign actor. Each person had to respect everyone else because of this fact. This was a radical redefinition of freedom in the America context. When Wilson talked of freedom, he was using the Kantian definition which was not the same definition used by the American Founders. However, in a practical way there was nothing in this Kantian definition that the American
Founders would disagree with. This was Wilson’s point. The logic behind Wilson’s argument was that this definition of freedom was, in effect, the same as that of the Founders, so nothing was lost by replacing it with the older definition. In addition this definition of freedom provided the basis of a newer, and better, understanding of society that provided an outline for a new international order. Wilson shifted from a transhistorical to historical definition of rights. Freedom, as Wilson defined it as the source of rights, would be essential to Wilson’s internationalism.

Wilson’s idea of reform of the political system can be understood as a movement from negative liberty to positive liberty, as defined by Isaiah Berlin in his essay Two Concepts of Liberty. A positive liberty is freedom from having restrictions placed on an individual’s activities. A negative liberty is a restriction on an individual’s activities. Positive liberty denotes a passive role for government. Negative liberty denotes an active role for government. Wilson did not use this terminology of positive and negative liberties, but the process that Wilson undertook could be explained as a shift from positive to negative liberties. Wilson saw this as a natural shift that resulted from the fact that society was organic, and he did not perceive this shift as a problematic movement between two categories of liberties. This tied into Wilson’s theory of history since it was only under a constitutional government (Wilson’s final form of government) that real and beneficial negative liberty could be undertaken by government. Before the advent of constitutional government, the predatory nature of ruling elite made it impossible for government to try and implement such a concept of liberty. The best government could

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55 Berlin essay, The Two Concepts of History would not be first published until 1958, more than three decades after Wilson’s death.
do in the past (i.e. in Jefferson’s day) was to uphold positive liberty. Wilson used Kant’s, and later Hegel’s, definition of liberty. On the surface, this definition of liberty might seem like the same as the founders, but it is different in terms of the positive-negative division. Negative liberty is problematic since it is more easily abused by government.

Berlin raised fear of authoritarianism. Wilson did not share this fear. A characteristic of Constitutional government would be a strong state, but the possibility of authoritarianism would be mitigated by the democratic nature of the regime. When Wilson spoke of “reforming” government, he was speaking of modifying democratic institutions in a government that already met the criteria of what Wilson called a Constitutional government. This is an important point because even if a government was constitutional, it was not fully developed according to Wilson’s schema. A constitutional government only worked if all of the players in it were active and government remained responsive to the continuing needs of society. A neglected constitutional government was still not free from stagnation, but stagnation was not the same thing as a revision to authoritarianism. Wilson noted in his essay The Modern Democratic State that the Aristotelian cycle of government and concluded that although democracy had a tendency to degeneracy into an authoritarian regime in the ancient world, this was not the case in the modern world. (PWW Vol.5, 61-93). If Aristocracy seems about to disappear, Democracy seems about universally to prevail.

Ever since the rise of popular education in the last century and its vast development since have assured a thinking weight to the masses of the people everywhere, the advance of democratic opinion and the spread of democratic institutions have been most marked and most significant. They have destroyed almost all pure forms of Monarchy and Aristocracy by introducing into them imperative forces of popular representation; and they promise to reduce politics to
a single form by excluding all other governing forces and institutions but those of a wide suffrage and a democratic representation—by reducing all forms of government to Democracy. (Wilson [1898] 1908, 581)

Government in the past had a tendency to become predatory, but this was curbed by a mixture of effective institutions, leadership, devoted bureaucracy, and educated and active citizenry. The political cycle that was pointed out by Aristotle was broken by the advancements of the modern age, according to Wilson.

Another issue that emerged from Wilson’s organic-progressive principle dealt with his definition of rationality. This is related to Wilson’s definition of freedom. Economic rationality, the predominant definition used in political science today, views the individual as a calculating creature that acts in hopes of deriving the greatest utility from one’s actions. This is a consequentialist view of behavior. Because Wilson used an idealistic context to frame his valuation of the individual, his definition of rationality could not be fully defined in economic terms. Wilson believed that humans had the capacity, once enlightened, to be compelled to act by a sense of duty and not merely self-interest. Personal enlightenment was the result of a very specific form of education. This ideal of education flowed directly out of the school of German idealism. This was Kant and Hegel’s notion of tapping into the spirit of the age. Rationality in this definition involves recognizing truth and the moral obligation to act on that truth once one is made aware of it. That truth, which is the substance of the spirit of the age, will change over time; therefore, the moral duty that the enlightened individual is compelled to, in the long historical view, will vary and will change over the historical epochs.

Wilson put his own American twist on this theory of education by focusing on
the ideas and values that he believed were essential to the American experience. Still, at its core, the process was the one developed by Kant and accepted by Hegel. It was concerned with the individual gaining an understanding of the great forces that moved humanity through history. Wilson believed that this would result in the development of a moral sense. Moreover, this newly developed sense would tie the individual to their local, national, and universal communities. However, each individual was free to act as he or she chose within this social framework. The hope was that given the immense weight of the knowledge before the successful student, this individual would be compel by an internal desire to act in a way deemed appropriate by Wilson.

A key to Wilson’s political thought was the closely related concept of free will. As Wilson understood it, every human being was a free moral agent. A rational individual who was educated properly would act in a moral way in Wilson’s estimation. They were not forced to act in such a way but would realize that it was the right way to act. This was the moral component of education. Rationality meant that an individual could not deny the truth once exposed to it. There was one exception to this. If an individual was unduly under the influence of evil, then that person could act in a contrary matter. Wilson had to account for evil because he maintained strong religious beliefs. It was quite helpful in constructing Wilson’s understanding of the world. If an apparently rational person disagreed with Wilson on an issue that had a solution that was clearly obvious to Wilson, then that person was either ignorant or misinformed about that issue. (A person would have to be mature enough to have the faculties to be rational; if not then it was permissible to treat them as an inferior.) This problem could be resolved easily by
educating that person on the issue, so they could see the truth in it. If, after the issue was completely explained, that person still did not agree, then something more nefarious was at work. That person was simply under the influence of evil and, as a result, did not have to be taken seriously while more extreme measures to compel that person to act in a socially acceptable matter might be justified.

This notion of moral action as a result of rationality, and the subsequent ideas of free will and evil, applied not just to individuals but to the political organizations that they created. Nations could be moral actors. This was the reason why Wilson talked of a moral diplomacy. This was especially true of self-governing nations. A democratic nation which had rationally elected representatives was the sum of its parts. Therefore, moral men could create a morally responsible government, and that government could be expected to act in a moral way towards other nations.

Finally, Wilson grounded his political thought in history and this made him a “historical thinker.” Burke had moved away from the idea that political organization could be based on an idea of naturally occurring rights and, in its place, inserted idiosyncratic cultural development as the arbiter of social organization. The German Idealists had used history as the moral compass of human society. Wilson integrated these two ideas together, and, for that reason, his historical thinking moved into the realm of historicism. History became the highest authority in determining the course and speed of political development.

However, because Wilson did not divorce the idea of divine transcendence from human history in his political thinking, his form of historicism was soft (PWW vol.7).
Hegel did use religion as a force in human development, but, according to a common interpretation of Hegel, he had an expectation that eventually spirit would be recognized as a secular thing that did not need a transcendence divine source (Fackenheim 1968). I believe that Wilson shared in this interpretation of Hegel. This was a point that Wilson did not share with Hegel. Also, this divine transcendence would spare Wilson from the conclusions that were reached by adherents of a later form of radical historicism. Spirit supplied a certain amount of variation between societies and this eased a sense of rigid determinism in Wilson’s thought, although in the end democratic government would become dominate, if not universal. This post-Hegelian form of historicism had at its core a relativism that removed the possible of any foundational source of spirit and was absolutely secular in its nature. Historicism became more and more deterministic in its formulation. Spirit was a barrier against strict determinism. However, the strength of this bulwark is of questionable quality. If Wilson did not maintain his appeal to some religious notion, then his intellectual framework would have begun to unravel. It might be possible to try and insert a secular alternative, but such a strategy would have created a much weaker argument and this would threaten to move Wilson closer to the radical historicism that he did not wish to approach. Political development was evolutionary, but Wilson needed that evolution to have a higher purpose that he believed could only be found in a divine source.

With historicism, the source of human rights loses its absolute nature and is tied to specific historical periods. When history moves into another period, there is a shift in the concept of rights for this new period. Thinkers were locked into their own age and
could only conceive of rights, or any issue for that matter, within the limits dictated by
the “Spirit of their Age.” However, modern thinkers would have the ability to look back
at ages gone by and see this progression and have some understanding as to where all of
this history would finally end. This is the idea of the “end of history.” The question is
how was this survey of history undertaken? What was it that freed the “modern” thinker
from this cycle of being bound to one’s age? If one wishes to have a God’s eye view,
then that God-space must be occupied by something. Therefore, either that God-space is
occupied by something divine or something secular. History may be unfolding for
humanity, but the knowledge of the final outcome must be held somewhere; otherwise,
there is no hope for humans to predict what that end will be. In Wilson’s
conceptualization, that place was the mind of God.

Wilson accepted the basic argument of the historical school but still maintained
some connection to a metaphysical source of influence on human behavior. Wilson
opened the back door for God. Nevertheless, that connection was sometime tenuous.
God was an important but somewhat removed figure in Wilson’s cosmos. God might
have been distant, but he was not dead. Since politics was a ready arena for the display
of proper moral action, Wilson drew a close association between religion and politics.
The act of governing was a sacred duty to Wilson. Wilson saw his “moral diplomacy” as
an innovation. The time had finally come to reorganize the basis of international
relations. According to Wilson’s long arc of history, an idea could only be made manifest
if society was prepared to accept, it and for Wilson, in the wake of the catastrophe of the
First World War the time was propitious.
Wilson in the Literature

There has been considerable scholarly research on Woodrow Wilson. The literature on Wilson covers many areas and comes out of several academic quarters. These works are arrayed across a spectrum starting from the extremely sympathetic and continuing all the way to the brutally critical. Historians, political scientists, international relations scholars, psychologists, economists, legal scholars, and medical doctors have scrutinized numerous aspects of Wilson’s political thinking. This places Wilson at a nexus of cross-disciplinary research which makes a survey of the literature on Wilson challenging.

Of particular interest to this study is the extensive work that has focused on Wilson’s foreign policy, although as has been seen, many of the concepts that would shape Wilson’s internationalism would be present in his comments on domestic issues. Much of this scholarship is directed at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 because of the importance that event had on European and world history for the rest of the twentieth century. Paris 1919 was the last time so many gathered for an extended period to decide such weighty issues as peace to and redraw the map so thoroughly. It was an event of high drama and has been the source of much scholarship, with the majority of this work coming from historians. Appropriately, the Conference has been called the “Six Months that Changed the World.” This has become the subtitle of a popular account of the peace conference (Macmillan 2001, Also see Langer 1958; Seymour 1958; Czernin 1964; Levin 1970; Schulzinger 1984, chapter 2; Knock 1992; Herring 2008, chapter 10; Kennedy 2009). It was here that Wilson’s internationalism took center stage as he tried to
articulate his internationalism to the leaders of the allied powers, often with mixed results.

There have been a number of biographies of Woodrow Wilson that are helpful in understanding his internationalism to the extent that they provide historical context and describe his actions, which is a starting point to better comprehending the intellectual framework that undergirded Wilson’s political thought. These include Link (1947-1965), Heckscher (1991), Clements (1999), Brands (2003), and Cooper (2009). Wilson’s early life before he became president was the topic of Bragdon’s *Woodrow Wilson: the Academic Years* (1967), John M. Mulder *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation* (1978), and W. Barksdale Maynard’s *Woodrow Wilson: Princeton to the Presidency* (2008). Much of the work on Wilson done by these historians does not adequately explore Wilson’s political thought to a satisfactory degree. This should not be unexpected since a theoretical explanation of Wilson’s political thought is not the primary goal of the many historians who have written about him. Although several of these authors make comments on Wilson’s motives, many of these historical texts tend to generalize about Wilson’s thought and the influences on it. Still, there is valuable information spread across the biographical work on Wilson, but in most cases, it lacks comprehensiveness or consistency.

Historians debate Wilson’s positions and the meaning of his internationalism. Link, Brands, Cooper, Bragdon, Mulder, and Maynard are sympathetic to Wilson on the whole. He is viewed as an enlightened individual who had ideas that were before his time. However, these historians make the argument that Wilson must be placed in context
to understand some of the less than progressive attitudes that he displayed in both his
domestic and international politics. For example, Wilson’s attitude towards race relations
is one of these thorny issues that had to be explained in such a way.

Heckscher and Clements were more critical of Wilson. Their criticism focused on
the limitations of the progressive movement in general. According to these authors, the
progressives suffered from the problem of greatly oversimplifying issues and believing
that it was possible to solve massive social problems with relatively superficial efforts.
According to these authors, Wilson, being the champion of progressivism, also tended to
oversimplify issues. As a result, his internationalism was naïve. Progressives had a hard
easy time analyzing domestic issues with which they were familiar. This problem was
compounded when they turned to international issues. The writers claim that the
progressives simply did not have the proper inclinations or analytical abilities to
understand the complex issues in the international arena. Despite the best of intentions,
progressives failed to create coherent policies and they detracted from national security
concerns at the highest levels.

An example of a historian who tried to explain Woodrow Wilson’s political
thought as it was expressed through his internationalism was Arthur S. Link. Link
devoted a large part of his academic career to studying Wilson. Surprisingly, for all the
time that Link devoted to studying Wilson, his analysis of Wilson’s political thought and
internationalism varied over time. Link saw Wilson as a complex personality and not
easily explainable. According to Link, Wilson’s political skills were his ability to
“articulate in moving terms the high ideas of economic and social justice for which
progressivism stood.” Yet, Link highlighted that Wilson suffered from “excessive moralism, self-righteousness, partisanship, and a tendency to trust in his own judgment and that of a small coterie of advisors” (Link and McCormick 1983, 44). Link is not the only scholar to point to these negative characteristics that Wilson possessed which are a point of great debate when examining Wilson.

Link’s list of Wilson’s negative attributes would seem to put the character of Wilson in a poor light, but these characteristics could be interpreted as a description of many American presidents in the twentieth century. Link viewed moralism, self-righteousness, and self-worth as distasteful, but they could be also used to describe an individual with a well developed sense of self-confidence. This is an attribute that is necessary to survive the rigors of national public office. Being inclined towards a party and having a small group of advisors is common, if not necessary, for any politician but particularly for one that aspires to the White House. Link might have pointed out characteristics that he found less than noble, but those very characteristics describe the modern American politician.

It was Link who described Woodrow Wilson as a synthetic thinker. According to Link, Woodrow Wilson was not an original thinker; instead, he collected other’s ideas and put these ideas together in a novel way. Wilson had an ability to “absorb ideas and to assimilate and synthesize them rapidly” (Link 1958, 5). Also, according to Link, Wilson had an ability to “cut through verbiage or a maze of detail and to go to the essentials of any problem.” (Link 1958, 5) However, Link did not see a connection between the intellectual sources that Wilson wove together. Link would conclude that Wilson’s
political ideas were convoluted. It was too difficult to perceive any general precepts about Wilson’s political philosophy before 1913.

…Wilson’s political thought simply cannot be studied as a whole. There are too many incongruities, too many contradictions if the scholar attempts to analyze them without reference to chronology and changing circumstances. What has to be done, rather, is to consider the periods of Wilson’s political thought. (Link 1947, 31)

For a scholar who spent so much time in studying Wilson, Link made a serious concession in this statement. He effectively closed the door to understanding Wilson as a systematic political thinker until later in his life. From this analysis, it would appear that Wilson was some type of theoretical chameleon. This position seems to remove the idea that Wilson had a core concept that held his political thought together over his lifetime, and it creates an unsatisfying portrait of Wilson as a political thinker.

More specifically to Wilson’s internationalism, Link indentified three foundations of Wilson’s foreign policy in *Wilson as Diplomatist (1957)*. The first point was Wilson’s strong religiosity. This was the result of the strong role of religious faith present in Wilson’s life from birth. Woodrow Wilson’s father, Joseph Ruggles Wilson, was a Presbyterian minister and a major influence in his son’s life. Throughout his formative years, the young Thomas Woodrow Wilson was, in both the literal and figurative senses, surrounded by the church, and this developed a sense of intense spirituality that would stay with him over the course of his life. Later in life, Woodrow Wilson shortened his name. During his youth, he was called Tommy by people who were close to him. When he was about twenty years old, the young man dropped the Thomas because he believed it was too juvenile and settled on what he believed to be the more professional name
Woodrow Wilson. He also liked the alliteration that the name produced. It was an added touch for a man who believed that he would pursue a literary career. (Although throughout his life, certain friends and family members would still called him Tommy.)

His religiosity is an observation that all Wilson scholars make to one degree or another. It is safe to conclude that anyone researching Wilson has to account for his religiosity before any satisfactory account of Wilson’s internationalism can be rendered. Some scholars take this point to the extreme claiming that Wilson can be simply understood as trying to impart a faith-based foreign policy (Magee 2008). All of Wilson’s political thought can be traced back to basic Christian values, but it is too oversimplified to state that Wilson’s political thought is merely based on Christian values. This does not account for the large intellectual framework that Wilson constructed to justify these Christian values. Wilson believed that there was a moral force that could be used as an organizing principle in international relations, and that morality was based on Christian principle (Blum 1956). Therefore, it would be an error of the first degree not to take into account Wilson’s religiosity when investigating Wilson’s internationalism. It was a starting point of a larger intellectual framework, but this intellectual framework cannot be fully explained by simply calling it an application of Christian theology.

The next point in Link’s analysis in Wilson as Diplomat was Wilson’s belief that democracy was the best form that government could take. Wilson divided governing regimes into those that were imposed on the people (until quite recently in human history, this was the form that the vast majority of governments took) and self-government. In the
Wilsonian understanding, the progressive thesis pointed to self-government. Democracy was the most humane and Christian in Wilson’s estimation and not just a possibility among several alternative regime types, as it had been in ancient political thought. It was the best of all possible regime types and had an universalizing tendency which accounted for its potential ability to spread to all nations.

Wilson’s ideas on this point reflected a modification of Whig history that he had encountered in his reading of English history. Because Wilson saw the historical process as evolutionary, not mechanical, he supposed himself to hold beliefs that were much more sophisticated than what he viewed as the older and cruder British Whiggish political thought. (Wilson [1908] 2002) Even though Wilson tried to differentiate himself from this Whig theory, the general progressive idea is the same in the mechanical or evolutionary view. The ability for democracy to spread, under salubrious conditions, was a phenomenon that Wilson wished to cultivate, and it became the highest goal of his foreign policy when he was president. This provides an insight to Wilson’s post World War One aspirations.

Link’s third observation on Wilson’s internationalism in *Wilson as Diplomat* revolved around the place of the United States of America in future world politics. Wilson believed that the United States had a special mission. Link has been extremely influential in Wilson scholarship, and this observation has been taken by many subsequent authors to be equivalent to Wilson’s belief in American exceptionalism causing a great deal of confusion. According to the concept of American exceptionalism, the founding of the United States was based not only on ideas of self-governance, but
done in a way that avoided the corruption that was strangling the Old World. Americans
in some way where able to embody the spirit of true republicanism in a way that was
impossible for their European brethren. This made the United States not just different
from Europe, but better than it. America was the home of a true republican virtue that
could only be born and grow in the vastness of the Brave New World of North America
far away from the corrupt monarchies of the Old World.

The argument for American Exceptionalism concludes that free and self-
governing polities could not spring from European despotism, and, in this way, America
was exceptional; however, this was not exactly how Wilson constructed his idea of
American Exceptionalism. Wilson saw the United States as a continuation of the ideas of
self-government first developed in England in the centuries before the first Europeans
stepped onto the shores of the Americas. From his evolutionary perspective, Wilson
viewed these ideas as being passed down from one generation of Englishmen to the next
and, eventually, crossing the Atlantic where they took root in the American mind. There
was a long historical arc that straddled the Atlantic between England and America. After
the Revolution, America and England developed different democratic institutions. In
Wilson’s estimation, England had a better set of institutions on the whole when compared
to the United States. Nevertheless, the spirit of democracy was alive in both nations, and
in an organic sense, this is much more important than questions of institutional design.
Wilson ascribed this spirit of self-government not just to a national origin, but to a racial
one as well. Wilson connected this spirit to an innovation of the Anglo-Saxon race. It
was not American Exceptionalism, but Anglo-Saxon Exceptionalism.
Wilson’s anglophile would cause problems for him during the Great War. When the conflict erupted, England’s beleaguered status left Wilson incapable of acting as a disinterested party in any attempt to negotiate an end to the conflict, although he would try to fill that role during the first years of the war. After the United States entered the War, Wilson believed that the United States had been pushed into the War by aggressive Germany naval policies, not, as others at the time thought, a combination of pressure, some of which might have which emanated from England. Wilson made it a point that the United States joined the war effort as an associate and not allied power. This rhetorical point was necessary for Wilson to denote the special position of the United States in the War. Furthermore, he deemed it essential that he, as representative of the United States, be a, if not the, leader in the peace that would follow after the fighting had ceased. The result of this desire would be the Fourteen Points. This was a plan that Wilson believed would be acceptable to the English in no small part due to fact of the common political culture and, by extension, Anglo-Saxon heritage that the two nations shared.

It is important to understand that Wilson thought in racial terms. This was a residual effect of the evolutionary thinking of his day reinforced by his Southern upbringing. The then accepted concept of racial characteristics as a cause of mental inferiority has since disappeared in academic social science. The idea of assigning a characteristic to an entire “race” is not something that is taken seriously. The biological notion of race was an idea that was perpetuated in 18th and 19th century anthropology. After the horrific application of these ideas in the mid-20th century, the unsupported biological notion of race evaporated as an idea with merit in academia. However, Wilson
and his generation came before these historical traumas; indeed, the idea of race as a biological certainty was very much alive for them. The evolutionary understanding of political development and race (as a stand in for specie) made sense to men of that day. The pseudo-scientific study of race as a biological characteristic that determined the abilities of individuals in specific groups was very much in the mainstream of serious academic thought in Wilson’s day. Race was a factor that Wilson took very seriously in his political analysis, and there is no way around this fact. Wilson believed that more advanced races would lead the way for less advanced races in terms of political development.

Historians from the left saw Wilson’s rhetoric as a poor façade for his lack of understanding of the true sources of the problems that the United States faced in the first decades of the twentieth century. The progressive historian, Richard Hofstadter’s view of Woodrow Wilson was typical of historians on the left. In *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, Hofstadter called Wilson the “Conservative as liberal.” Hofstadter attributes Wilson’s political thought to his religious sensitivities, southern upbringing, and his admiration of the British liberal tradition. According to Hofstadter, Wilson was “only slightly influenced by the German historical school” during his graduate studies at Johns Hopkins (Hofstadter 1948, 320).

This may have been true in a methodological sense. Wilson as a historian was not impressed with the practical methods used by German historians, but he was influenced by the way that the German idealists interpreted history. To this point, Hofstadter said nothing, but this was so ingrained in the progressive historiography shared by both
Hofstadter and Wilson that it could be easily overlooked. Hofstadter did not see progressivism as a radical idea; he was more concerned with how one acted on those ideas. He did not see the actions of a true progressive in Wilson and had to explain this seeming inconsistency. To make this explanation, Hofstadter claimed that Wilson was closer to Burke than Jefferson, which made sense because Wilson discounted Jefferson due to the latter’s supported the Rights of Man Theory, according to Hofstader. It was this association to Burke, the father of conservatism, that accounted for Wilson’s propensity to be conservative in his outlook.

As a prototypical criticism of Wilson by Progressive historians, this might tell us more about the historians than Wilson. The Progressive historians as a group accepted a materialist point of view. From this, Hofstader pointed out that Wilson’s greatest failure was his inability to deal with economic issues. From a materialist perspective, economy broadly defined as the acquisition of scarce goods as a root of social power is the basis of all human activity (Brown 2006). This would mean that a failure to understand economic issues would be a failure to understand the essence of human nature. Hofstadter, like other historians of his school of thought, looked at the economic system that had developed in early 20th century America as fundamentally unjust because of the inequities in wealth between classes that the system created.

Hofstadter’s interpretation of Woodrow Wilson centered on the argument that he did not understand the root causes of the economic problems in the United States. Wilson was concerned about the lack of an individual ability to succeed in an economic system dominated by large corporations. Wilson wanted to return to a pre Civil War notion of
the self-made man as the model for economic success. However, in this new corporate
world this return was impossible, according to Hofstadter. Wilson failed to grasp that the
reason was the system, not just the abuse of it, causing these imbalances. Wilson tried to
treat the symptoms of the economic sickness that the nation faced, and then only
begrudgingly.

The problem was structural, according to Hofstadter. Wilson never considered
the sweeping changes that were necessary to fundamentally transform the system to
ensure a more equitable distribution of income between the classes. Working from such
assumptions, Wilson was viewed as timid. For Hofstadter, Wilson was not radical
enough and needed to do much more to change the economic system through the political
power he possessed as president. This problem spilled over into Wilson’s
internationalism. Without breaking the economic power structure that drove the
international system, no real change in the system was possible. Hence, all of Wilson’s
ideas were stillborn, since he never addressed these issues. Wilson was not progressive
enough for Hofstadter; therefore, he was not a true progressive and could not be
considered one. Hofstadter focused on the organic, but missed the progressivism in
Wilson’s political thought.

Idealism and Pragmatism

Another avenue of analysis examines the split between the idealism and the
pragmatism that is perceptible in Wilson’s internationalism (Calhoun 1986). American
intervention in the war and Wilson’s ability to use force to achieve his larger goals of
peace are the focus of this analysis. Also highlighted is the rhetoric that Wilson uses in the latter part of the war compared to his behavior at the Paris Peace Conference, where he was forced to make concessions that failed to match that rhetoric. The idealism-pragmatism split is an observation that Lloyd Ambrosius made in his book *Wilsonian Statecraft: Theory and Practice of Liberal Internationalism during World War I* (1991). Ambrosius, a self-identified realist, made the argument that Wilson’s liberal internationalism “suffered from a lack of realism” (p.xii). This seemed like an obvious argument for a realist to make against Wilson. Ambrosius’s point was that the practicality in Wilson’s statecraft should have been tinged with realism. According to Ambrosius, Wilson’s goals and methods were “too frequently” unrelated to one another (p. xii). Moreover, Wilson failed to align his foreign policy with strategic concerns; the most blatant example of this was the president’s plan for collective security in the League of Nations Covenant (Ambrosius 1991, xv). This would have allowed him to achieve some of the goals that he had set for Europe and America. According to this argument, Wilson was trying to create a system of collective security, but because of the moral inflexibility that accompanied his political argument, he was unable to achieve any of it.

The historian John Milton Cooper has written extensively on Wilson. In *The Warrior and the Priest* (1983), he compares Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. Cooper identified Wilson as the priest, while Roosevelt occupied the role of warrior. Milton claimed that Wilson’s demeanor was steadfast, disciplined, and controlled. Wilson, while forceful, was without the brash aggressiveness that was characteristic of Theodore Roosevelt. Cooper points to the similarity between the relationship of Wilson
and Roosevelt and that of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. The idea behind this was that like the Jefferson-Hamilton pairing, the Wilson-Roosevelt coupling was that of two thoughtful intellectuals forming two opposing visions of America’s future paths. Wilson placed an emphasis on an idealist perception, while Roosevelt placed an emphasis on a realist one. However, Cooper concluded that neither man could develop his ideas without the counterpart providing a foil to the other.

The comparison of the Jefferson-Hamilton and the Wilson-Roosevelt debates is one that has been drawn by many commentators, and Wilson is commonly depicted as a strong advocate of states’ rights. However, the flaw in framing Wilson in such a light is that it fails to account for Wilson’s organic-progressive principle which led him towards statist centralization causing him to reject the social contract. These two consequences of Wilson’s organic-progressive principle run counter to the Jeffersonian tradition. Moreover, Wilson did not consider Jefferson’s philosophical thought to be truly American in his academic writings. It was not until Wilson considered running for elected office that he softened his opinion of Jefferson in his public statements.

According to Cooper, Wilson’s legislative achievements and administrative skill during his first term have not been equaled by any other Chief Executive (Cooper 1983). Cooper echoed this statement in his recent biography of Wilson. In this newer, full length biography of Wilson, Cooper concluded that Wilson drew a large part of his political thought from Edmund Burke. Cooper pointed to the organic society thesis as an essential element in Wilson’s attempt to design the covenant agreement for the League of Nations to place within the Treaty of Versailles (Cooper 2009).
Wilson also appears in the public administration literature for he did much over the course of his academic career to develop it as a sub-discipline of political science. Most notably, Wilson proposed the political-administrative dichotomy, and this furthers his organic-progressive principle (see Politics and Administration: Woodrow Wilson and American Public Administration, 1984 edited by Jack Rabin and James S. Bowman). Wilson called this the political-administrative dichotomy, and it was another one of the observations that Wilson believed to be an innovation in how he conceptualized the working of modern government. This dichotomy was linked to Wilson’s strong statist philosophy. According to Wilson, once political decisions were made the implementation and application of those decisions would be executed in completely unbiased ways. He made this argument in his 1887 essay, The Study of Administrative. From these ideas came the concept commonly referred to as the “administrative state.” This was the source for large government bureaucracy that was the foundation of the interventionist states of the 1930s. The state should be neutral in its bureaucratic actions, neither adding nor detracting from the substance of the programs that it administers- the political and bureaucratic functions of the state remain two separate activities. For Wilson, and the progressives in general, the statist policies that led to the “administrative state” was a positive development.

One of the hallmarks of a modern society was that the administrators, or the civil servants, who acted as the mechanisms of enforcements would simply carry out political decisions as they were instructed. Political debate would take place in the government during the policy formation process, but once the legislative process had concluded,
Wilson believed that the prescripts of the law would be carried out faithfully. Public administration was a non-political realm of activity. He did not anticipate arguments like organizational culture or bureaucratic capture. Those tasked with carrying out these decisions would use an equal amount of effort if these administrators personally agreed with the political nature of the decisions or not. This would be the function of a professional bureaucracy. This idea helped to forward the progressive idea of efficiency government (Frost and Sikkenga 2003, 539.) An effective and transparent government would ensure that such a system was possible. Wilson believed that capable men, properly educated and trained, could act as disinterested administrators.

These individuals, technocrats to use the contemporary term, were key to the development of the nation. This rationalization of administration could be taught, and this would fill the ranks in government with competent individuals to run this newly envisioned bureaucracy. As an educator, Wilson saw himself as key to this process in the United States, although other nations, in particular Germany and England, were ahead of the United States in developing this skilled professional class. It was part of the institutional development of nations to form the educational capacities that would produce this professional retinue, a fifth estate, to undertake the business of government in a completely neutral way. The challenges of the industrial age would require the moderating forces that were only possible through state intervention, without which an industrializing society might stagnate. This was only possible if a group of technocrats existed to undertake this intervention in a non-political manner.
When considering Wilson’s internationalism, this question intensifies. Even if such a group could exist within a nation, it is another question if it would be possible to create a similar group of technocrats that could administer a super-national organization in a completely unbiased manner without regard to national, regional, or partisan issues. Wilson believed that at the national level, it was possible to discern a common interest which civic minded individuals would be able to direct their talents toward achieving, but when this is taken to the international level, would it be necessary to discern a transnational common good? This transnational good would have to be created from a different source then the one used to create national good. In the global context, national interest would be provincial. At least a few individuals would have to gain a certain degree of cosmopolitanism in order to consolidate this transnational system. Individuals would also have to stop viewing the international arena as hostile. Thus, if properly ordered, the international system could offer mutual advantageous benefits to all of its members. In a practical sense, Wilson’s internationalism becomes difficult if not impossible without such men to staff the large national and international bureaucracies that such a system would necessarily need to maintain to operate effectively. Despite these difficulties, Wilson believed that the enlightening power of education could create such insightful men. Just as individuals came together to form communities, and over time those communities came together to form nations, so nations would come together to form a cosmopolitan international system that would cooperate for the common good of all of its members. Wilson believed that, in time, democratic governments would be the dominate form of government of the more advanced races and that these races would
teach the other races of the world the principles of self-government. Eventually, these races would become democratic, but that was a long term goal. Part of the process of becoming a people capable of self-government was the development of a rationalized bureaucracy (PWW Vol.5).

One of the ferocious criticisms of Wilson’s brand of internationalism comes, unsurprisingly, from international relations scholars who represent the realist perceptive. Realism has been present since antiquity, but most international relation scholars are familiar with the form it took in the post-World War II period. This reformulation of realism was in response to what was seen as the folly of naïve internationalism that animated the inter-war period (1919-1939) and was blamed for creating the environment that cultivated the seeds of authoritarianism that resulted in World War II. John Herz, writing in 1950, tried to discredit what he saw as the disastrous policies of the inter-war period. He is representative of the realist critique lodged against Wilson. Herz centered the blame for what was, for him, the current calamity in international relations on what he called idealist internationalism. He does not mention Wilson by name, but under the umbrella of idealistic internationalism, he is clearly describing Wilson’s attempt to reform the international arena after War World I via the creation of the League of Nations that was based on Wilson’s organic-progressive principle.

Herz stated that idealistic internationalism was based on the creation of “conditions and solutions which are supposed to overcome the egoistic instincts and attitudes of individuals and groups in favor of consideration beyond mere security and self-interest” (Herz 1950, 158). Moreover, idealists during the inter-war period which
would include Wilson believed that the assumptions that they held about the potential realignment of the international arena were more “rationalistic” than classically realistic. Classical realism excluded the possibility that states could work together in order to ensure their security, while idealists of the period believed that it was not only possible, but preferable. If such a condition could be achieved, then the issue of security would not just be momentarily assuaged, but overcome in a symmetric way. The uncertainty that surrounded security could, through agreement and institutionalization, be used as a binding force to create a self-reinforcing system that would banish aggression as a possible option within the international system. Even though states still maintained the right to defend themselves, this would effectively end conflict since if no nation would attack any other nation, there would be no need for any nation to maintain large armies or navies to defend themselves against aggressive attack.

According to Herz’s argument, the plan of the idealistic internationalists was naïve and could never work as envisioned. Instead, Herz centered his argument on what would be a classical articulation of the barrier that states faced when cooperating with one another. Herz called this the security dilemma. If security is the driving interest of a state, then that state will take steps to defend its security. This will result in that nation building its military capacity. Although the nation in question will claim that the military buildup is for defensive purposes only, other nations will see this move as aggressive. Those nations are concerned about their own security, so any move by another nation must be considered a threat. In response, those nations must react to the actions of the first nation, not only matching the perceived threat, but surpassing it. This, in turn, is
viewed by the first nation as an aggressive act that must be responded to. This results in a cycle of escalation between nations in the pursuit of national security. This is an excellent illustration of realist principles; the entire phenomenon is propelled by security concerns and security concerns alone. Wilson believed he could circumvent the barriers raised by the realistic view. It was not that they were not substantial, but several societies had moved to a point in history where such concerns were no longer the driving force in world politics.

The Potential Effects of Wilson’s Physical and Mental Health on His Internationalism

There has been much focus on Woodrow Wilson’s physical, mental, and psychological health as an explanation for his uncompromising positions during his presidency and the foreign policy decision-making that he engaged in during his time in office. It is not possible to study Wilson without considering these factors. Therefore, it is necessary to mention it here. It is important for this study in so far as some scholars have tried to connect Wilson’s psychological and physical condition to his political thinking and behavior. This literature has focused on his activities at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the fight for treaty ratification. Wilson had health problems over the course of his lifetime. Some were more apparent than others.

He probably suffered from dyslexia as a child, which may account for his problems reading. He did not start to read until after his ninth birthday and was a slow reader for the rest of his life. This caused Wilson not to read as widely and to concentrate on a narrow range of books during his undergraduate and graduate education. Wilson
suffered from dyspepsia and other digestive ailments. These occurred periodically, usually at times of stress in Wilson’s life. At times, these symptoms would increase in intensity and expand into what Wilson referred to as a “breakdown.” These “breakdowns” were periods of intense anxiety, digestive problems, and extreme headaches. These periods were crippling and distracted Wilson from his work. During several of these periods, Wilson would be forced into a period of convalescence (Link 1947; Cooper 2009).

Over the course of his lifetime, Wilson had at least fourteen occurrences of “breakdowns” that were serious enough to interfere with his work. Wilson suffered from arteriosclerosis, a hardening of the arteries that caused him to temporarily lose eyesight in his left eye in 1906. Although no diagnosis was made during his lifetime, many scholars have pointed to the possibility that Wilson may have suffered from some ongoing type of clinical depression as well. It is known that throughout his lifetime, Wilson suffered from several maladies that likely had far reaching effects on his political career and later performance in office.

The most serious of Wilson’s health issues was his 1919 stroke that crippled him both physically and politically. Based on the symptoms, it was apparently an ischemic stroke caused by clotting of the blood in the brain and not a hemorrhage. This type of stroke has the potential to do serious damage to the structure of the brain, resulting in potential emotional and psychological damage. Wilson’s behavior immediately after the stroke was erratic, and his judgment appeared to be impaired. The specific type of stroke that Wilson had is rarely fatal in itself, but two weeks after he had been stricken, Wilson
developed an infection of the prostate gland causing a swelling that resulted in a
gastrointestinal blockage which did almost kill him in mid October of 1919 (Cooper
2009).

Constitutionally, according to Article II, Section I Wilson should have resigned,
been removed from office, or allowed Vice-president Thomas R. Marshall to assume the
office as Acting president until he had sufficiently recovered. The failure of Wilson to
resign is the grist of intense controversy. The First Lady, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson
(Wilson’s second wife); his doctor, Cary T. Grayson (who was not a graduate of a
university medical school, but trained in the navy); and his secretary, Joseph Tumulty
(equivalent to the modern Chief of Staff) controlled access to Wilson who did not leave
his sickbed for nearly seven months. After that period, Wilson’s mobility and ability to
work were still greatly limited.

Edwin A. Weinstein, James Anderson, and Arthur S. Link developed a
hypothesis that Wilson suffered a number of brain damaging strokes starting in 1896.
These strokes correspond with some of the more serious “breakdowns” and increased in
severity until the catastrophic 1919 stroke. This took the impairment of cognitive
function theory and spread it out over the entirety of Wilson’s political career. It is an
interesting theory but based in large part on speculation.

In terms of his mental health, the most notable attempt to analyze it was a
psychoanalytical study made on Wilson by no less of a personage than Sigmund Freud.
Freud was a co-author with William C. Bullitt of Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A
Psychological Study (1967). Bullitt had been one of the junior diplomats at the Paris Peace Conference and left it extremely disenchanted with the terms of the treaty. Bullitt was so certain that Wilson was incorrect that he believed that his obvious wrong thinking must have stemmed from deeper psychological reasons. In the study, the team points to Wilson being a seriously repressed individual who was fixated on his father and who was harboring a messiah complex. Much has been made of this diagnosis by psycho-historians ever since. Juliette George and Alexander George in their co-authored work Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study (1964) proposed that Wilson’s “tragic flaw” was his self-defeating stubbornness that made him refuse to compromise with his political foes. The reason that the Georges give for this troubling characteristic was Wilson’s low self-esteem which they attributed to his demanding father.

The questions raised within this sub-branch of Wilson scholarship is what effect, if any, did Wilson’s physical and mental health have on the way he perceived the world? Could this account for his sometimes seemingly erratic decision making and what some is perceived by some as poor judgment in foreign relations? One of the reasons for these medical explanations is that Wilson is seen as inconsistent. As already noted, many scholars have had considerable difficulty in trying to unravel Wilson’s political thought. This problem became especially complicated for scholars focusing on Wilson’s ideas about international relations. Although his ideas were convoluted, Wilson did have an internal consistency in his thinking regarding international relations based on the

6 Freud and Bullitt collaborated on this manuscript during the 1930s. The final text had been completed by 1939, before Freud’s death. However, the finished manuscript went unpublished until 1967.
principles that he believed to be true. Why Wilson believed what he did and if those core beliefs were flawed is a different matter.

However, such speculation adds little in explaining Wilson and reinforces the idea that his international thinking was inconsistent. After his 1919 stroke, the neurological damage more than likely affected Wilson’s cognitive function at least for several months if not longer. However, this was much later in Wilson’s political life, and he had formed his ideas about international relations decades before the adverse affects of his neurological problems would have any effect on his ability to reason. The stroke most definitely ended Wilson’s direct efforts to influence the Senate ratification debate on the Paris Treaty which was so important historically, but that is not the issue that is being examined here.

Wilson’s organic-progressive principle had been a central pillar in his thinking long before his body, and possibly his mind, collapsed. Wilson’s health certainly had an impact on Wilson’s life and added an element of drama to the narrative of his biography. However, I do not believe that his health had a serious impact on his concept of politics. The progressive and organic elements were present in Wilson’s political thought from an early time. It is possible to see these concepts throughout Wilson academic and later political careers in a consistent way. Therefore, I argue that the “Health” factor is minimal when it is weight against Wilson’s long-term intellectual development.

Critical Revisionism of Wilson’s Organic-Progressive Principle

There is a revisionist movement of conservative scholars who view Wilson in an
extremely critical light. As has been stated, many scholars have been critical of Wilson, particularly international relations scholars from the realist school of thought. However, these conservative critics attack Wilson because of the perceived shortcomings of the progressive thesis and the incompatibility of this thesis to early American political thought. Although they focus their arguments on different aspects of Wilson’s political thought, the basic argument focuses on the fact that Wilson’s ideas were based on a break from the basic ideas of the American founding. They point to Wilson’s rejection of the social contract, his undermining of the separation of powers, and his discarding of the Rights of Man Theory which they interpret as an attack on the concept of natural rights. These scholars conclude that Wilson’s radicalism was produced by a historical relativism and that directly conflicts with founding American Constitutional principle.

This school of thought can be collectively summarized by its basic contention that Wilson and the progressivism that he championed “transformed, not developed” the basic assumptions of American political thought. The basic argument is made against progressivism and the philosophy behind it (Eldon J. Eisenach’s *The Lost Promise of Progressivism*, 1994 and *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science: Transforming the American Regime*, 2005 edited by John Marini and Ken Masugi). Wilson is a special target because of the fact that he tried to systemize his thought while a scholar; when as president, he had a platform to implement his ideas. These conservative critics look at Wilson’s political thought and do not see it as an evolution of early American political principle, but as a decisive break with it. According to this argument, Wilson introduced the ideas of Hegelian statism which launched an attack on the
principles that supported the ideas of limited government. The ideas packaged by Wilson had a corrosive effect on the founding principles and was an attack on the Constitution.

Most of the work that has been done from this quarter has focused on Wilson’s political thought as it pertained to domestic issues. However, since Wilson built his larger democratic theory on the example of the United States, and that democratic theory was central to his perceptions of international relations, this criticism of Wilson has implications on his overall internationalism. The basic promises of progressivism were not achieved. Progressivism suffered from the problem of oversimplifying complex issues while ignoring others, such as racial inequities. Many concluded that the same problem was true of Wilson’s solutions to the problem of international relations. The collective security arrangement that Wilson proposed did not deal with the possibility of defection and, therefore, would never have properly functioned. The system was supposed to ensure the safety of nations, so they could be free to develop democratically. Although the democratic peace argument had not yet been systematically established there was already a perception of the passive nature of democracies dealing with other democracies. Therefore, international security against aggressive nations was a key component for the continued development of democratic government. For Wilson, nations would develop over time, acquiring improved democratic institutions that would provide the people of those nations greater influence in the decision-making process. This was a natural function: if one could create the proper environment, then the rest would follow. The organic-progressive principle is central to this idea of development and the point of much contention from Wilson’s detractors.
A major argument that is raised by these revisionist critics is Wilson’s rejection of the social contract as a sufficient explanation for the origin of government. The organic-progressive principle that Wilson used was his organizational axiom for all of his political thought, and it had no room for the social contract. The rejection of the social contract has larger implications because it was viewed as a rejection of the Rights of Man Theory. The idea of natural rights is the basis for the social contract from which the legitimacy of government is then derived. If government fails to uphold the rights of its citizens, then that government is not longer legitimate and should be replaced. This is the argument that Jefferson made in the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. Wilson’s rejection of the social contract is a result of his larger argument against natural rights.

Wilson’s quarrel against natural rights is that any lists of such rights are always presented in the abstract. This argumentation against such abstraction is legalistic in its tone.

The rights of man are easy to discourse …but they are infinitely hard to translate into practice. Such theories are never ‘law’ no matter what the name or the formal authority of the document in which they are embodied. Only that is ‘law’ which can be executed and the abstract rights of man are singularity difficult it execution. (Wilson 1908, 16)

Since the rights of man could not be practically translated into laws, they were not suitable to be used as a basis for laws. Here, Wilson is referring to the United States Constitution and the claim that it is the law of the land. Wilson continued his argument by making reference to the Declaration of Independence.

We think of the [the Declaration] as a highly theoretical document, but except for its assertion that all men are created equal, it is not. It is intensely practical, even
upon the question of liberty … It expressly leaves to each generation of men the determination of what they will do with their lives, what they will prefer as the form and object of their liberty. (Wilson’s *Princeton for the Nation’s Service*, 1902) (PWW Vol.15, 170-185)

In this statement, it is possible to see the influence of Edmund Burke and the idea of the organic society. In Wilson’s estimation, a free society is one that continually debates the meaning of liberty. The institutional change that follows such debate should be able to overcome the structural limitations that were part of the federal Constitution of 1787. The idea of liberty greatly outweighed the institutional structures because Wilson believed those institutions to be malleable.

The “transformed, not developed” criticism claimed that because Wilson rejected the rights of man theory and the concept of natural rights that it produced, he severed American political thought from its founding principle. Everything that came after was built on this fundamental flaw. Modern liberalism and the policies that come out of it, The New Deal, the Great Society, and the contentious politics of the 21st century, can all be traced back to the original flaw that Wilson propounded as an academic and later instituted as president. Each program increased the scale of this initial flaw, making each program more dangerous to the nation than the one before it. The statist philosophy that Wilson believed to be the necessary arbiter for the American society to fully enjoy the advantages of its newly developed unity was in actuality, a dangerous detour off of the constitutional path mapped out by the Constitution.

When these scholars discuss Wilson’s internationalism, the tone is extremely negative. Wilson’s politics were not just naïve; they failed to secure the best interests of the United States. Wilson and his conception of international relations was a danger to
the United States. Wilson’s position of negotiating a system of collective security while still expecting the United States to have freedom to act in a unilateral manner if it was deemed necessary was self-contradictory. (Stid 1998) Such treaty obligations would have been untenable had the Senate ratified the Treaty of Versailles.

Jeffrey K. Tulis examined the theory of presidential leadership in *The Rhetorical Presidency*. According to Tulis, the presidency has gone through two phases. The Founding Era, or what Tulis called the Old Way, produced a presidency that was mainly concerned with enforcing the laws that Congress legislated while the Chief Executive was a clerkship. This concept of the role of the president changed over time. In the twentieth century, the Presidency became “rhetorical.” Rhetorical here means that the president became an instigator of legislation and the relation between the legislature and the executive was inverted. Furthermore, the president pursued this new relationship by engaging in moral suasion to convince his audience through the context, but also the style, of his speeches that his proposed policies were the correct ones to be instituted. Although what was said would be important, the effectiveness of any presidential message would have to rely on how it was said as well. The Old Way had at its center a fear of demagoguery. Because public decision-making was part of the then new constitutional government, the Founders feared that an ambitious, self-serving individual could use an artistic tongue and sharp wit to woo a less than thoughtful public to support and elect them. Such a political mountebank could be a danger to the republic. The New Way, based on rhetoric, placed a value on the ability to use language to inspire. This is the same method used in demagoguery with the line separating the two very thin. It can
be difficult, if not practically impossible, to separate the demagogue from the good-intentioned politician.

At the point of transition when this New Way took hold was Woodrow Wilson. Tulis described a Middle Way, but the final break was during Wilson’s tenure in office. Wilson highly valued the power of the spoken word. Oratory competitions and debate clubs were his favorite form of extracurricular activities throughout his education (Bragdon 1967). From his experience in forensics, Wilson came to the conclusion that high minded debate between reasoned interlocutors in the parliamentary fashion was the most profitable form of government, and Wilson longed to transform the United States Congress into an arena where such intensive debate could take place. This would be done through institutional reforms to change the basic structures in the Congress, and was the main theme of the reforms that he proposed as an academic. When he became president, he believed that the speech was the key to leadership. Wilson was the first president since Jefferson to appear before the Congress and give his State of the Union. For over one hundred years, the State of the Union was written out and read to the Congress by a clerk. Wilson saw it as a chance to lead. Even though Wilson had given up his ideas about transforming the Congress into a parliamentary system with members serving in the president’s cabinet, he did not give up the hope that he could have the powers of an informal Prime Minister.

Daniel D. Stid examined Wilson’s call to reformulate the shape of political institutions in the United States and if this had any lasting negative effects on American government. Stid placed an emphasis on Wilson redefining the meaning of the
Constitution which he concluded to have greater repercussions than past Wilson scholars had attributed to it. Furthermore, Stid concluded that Wilson’s argument did not substantively change over the course of his academic work and that he brought this argument with him when he became governor of New Jersey and then president of the United States. This observation stands in contrast to the work of many other scholars. According to these scholars, Wilson’s argument for reform changed markedly over the course of his career. Stid argued that these changes were superficial.

According to Stid, and others from the critical school, Wilson was more consistent than a cursory evaluation of his writings might suggest. The point was made that although the specific forms of Wilson’s proposed institutional reforms changed over time, the basic reason that he used to justified these modifications to the institutions of government remained the same. Wilson’s goal was to remove the obstacle of the separation of powers because he believed that it acted a barrier to the government’s ability to make and coordinate policy in full view of the public. Making such changes in the institutional design of government would make it easier for the federal government and the political leadership to focus its powers and apply its resources in a way Wilson believed would be more beneficial to the nation. The specifics of how the government would change varied over time, but not why the government needed to change. Stid claimed that the Separation of power is a key institutional bulwark of American government and that it manifest specific principles of the Founding Father’s political thought. Therefore, any weakening of the principle would not be a cosmetic change, but a fundamental alteration in the genius of the Constitution. This is a very different
perspective than the one that Wilson was basing his reforms on. Government served as a problem solver that was neutral and powerful in Wilson’s estimation. This reformed and focused government would be an improvement over the continued enforcement of the institutional precepts of the outdated Constitution that resulted in a government that was inefficient and lacked transparency.

According to Stid’s argument, Wilson’s reinterpretation of Constitutionalism was based on his idea that such a document was flexible. A constitution was the embodiment of the spirit of the people. Since societies were organic, that spirit would be slowly changing over time, and, therefore, no constitution should be frozen in time. In the American case, the spirit of the American people was inherently democratic, so any properly made change or reform to the federal government would make the American government more democratic. The Constitution was not a perpetual blueprint for American government, only a vessel that held the spirit of the American people at the time it was written. As Wilson would explain it, there was theory, or what is written in the Constitution, and there is the practice, the way the government is actually undertaken. The practice had changed substantially from the theory since the Constitution had been written and that was proof enough for Wilson to show that constitutionalism was a malleable concept.

In *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism*, Ronald J. Pestritto’s interpretation of Woodrow Wilson focused on the Hegelian aspects in his thought. According to Pestritto, Wilson’s intellectual precursors were the English Historical School and Hegel. However, of these two, Hegel was the dominating force in Wilson’s
thinking. The Anglo-historical authors, although important, were secondary to the systemized force of Hegel’s theory of history. Pestritto argues that Woodrow Wilson was a historical thinker, but because of the strong presence of concepts taken from German idealism, Wilson was a historicist. Further in his analysis, Pestritto viewed Wilson’s integration of Hegelianism to support his progressivism as introducing foreign ideas into American political thought, with unsettling effects. Pestritto drew a comparison between the Founding Fathers and Wilson in regards to the assumptions that they made about the forces governing individuals’ behavior and the proper way to design the institutions of government.

In Pestritto’s estimation, the Founding Fathers based their political ideas on natural rights, or what he called transhistorical ideas. The rights that the Founders believed to be inseparable from the individual have always existed. History and society have no affect upon these rights. Again, the foundation of social contract theory is that natural rights exist regardless of government. Even in a state of nature or a hypothetical time before government an individual still could make a claim to these rights. Over the course of human history, there have been many governments, but most of those governments did not recognize these basic rights. That did not mean these natural rights did not exist, only that governments willfully chose not to recognize them. With the advent of social contract theory, the recognition of an individual’s natural rights became the test of legitimization of any government. It is upon the criteria of rights that we judge government. A proper functioning government is one that recognizes the natural rights of
all of its citizens and, in doing so, limits its own power. If a government fails to do so, it loses its sanction on authority.

According to Pestritto, Wilson did not place the same faith in the idea of natural rights as the Founders. Instead, Wilson built on Hegelian idealism and believed that value was the product of interaction between the individual and the society in which they lived. Wilson, borrowing from Hegel, believed that humanity was progressing towards a more enlightened state and, as it achieved higher levels of awareness, human values changed, and this had an effect on political organization. It was only when a society came to a consensus that values became applicable to the current political environment. This made political value a social construct and moved the nature of rights from an absolute to a relative basis. In this understanding, rights cannot be natural and cannot inhabit any space outside of human history.

Moving rights from a transhistorical to historical basis had a function for Hegel. Hegel’s philosophy is inherently optimistic because he believed that humanity was moving along a continuum of self-improvement and self-betterment; therefore, human society was always “becoming” and the limitations under which it obviously suffered could always be rectified in the future. Wilson, like Hegel, was an unabashed optimist. The process of amelioration of human failing and suffering appealed to Wilson. This was reflected in his attempt to remake the international system into a more equitable and peaceful arrangement, both qualities that Wilson believed were necessary in a more enlightened political world. This is the essence of the progressive thesis as an intellectual ideal.
Pestritto pointed out that adjustment as it is presented in Burke is not a radical concept, but coupled with Hegelian historicism, it is a volatile idea. If this idea is wielded in a carte blanche manner, it does not simply adjust but becomes a tool that can undo what has come before it. The creative force of destroying the old to make room for the new wipes away all that has come before it, no matter its merits, and what replaces it maybe questionable. This is especially dangerous if rights are trans-historical because the process would sweep away the very basis for human rights in its quest for innovation. Ironically, historicism removes the moderating force of experience and the importance of history on political consideration. In this formulation, political reality is based not on truth but a relativistic system of changing social consensus. Progressivism sacrifices prudence for an optimistic outlook on humanity’s future. Pestitto seems to believe that even when progressivism takes a moderate route, it is still harmful. Wilson, the target of Pestritto’s ire, considered himself a ‘conservative’ progressive, but this oxymoronic description can only make sense if a comparison is being made to other progressives. The intellectual framework that Wilson used to support his progressivism undid the social contract theory and assaulted the idea of natural rights. This is what Pestitto finds so upsetting in Wilson.

Pestitto draws on Hegel’s famous aphorism, “What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational,” to illustrate what progressivism means (Hegel [1896] 1996, xxvii). According to this view, rationality which should be set by immutable truths that transcend human history is indeed mutable and tied to social development. The idea of ‘rights’ had been correct for a specific time, but Wilson believed that the older idea of
rights had shifted and become something else. This inverts the Founders’ constitutional system which is based on the idea that human nature is set, and from that understanding of human nature, political institutions were crafted to ensure a limited government. Pestritto concluded that without natural rights such limitation would be impossible to maintain. This analysis puts Wilson’s organic-progressive principle under direct scrutiny and throws doubt onto the entire progressive thesis.

I believe that Pestritto is correct in pointing out the relationship between Wilson and Hegel and, in doing so, he is able to explain Wilson’s political thinking in a more satisfactory way than scholars before him. In many ways, Pestritto’s research is the departure point for my own. I believe that Pestritto’s research is a valuable addition to the Wilsonian canon. However, I do not completely agree with how he formulated his explanation. Pestritto emphasized the Hegelian influence on Wilson, while deeming the English Historical School of secondary importance.

Moreover, Pestritto only mentioned Wilson’s religiosity briefly and after acknowledging that it was important because Wilson considered politics a religious duty, Pestritto then dropped this point from his enquiry. I understand that Pestritto was striving for a sharp focus, but I am more than a bit wary that this tactic may have damaged his analysis. Parsimony is the key to elegance, but one must be careful how one wields Occam’s razor: too close cuts one’s own throat. I believe that Wilson’s religiosity had important theoretical implications. Wilson accepted Hegel’s theory of history with some modifications. This made him a historicist, but his strong religious background made this a soft type of historicism because he could not accept the eventuality that the spirit would
become a completely secular phenomenon. Hegel used religion (particularly Christianity) as a driver of thought over the ages, but it was only a tool and it was not necessarily true, only useful. Hegel believed that sometime in the future, humanity would discard those rigid belief systems. Wilson believed that religion was not only useful, but it was also true. Wilson could accept Hegel’s idea about the form, but not the future, of the spirit, or Zeitgeist. This made it possible for Wilson to reject the Rights of Men Theory and the social contract but find an acceptable replacement in the Kantian/Hegelian notions of freedom and human dignity. Moreover, Pestrutto examined Wilson’s political thought as it applied to domestic issues. This was an important first step in this new line of research. I extend this research by applying my version of Wilson’s political thinking to his internationalism.

In order to make this argument, I intend to use the organic-progressive principle construct. I feel that it is only possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of Wilson’s political thought by first understanding how Wilson used both the organic and progressive theses in concert. This led to a conflation between the two concepts. Wilson was able to take the evolutionary ideas that were the foundation of all of his political thought and translate them to the notion of organicism. This gave him the growth that he needed to make his idea of social and political evolution work. However, because of his ingrained idea of faith and morality, he had to couple the idea of progress to his organicism. For Wilson, the ideas were the sides of the same coin- they had to be, for otherwise his ideas would have failed to have the dynamic nature that he so desired.
Course of the Study

Wilson’s use of concepts from the Christian tradition, Burke and the English Historical School, and Hegel and German idealism was possible if Wilson made the theoretical concession of conflation. Scholars have fought for years over whether Wilson prioritized Burke, Hegel, or Christianity. Use of the organic-progressive principle as Wilson conceived it made it possible for him to combine these three major intellectual traditions. While many scholars have become so frustrated that they cannot see the ideas that held Wilson’s intellectual framework together, the ideas were consistent in Wilson’s mind.

This is not an exhaustive study of all of Wilson’s writings, but a representative sampling that illustrates the importance he placed on his organic-progressive principle so central to his political thinking and the affects it had on his view of international relations. There is a common problem that most students of Wilson have faced, this being the difficulty in parsing Wilson’s political rhetoric from his long held political ideas. Some scholars report that they are stymied by this quandary, but I will argue that much of this comes from a misunderstanding of Wilson’s organic-progressive principle. If one understands the organic-progressive principle as Wilson conceived it, then his understanding of international relations is thrown into much greater relief. If one views Wilson’s application of the organic-progressive principle over his career both as an academic and a politician, it is possible to see a conceptual consistency. There is a change in what political mechanisms or institutional reforms Wilson suggested over time,
but the underlying reason remains the same: Wilson based his understanding of society along the lines of the organic-progressive principle.

The chapters will address the following topics. Chapter two is an examination of Wilson’s understanding of spirit. This was a crucial element in Wilson’s historicism. Through his definition of spirit, Wilson was able to bridge the gap between the secular and religious elements in his political thought. Chapter three examines Wilson theory of history as it pertained to the origin of government and the progressive growth of political institutions. Chapter four focuses on Wilson’s concept of political leadership in relationship to the organic-progressive principle. These chapters and the topics that they cover further explain Woodrow Wilson’s political thought and shed light on his perception of international relationships. Wilson’s organic-progressive principle was his guiding concept in developing his theory of the state and institutional development. The goal is that by discussing how Wilson constructed his ideas and applied them, it will be possible to understand his internationalism.
CHAPTER 2

WOODROW WILSON AND THE QUESTION OF SPIRIT

The Compound Idea of Spirit

This chapter investigates Woodrow Wilson’s concept of spirit and its effects on his politics. German idealism has as one of its core elements the idea of a world-spirit, and I believe that this was one of the aspects of idealism that Wilson found appealing since it fit into Wilson’s religious views. In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity. I believe that Wilson was able to integrate the idea of spirit into his evolutionary thought. The process of spirit unfolding and becoming known to humanity was viewed as an evolutionary process by Wilson. In making this an evolutionary process, Wilson was able to associate it with his idea of the organic society. Wilson seemed to believe that if political development was an evolutionary process, then society clearly had to be organic, not mechanical. The idea of spirit had the added benefit of accounting for the progressive nature of politics as well. In its religious context, spirit led towards the better, and Wilson couple this to Hegel’s notion of spirit that was also a benevolent force in nature. It was not too much of an intellectual leap for Wilson to see spirit as a progressive element. None of the parts of this argument was original to Wilson, but Wilson took diverse ideas and mixed them together in such a way to satisfy his need to explain politics.

Wilson likened his organic-progressive principle to the idea that there was a universal spirit that drove the continued and positive growth of human societies. For
Wilson, concept of political liberty to work, he pointed the existence of an invisible but tangible spirit that acted as a guide and spur to the development of political institutions. This idea of a spirit is supported both in Christian tradition and German idealism; however, the difference between the two is the source of that spirit. German idealism attempted to secularize this spirit and remove the necessity for a divine presence (Taylor 1975). Conceptually, the differences between the two can be viewed as quite substantial. Wilson’s way around this difference in the origin of spirit would be to reject the Hegelian secularization of spirit.

Wilson summarized this argument in the following line: “The body is not the cause, but the instrument of the spirit” (PWW Vol.7, 366). By making the body, or material world, the instrument and not the source of spirit, Wilson frees spirit to reside in other places. So while Wilson used many Hegelian concepts, he rejected the secularization that is present in Hegel. In doing so, he tore down the barrier between Hegelian spirit and religious spirit, allowing him to synthesize these two sources together, and, from it, he created a composite idea of a world-spirit. However, this also made him less than a true Hegelian. But, it enabled Wilson to focus his thought on the evolutionary, or as he has termed it, Darwinian, aspect of politics. Wilson did not want to secularize politics, but he did want the evolutionary, and by extension, organic model he saw in Hegel. Because the concepts that he explained were universal in nature, all nations would, to one degree or another, have to come to terms with this spirit. This would be a commonality that all nations shared and could serve a foundation from which nations could recognize their mutual interests.
Spirit was closely associated with liberty and history in Wilson’s political thought. His definition of political liberty was framed around the concept of the organic nature of society and the malleability of spirit. According to Wilson, political liberty was “the right of those who are governed to adjust government to their own needs and interests” (Wilson [1908] 2002, 4). This was viewed as the key relationship between the government and those being governed, and, without it, the modern state, and all of its beneficial functions, could not be undertaken. (Wilson called this modern state a constitutional government. We will explore this notion to a greater extent in a later chapter.) Wilson expanded his definition.

This is the philosophy of constitutional government. Every generation, as Burke said, sets before itself some favorite object which it pursues as the very substance of its liberty and happiness. The ideals of liberty cannot be fixed from generation to generation; only its conception can be, the large image of what it is. Liberty fixed in unalterable law would be no liberty at all. Government is a part of life, it must change, alike in its objects and in its practices; only this principle must remain unaltered- the principle of liberty, that there must be the freest right and opportunity of adjustment. Political liberty consists in the best practicable adjustment between the power of the government and the privilege of the individual; and the freedom to alter the adjustment is as important as the adjustment itself for the case and progress of affairs and the contentment of the citizen. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 4-5)

Government was a continual negotiation between the government and the governed.

Accordingly, the first principle of government is that of adjustment- the ability to steer government towards the “substance” of the liberty. Just what comprises this substance of liberty will change from generation to generation.

Wilson’s definition of liberty not only rejects the idea of natural rights, but invalidates it. Rights must be decided on by the generation at hand, and to be given a set of rights from an early generation that are inappropriate to the needs and interests of the
current generation is just as bad as not to have those rights in the first place. In a somewhat circular argument, liberties are linked to happiness and the happiness, of a people is to be ensured by their liberties. Therefore, specific liberties, like freedom of speech, certainly can exist under Wilson’s definition of political liberty. Moreover, it seems plausible that one generation’s set of rights could be accepted by the next or the next several generations. However, those specific liberties are in place only due to the historical context of that specific society and the custom and traditions that have evolved over time. Wilson had a loose definition of liberties. This loose definition erodes the idea that rights must be permanent to support the notion that there can be a core set of foundational rights. Wilson believed in the idea that liberty changed from generation to generation. He was more concerned with the process by which the collective decisions were made than about what the ‘substance’ of liberty would be. Wilson’s argument about liberty is procedural, not contextual. He accepted that he could not know what specific issues will define the liberty of any generation but his own. The process by which each generation makes about their specific liberties is tied to spirit.

From this, Wilson would conclude that the Constitution of the United States was open to revisions since there was no permanency in the rights upon which it was written. Wilson did not view the institutions laid out in the Constitution as the best solution to managing the problems arising out of an immutable human nature. According to Wilson’s political thought, that was an impossibility since humanity evolved this allowed human nature progressed. (Wilson 1908) Human nature could not be immutable in the way that the Founders had believed it to be. The key to understanding human nature was
not that it was based on self-interested action, but it longed to be free. Wilson believed
the needs and interests of American society had changed substantially and that the old
institutions of American government no longer were suitable to effectively government
the nation. However, Wilson would argue that even though it seemed that everything had
changed, it was not the case.

Not everything is changed: the biggest item of all remains unaltered,- human
nature itself: and it is nothing to daunt a free people-free to think and free to act,
that the circumstances in which that old unalterable nature now expresses itself
are so complex and singular… It is the task of making a new translation of our
morals into the terms of our modern life, where individuality seems for the time
being lost in complex organizations, and then making a new translation of our
laws to match our new translation of morals. It is the task of finding the individual
in the maize of modern social, commercial, and industrial conditions: finding him
with a probe of morals and with the probe of law.” (Pestritto 2005b , 103)

The change that the nation faced was a moral one, and the laws and political institutions
had to conform to this change; otherwise, the individual would be lost. Human nature
allows us to be flexible and to solve the problem of how to be as free as we possibly can
be at that given time. Because America was already a free society, it was able to tap into
the creative energies of its peoples and from this collective effort, a good result would be
produced. The change in America was not merely a social or economic change, although
that was the way in which it manifested itself. Instead, there was a deeper moral change
and the moral change was indicative of a shift in the spirit of the Age.

The laws of the nation had to change to meet the new demands of society, and
Wilson saw a need for a sweeping change. In particular, the Separation of Powers was a
barrier to the further progress of American government (Wilson 1879 in Pestritto 2005b).
The Constitution had frozen American institutions in place. Those institutions may have
been adequate in 1787, but now they were not. A written Constitution was at best a snapshot of the concept of spirit for the generation who wrote. It Wilson’s major goal was an institutional shift in the United States towards a parliamentary model, making the United States more like England. He could justify this goal by claiming that the Spirit of the Age had moved on since the Constitution had been written.

Spirit as an influence on politics was fundamental for Wilson. “Spiritual things are not wholly comparable with material things, and political liberty is a thing of the spirit of men; but we speak of friction in things that affects our spirits, and do not feel that it is altogether a figure of speech” (Wilson [1908] 2002, 5). Wilson tied his definition of liberty to spirit. Adjustment must be guided by something, since Wilson rejected natural rights, he turned to spirit as that moderating force. Spirit pushed men’s souls, thereby causing friction, causing them to make changes to government to forward their demands for liberty. The source of political liberty was spirit. In order to be a free people, spirit must not only be present, but must be understood.

Moreover, spirit acted as a progressive force in Wilson’s political thought. It was the source of the progressive side of the organic-progressive principle. The reason why the historicism that Wilson practiced was soft was due to the fact that he did insist that there must be a benevolent spirit present to act as a guiding force within the fabric of history. In its more radical forms, historicism does not focus on spirit, especially a spirit with a connection to a divine source, as was Wilson’s version of spirit. Instead, spirit takes on the guise of human consciousness. The idea of spirit as a thing-in-itself disappears, so too does the progressive aspect that can be found in Hegel. Wilson’s
insistence on the existence of this spirit created a strong connection between his religious belief and German idealism. The conception of spirit that Wilson used in his theory of history shared many of the characteristics of the Hegelian concept known as zeitgeist. Spirit had an implicit and explicit political function in all societies; it framed the intellectual achievements of the age, and any innovations in government were a result of the impetus of spirit on society. Moreover, different societies had different abilities in interpreting the directive of the world spirit, resulting in some societies being more advanced than others. Wilson concluded that being able to identify and relate to this spirit and the form it took at that specific time and place was the quintessential element for the political thinker to master.

The Science of Spirit

Wilson believed that this world spirit was a tangible, although invisible, ubiquity in the world that could be studied in a scientific manner. Wilson believed that a conclusive morality could be drawn out of history if one understood the spirit behind it. The study of this spirit was just as, if not more, legitimate as any other scientific pursuit of his day. However, this quest to gain a moral basis out of a scientific pursuit conflicted with the changing definition of the reasonable scope of science. The definition of science and the methods used to undertake scientific research were moving towards a hard empiricism and quantification in the United States in the latter decades of the 19th century. However, Wilson fought for a more inclusive definition of science that was necessary for his theory of history to function. This meant that the practical purpose of
political science was to understand the Zeitgeist and to create a political system that was appropriate to it.

Wilson’s point of departure for his larger argument was that all politics were evolutionary, and this served as a base for his organicism. For Wilson, evolution was a process that only a living thing could undergo. Wilson reasoned that a society must be a living thing beyond the sum total of all of its parts. He took this stance by envisioning the organs of the body—heart, liver, lungs etc. Each one was a separate entity, but it was only together that they made something alive and capable of growth (Wilson [1908] 2002).

Society was also an organism that must not be reduced to the individual members that constitute it. Wilson would write: “Society is not a crowd, but an organism: and, like every organism, it must grow as a whole or else be deformed” (Pestritto 2005b, 221).

History was the record of the growth of the organism that was society. It was a record of political evolution, and, for Wilson, the study of political philosophy was therefore a historical pursuit. He commented on his ontological perspective in his 1891 essay The Study of History:

The study of politics is a study of life; of the life of states, the close organization of peoples into communities, their wide organization into commonwealth, their united efforts towards the attainment of common ends. Nice theories do not fit the study of such things, for theories must be logical and life need not be, indeed, seldom is; it can be learned only by familiar association with it, can be penetrated only by insight deciphered only by close and repeated scrutiny. (PWW Vol7, 279)

It is possible to see the connection that Wilson made between the organic nature of society and its manifestation through politics. The united efforts of a society produce the institutions of government. For Wilson, the common goals of a society are what
produced the rationale for legitimate government action. Those goals were gleamed by the society itself. As Spirit impacted society, society would change, and those changes would form the challenges that would define the political goals of that society. This is history as politics, and politics cannot be understood outside of history since as society changes, so too does the rationale for government action. This is the fundamental notion of historicism- politics could not be understood outside of its historical context. Moreover, it is not possible to reduce politics into something outside of this historical context. However, there was more to this linkage between history and politics for Wilson. This was the totality of politics in a given society. There was an interplay between civil society and government: a give and take. The influence ran both ways in something akin to a feedback loop. This too needed to be understood, and the only way to do this was via the historical record.

This led Wilson to have a comprehensive view of politics. In order to understand politics, one needed a greater understanding of the larger social issues in the political community. The political institutions of a society are a reflection of the larger social consensus, and that consensus comes out of the common experiences of that society, even if many of those experiences have very little to do with politics. A true statesman would have to have a wide knowledge and sensitivity about a great many things happening within his community to truly appreciate the organic nature of society.

The state itself should be considered a living thing; hence, the state is an organic entity expected to display the characteristics of a living being. The state was the political manifestation of a society. When a people were able to gain a sense of themselves as a
distinctive group, the state would follow. Wilson believed that the earliest states emerged
from kinship bonds that defined different groups (more on this process in chapter 3). The
use of the term society and states were used interchangeable by Wilson. He observed that
there was great variation in the organic world. Therefore, according to Wilson’s logic,
there must be some variation in the institutional structures of different states since the
political institutions were a manifestation of that larger historical evolutionary process.
According to Darwin, adaptation was the result of variation within a specie. If there was
no variation, then there could be no adaptation and, as a consequence, no development.
Just as there was variation within the total population of a specie in the biological
application of Darwin, there had to be variation within human societies in the social and
political realms if something similar to biological evolution could be applied to political
institutions. With this, it is possible to see that importance of Darwin and evolutionary
thought in Wilson own ideas.

It was due to the fact of this variation that Wilson saw in human societies that
added credence to Wilson’s belief in organicism. In his survey of human society, Wilson
did not see an obvious or simple order, and the social theories of his day did not account
for this great amount of variation. Wilson called these older ideas Newtonian or
mechanical and felt them totally inadequate to explain the seemingly chaotic nature of
society (Wilson [1908] 2002). The apparent chaos might be due to the complexity of
society, but just because something is difficult to understand does not mean that it cannot
be understood. Every society varied from one another to one degree or another. In some
instances, this variation was minor, but in others it was great. This difference had to be
accounted for in any comprehensive account of politics. For Wilson, the biological was infinitely more complex than the mechanical and it was not simply a change in the degree of complexity, but a change in kind. From his observations, Wilson concluded that a new way to study politics was needed.

In his 1908 book *Constitutional Government in the United States*, the text of which was based on a series of his class lectures, Wilson began with the line, “My object in the following lectures is to examine the government of the United States as a constitutional system as simply and directly as possible, with an eye to practice, not to theory” (Wilson [1908] 2002, 1). It would seem that Wilson was an advocate of a non-theoretical understanding of history. He would be the first to argue that he did not have a theory of history since societies would vary so greatly due to different environmental pressures. A theory must have an internal logic and since Wilson perceived society as chaotic and seemingly illogical, it was therefore impossible for him to generate a theory that would adequately explain the inner working of society. However, even though there was great variation in politics, Wilson wanted to account for what he believed was the great purpose in politics which was the betterment of the human condition (Wilson [1898] 1903). Whatever solution Wilson proposed had to account for the substantial variations he saw between states but also address the positive direction that humanity was traveling. It seems that Wilson believed that this would have to be a dynamic process which is why he distinguished between theory, which was a static notion, and practice, which was a dynamic one. This was the genesis of the organic-progressive principle.
It is important to understand what Wilson believed to be the proper definition of a social scientific theory and what would be the purpose of proposing such a theory. First, Wilson had to consider what the common perception of a social scientific theory was in order for him to be able to draw a comparison to it with his own alternative definition. When Wilson thought of the common perception of a social theory, he viewed it as being akin to an algebraic formula, like Newton’s Laws of Motion. The study of politics during Wilson’s generation was intently focused on political institutionalism. Wilson, like his contemporaries, placed an emphasis on institutional development. Wilson was not only trying to describe political institutions, but also explain how those institutions developed over time. The particular aspects of these institutions were the variables of the social scientific formula according to Wilson. Understood in this light, it is possible to see Wilson’s perceived flaw in this type of theory-making. Wilson believed that there was no predetermined set of institutions that could be graphed onto any and all societies, so any algebraic-like theory would not be useful in predicting the best path for a society to follow. Wilson was trying to describe a process of political development, and, in order to do, so he had to redefine the parameters of the social-scientific theory in American academia.

For this reason, Wilson felt it was necessary to broaden the scope of scientific research to include areas that were outside the narrow confines of the accepted boundaries of political institutionalism. Questions of what later political scientists would call political culture and state capacity would have to be weighed before it would be possible to determine what institutions would be the most successful in a given society.
Wilson disagreed with what he viewed as institutional (Newtonian) theories of government that described government as a machine, not a living thing. Wilson would describe American government under the Constitution in this light.

If it had in fact been a machine governed by mechanically automatic balances, it would have had no history; but it was not, and its history has been rich with influences and personalities of the men who have conducted it and made it a living reality. The government of the United States has had a vital and normal organic growth and has proved itself eminently adapted to express the changing temper and purposes of the American people from age to age. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 57)

These were areas that had not been properly examined in Wilson’s estimation, but because of the organic nature of society, it would be impossible to understand politics without understanding these supporting structures that made up civil society. But unlike future political scientists, Wilson would rest his claim on the notion of a world-spirit.

Wilson believed that an institutional theory of government (as it was commonly perceived at the time) was not possible. Instead, Wilson believed that any theory of government would have to be tied to history. Outside of history, it was impossible to understand how institutions of government developed. Therefore, Wilson developed a systematic understanding of history and the effects of history on the evolution of politics. Wilson was arguing against the restricted notion of theories of formal institutional development that investigated only the mechanics of government. It is one thing to argue against an intellectual position. It is quite another to evaluate what should replace it. The problem inherent in Wilson’s argument is not that a more opened attitude should be taken when considering political institutions. This criticism prefigures later theoretical developments in political science, so Wilson’s argument that the dominant theoretical
construct was inadequate was not an incorrect position for Wilson to take. The problem is what Wilson wished to replace it with. The organic claim in the organic-progressive principle arguably has theoretical feet. However, Wilson’s claim of organicism was coupled with a claim to moral progressivism. It is debatable if these two ideas can be combined. Wilson certainly had no problem with fusing the two concepts together.

This claim of rejecting ‘theory’ (in reference to the theory-practice dichotomy) did not originate with Wilson; instead, it came out of Wilson’s reading of Burke. In his argument in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke had stated that his organic understanding of society was not due to a theory, but an observation of human society as it truly was. Wilson would say of Burke’s method of analysis,

> They (Burke’s books and writings) are not purely intellectual productions: there is no page of abstract reasoning to be found in Burke. His mind works upon concrete objects, and he speaks always with a certain passion, as if his affections were involved. He is irritated by opposition, because opposition in the field of affairs, in which his operates, touches some interest that is dear to him. Noble generalization it is true, everywhere broaden his matter: there is no more philosophical writer in English in the field of politics than Burke. But look, and you shall see that his generalizations are never derived from abstract premises. The reasoning is upon familiar matter of to-day. He is simply taking questions of the moment to the light, holding them up to be seen where great principles of conduct may shine upon them from the general experience of the race. He is not constructing systems of thought, but simply stripping thought of its accidental features. He is even deeply impatient of abstractions in politic reasoning, so passionately is he devoted to what is practicable, and fit for wise men to do. (Wilson [1896] 1996, 128-129)

Burke made generalizations, but they were good generalizations because they were not drawn out of abstract notions, particularly the Rights of Man Theory. To Wilson, it was possible to think in sweeping terms as long as the individual framed the thought the right way. Wilson accepted this argument and believed that he was merely extending Burke’s
basic observation of organicism in society and applying it to the American experience. A theory creates abstractions, and abstractions cannot be observed; only behavior can be detected. Consequently, it would have been impossible for Wilson to claim to have assumed Burke’s mantle if he promoted anything like a theory.

Being practical for Wilson meant dealing with concrete facts which took the form of problems that a political community experienced and had to solve in a collective manner. To face these problems meant that society had to be organic, since the problems would change over time. To solve these problems meant that politics had to be evolutionary since a society learned from each problem that it solved, and as their experiences increased, their abilities to solve future problems improved. This was the essence of practical politics for Wilson. It was from this that Wilson was able to link Burke’s organicism with his political evolutionary assumption.

In this Burkian-Wilsonian context, anyone who claimed to have a theory of politics and by extension a theory of history fundamentally misinterpreted both history and politics. Wilson often commented that there was a truth behind history. In his essay the *Truth of the Matter*, Wilson would write.

Give us the facts, and nothing but the facts, is the sharp injunction of our age to its historians. Upon the face of it, an eminently reasonable requirement. To tell the truth simply, openly, without reservation, is the unimpeachable first principle of all right dealing; and historians have no license to be quit of it...But the thing is by no means so easy as it looks. The truth of history is a very complex and very occult matter. It consists of things which are invisible as well as of things which are visible. It is full of secret motives, and of a chance interplay of trivial and yet determining circumstances; it is shot through with transient passions, and broken athwart here and there by what seem cruel accident; it cannot be reduced to statistics or newspaper items or official recorded statements. (Wilson [1896] 1971, 160-1610)
In Wilson’s estimation, people who provide theories could not find truths. Historical theories depend on facts, and history is so much more than mere facts for Wilson. Theories muddied the waters, placing undue burdens between the political thinker and the historical truth that floated somewhere in the ether of the historical record. Hard empiricism and quantification failed to capture the evidence of spirit, in Wilson’s estimation. History was both visible and invisible. Only the most astute observer would be able to see evidence of that invisible part of history. One could monitor spirit’s effect on history but not spirit itself. This is analogous to the way that an astronomer detects a black hole in space. It is physically impossible to see a black hole, but the astronomer can know that it is there by monitoring the distortions in the gravitational fields around it. This is a delicate operation requiring a vast quantity of background information, and it seems that Wilson made a similar argument about the historian and spirit. In Wilson’s mind, applying theories misses the backbone of history, the gel that held all of the facts together and gives them meaning. Therefore, theories applied to history and the political institutions hewn from it were not useful since their application would not lead to any further comprehension of the greater meaning of history.

Wilson claimed that he did not adhere to a theory, but this was only because he had a narrow view of what a theory of history would look like. Wilson claimed that an insightful political observer would have to consider social elements, and it was only by taking into account this social background that it might be possible to understand what types of political institutions were suited for that society. As has been shown, Wilson’s claim to a non-theoretical understanding of history makes sense if one views it only in an
institutional context. If one is concerned only with the institutional design of a
government, then the more universal view that Wilson was prescribing would fall well
outside the scope of any theory that institutional history could produce. Wilson stated
that the experience of different societies and, therefore, the politics in each of those
societies would, by necessity, be different. Wilson claimed:

There is, accordingly, no one best system of government, but for each nation there
is some sort of government which is best adapted to its wants and capacities most
appropriate and helpful in its present stage of development. (PWW Vol. 7, 279)

Every nation would have specific pressures that were unique to it, according to Wilson.
Therefore, it was logical to conclude that it would be impossible to expect that those very
different experiences would lead to the same institutional outcomes in different societies.

However, this passage pointed to the fact that Wilson, for all of his statements to
the contrary, did have a theory of history. It may not have been a theory based on strict
institutional factors that were common during Wilson’s time as a professor, but it is an
identifiable form of historical theory. Wilson believed that nations went through stages
of development. Societies could form a specific set of institutions within these stages,
but there were discernable stages of development that nations did move through, albeit
some faster, others slower. Some societies might require help from others to make this
transition. Or, in a more pessimistic version, some nations might never advance beyond a
certain point and it is debatable if Wilson thought this was the case. These stages of
development encompassed all of the social issues that made up Wilson’s comprehensive
view of politics. It was necessary to have an organic view of society in order to support
the notion of a stage theory of history. This enabled societies to have the dynamic quality
that they would need to undertake the journey of development. However, this organic view of history is not sufficient to support a stage theory of history. Wilson believed that organicism provided the how, but he also needed the why. For Wilson, the direction of development had a moral significance, and he needed a way to support this moral contention.

Wilson’s concept of history was not a “nice (institutional) theory,” in so much as it did not provide an institutional outline that could be easily applied to any nation. Nevertheless, it was a theory in that it recognized a basic pattern that political societies would move through. It is evident that despite his claims to the contrary, Wilson did have a theory of history. By his own admission, Wilson thought of politics in a comprehensive way which included not only the institutions of government, but history and social issues. It was a grand theory, but it was still a theory. Here, a grand theory refers to a sweeping and universal vision in which all peoples and societies would have their place in history. Wilson may have claimed that he did not have a theory of history that was fundamental to his understanding of politics, but that was only due to his narrow definition of what such a theory should do. He did not have a practical theory, but he did have a descriptive theory that had a claim to predictive powers, and even a moral compass. It created in Wilson’s mind a proper path that societies should follow if they wished to develop a self-governing body politic, the most efficient and moral form of government according to Wilson.

The United States was well on its way along the path that Wilson had set out in his stages of history. This meant that the American government was already ordered on
more sophisticated ideas than other nations who, because they were not as far along, did not have access to. According to Wilson, the genius of American politics was that it was able to draw lessons from England, and, as a result, the founders had made a good faith attempt to use science in their conceptualization of politics.

The politics of English-speaking peoples has never been speculative; it has always been profoundly practical and utilitarian. Speculative politics treats men and situations as they are supposed to be; practical politics treat them (upon no general plan, but in detail) as they are found to be at the moment of actual contact. (Wilson [1896] 1996, 158)

The American experiment in democracy was just that, a scientific endeavor. In Wilson’s opinion, being practical was being scientific since science produced practical results. However, Wilson’s claim of utilitarianism would cause him trouble since spirit was not always realized as the greatest good immediately. The political evolutionary process was not primarily based on material gain, although this would be a result of it. Spirit was about pushing society out of its comfort zone, resulting in a short term discomfort for a long term gain. Such an association between democratic government and utilitarianism brings one close to the situation that leads to the possibility of the “Tyranny of the Majority.” Without something to moderate the will of the majority and protect the political minority’s rights, democratic government can become a fearful thing. In place of the Founders’ claims, Wilson used spirit as a moderating force on society. Wilson concluded that from its very beginnings, the United States of America had tried to find a science behind its politics. For Wilson, science was a quest for the truth.

Because of the limited scientific knowledge of the day, the Founders’ attempts were of limited success. Wilson and his generation had access to entirely new avenues of
scientific theories that the Founders did not have knowledge of. Therefore, the outcomes of the Founders’ deliberations were necessarily different than those of Wilson because the inputs framing those deliberations were different. The Founders did the best they could with what they had, according to Wilson’s argument. Wilson had to re-formulate the Founders’ ideas in light of Darwinism and the new appreciation of the organicism that it engendered in the minds of political thinkers.

The Old Ideas: Newton and the Whig Philosophy

During his 1912 campaign, Wilson gave a number of speeches that became the core of the *New Freedom*. “What is Progress?” was one of the speeches that Wilson gave as he worked the stump in his first presidential bid. It was in this speech that Wilson explicated his idea of what form progress would take in a political context. It was here that Wilson the scholar met Wilson the politician, and progress had to be explained in such a way that it could be transformed from a theoretical concept outlined by a contemplative professor into the central element of a political platform declared by an active politician seeking public office.

Wilson chose to introduce his conceptualization of progress in the form of a story. It might have been a true story, or simply posed as such to make it more palatable to the general public. Wilson recalled an anecdote of when as president of Princeton he

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7 The idea as narrative is not an uncommon rhetorical technique, and Wilson may have been taking a cue from Lincoln who was known as a great raconteur of the frontier. The frontier lawyer turned Chief Executive often used this skill in his political speeches. The story in “*What is Progress?*” was told in such a way that the concept did not come wholly from Wilson, but from another. Perhaps, this was a way to advance the legitimacy of the idea by showing that the idea had come from a man of great learning.
talked to a “very interesting Scotsman” who was a scholar of the philosophical thought of the seventeenth century.

He called my attention to the fact that in every generation all sorts of speculation and thinking tend to fall under the formula of the dominant thought of the age. For example, after the Newtonian Theory of the universe had been developed, almost all thinking tended to express itself in the analogies of the Newtonian Theory, and since the Darwinian Theory has reigned amongst us, everybody is likely to express whatever he wishes to expound in terms of development and accommodation to environment. (Wilson [1912]1961, 41)

The old way of viewing politics created a concept of government that was influenced by Newtonian laws. This begins to suggest central elements of Wilson’s theory of history. It fit into Hegel’s notion of historical epochs that are bound in a historical set of ideas which limits individuals of that time to that set of ideas. For Wilson, the manifestation of the Seventeenth century was Newton’s law that governed the physical universe. Newton’s Laws were not simply scientific theory; they pervaded the minds of the thinkers of the time. Wilson had a great desire to combine his political thought with that of science and give it a legitimacy that he believed this coupling would confer.

What Wilson was describing was scientism, the attempt to use scientific methods in disciplines outside of the natural sciences, the most important for Wilson being political science. However, this attempt was inspired by Darwin and the organic, not Newton and the mechanical. Scientism had the advantage of lending strength to political arguments because of the objectivity that it was supposed to produce. From his historical observations, Wilson would claim that the scientism of his day was just as prevalent at

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Presenting it as an idea that he heard from someone else suggested humility on Wilson’s part. He may have been trying to shake the perception that he was an unapproachable know-it-all academic.
the time of the founding of America and the writing of the Federal Constitution.

Therefore, the Founders were able to gain a large degree of credence for their political ideas and the institutions that they produced because they could argue back to science.

…the Constitution of the United States had been made under the dominion of Newtonian Theory. You have only to read the papers of the federalists to see the facts written in every page. They speak of the ‘checks and balances’ of the Constitution, and use to express their idea the simile of the organization of the universe, and particularly of the solar system—how by the attraction of gravitation the various parts are held in their orbits; and then they proceed to represent Congress, the Judiciary, and the President as a sort of imitation of the solar system. (Wilson [1912] 1961, 41)

Wilson believed that the Founders problem was that they held the mechanistic view of the world. However, Wilson was claiming that the Founders “were only following the English Whigs, who gave Great Britain its modern constitution.” But Wilson too, like the English Whigs, shared a distaste for theory. Continuing, Wilson put the matter, “Not that those Englishmen analyzed the matter, or had any theory about it; Englishmen care little for theories” (Wilson [1912] 1961, 41).

One on hand Wilson, was trying to place himself in this political tradition that went from the Whigs to the Founders, thereby connecting himself to the modern British Constitution. In Constitutional Government in the United States, Wilson would expand this relationship between the Whigs and the Founders,

At the time our national government was erected, the Whig party in England was engaged in a very notable struggle to curb and regulate the power of the Crown. The struggle had begun long before the revolution which cut our politics asunder from the politics of England, and that revolution itself was only an acute manifestation of the great forces which were at work among thoughtful Englishmen. The revolution which separated America from the England was part of a great Whig contest with the Crown of constitutional liberties. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 198).
Wilson continued to claim that not only was the American Revolution an extension of English Whiggery, but events in America had a beneficial effect back in England. It is something similar to a contagion effect.

The leaders of that revolution (American) held Whig doctrine; the greater Whig statesmen on the other side of the water recognized them as their allies and gave them their outspoken sympathy, perceiving that they were but fighting a battle which must sooner or later be fought in England, whether with arms or with votes and the more pacific strategy of politics. Every historian now sees that the radical changes made in the government of England during the nineteenth century were quickened and given assurance of success by the changes which had preceded them in American; that the leaders of the American Revolution had but taken precedence of the Whigs at home in bringing government into a new and responsible relationship to the people who were its subjects. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 198-199).

Wilson cleverly inverted the relationship between the United States and England in terms of the development of political thought. Unlike the Germ Theory that Wilson’s professors at Johns Hopkins held to, Wilson proposed that democratic ideals did not flow in one direction from Europe and across the Atlantic to the United States. In this context, germ is defined as seed. Germ Theory claimed that democracy was an European transplant to North America. Wilson believed that the Atlantic was not a one way street; instead, there was a conceptual loop across the ocean. Initially, democracy was brought to the United States from Europe, where it underwent further modification. Democracy became more fully democratic, and this improved version was then communicated back to England where it was absorbed into English political culture. The United States owes much to England, but England’s political development also benefited from the United States. The United States was not the junior member of this perceived partnership between Old and New World Whigs. England and the United States were both
contributing members. It was important for Wilson to established this idea because it
gave to the United States its own unique political identity, similar to, but different from,
England. Also, it emphasized the evolutionary nature of politics and democracy.

Wilson made a claim that the Whigs on both sides of the Atlantic shared
sympathies with one another during the revolution. This claim helped to substantiate
Wilson’s argument that there was a long tradition of Whig-like political thought and that
as it flowed through time it could be traced all the way to Wilson. However, the
historical fact that this claim is based upon is questionable. The shared sympathies at the
time of the Revolution were not nearly as wide-spread as Wilson seemed to indicate they
were. For example, towards the end of the *Declaration of Independence*, Jefferson did
argue that the American Revolution was part of a larger Whig tradition since popular
revolution in cases of political suppression had been common in English history and that
the Colonists were drawing on this fact to justify their own actions. Therefore, English
Whigs should support the American Revolution. Despite Jefferson’s call, few
Englishmen of any political persuasion, Whig or otherwise, backed the American cause.
However compelling Jefferson’s argument was to Americans, it was a piece of political
rhetoric. The demand for English support was a political argument meant to forward the
cause of independence, and there is a difference between a political argument and a
historical fact.

Back in England, one of the notable exceptions to the lack of support for the
colonists by British subjects came from Edmund Burke. In an address to Parliament,
Burke states that the American colonists should be granted their independence since the
American Continental Congress was based on the Parliament. The call for political separation between the colonies and the home country was the culmination of a long process. Wilson concluded that Burke believed that both the British and American legislatures were the voice of the people that each respectively represented. The Crown had no more right to infringe on Parliament than Parliament had a right to infringe on the Congress. Yet, Burke’s speech was notable because it was the exception that proved the rule. The vast majority of Members of Parliament at the time of the American Revolution saw it as an act of treason pure and simple. It may not have been a fringe interpretation of history, but it was certainly a selective one. In addition, Wilson’s claim that there was consensus in the historical community about this contagion effect was inflated to say the least, but it was a widely held belief at the time.

It would seem that Wilson had more in common with the Whigs. Still, Wilson found something objectionable in them. According to Herbert Butterfield, in *The Whig Interpretation of History*, the theory that lay behind the Whiggery was a process of the abridgement of history, focusing on some events and others not at all. It was a dramatic telescoping of history, in which liberty grew over time although there were counter forces at play that tried to stifle its development, with the end result of this struggle being the liberty that is embodied in the English Constitution (Butterfield, 1931). One the surface this interpretation of history would seem to be extremely similar to Wilson’s. Wilson, like the Whigs, shared the attitude that the idea that liberty has grown through history, but their concept of society differed.
Wilson’s disagreement with the Whigs was not over their concept of liberty or its relation to time. Wilson and the Whigs both viewed liberty as an idea that developed or grew over time. As a consequence, both had an element of progressivism in their conceptual framework, if one defines progressivism as improvement. The problem was not that the Whigs were progressive, but that they viewed society as mechanical. In contrast to Wilson’s view, the Whigs had a mechanical-progressive principle. Wilson did not see the progressive side of the Whigs’ mechanical-progressive principle to be theoretical; instead, Wilson considered this to be practical. Since both the Whigs and Wilson shared this progressive attitude in their interpretation of history, Wilson focused on the differences between himself and the Whigs. The Whigs with their mechanical-progressive principle were a rival to Wilson and his organic-progressive principle. Wilson was trying to explain what was the best suited institutional design for a democratic, self-governing society, just as the Whigs and the Founders had in centuries past. Wilson had to show that the Whigs and Founders had been correct in their own time and place, but that in the current generation, that was no longer the case. He desired the same outcomes, an institutionally strong democratic society, but he argued that his conception of how that society worked was more appropriate than what had come before him. Wilson had to argue that progress could only be rightly considered if it was connected to the organic society, but he could not undervalue the work that the Whigs and the Founders had done.

For Wilson, the English Whigs were not the only source that provided the Founders with a philosophical position on which to base their new government.
Montesquieu was also part of this mix. The presence of the French philosopher in the minds of colonial intellectuals helped Wilson to differentiate his political thought from that of the Founders. Montesquieu was not part of Wilson’s perceived Anglo-Saxon continuum of political thought but was an outside source that made a systematic description of an institutional design that would become the system of checks and balances. Wilson was always a bit wary of political thought coming from outside of this continuum, and Montesquieu being French must have raised Wilson’s suspicions because he viewed such thought as foreign to the political tradition that he felt he was a part of. However, just because one was a foreign observer did not automatically discredit the individual from Wilson’s consideration if that thinker had something to contribute that Wilson felt was worthwhile. There were some non-Anglo commentators who Wilson agreed with, at least in part. This confusion is a result of Wilson’s synthetic thinking. Wilson did not have a problem with picking and choosing ideas from a wide array of thinkers. For example, Wilson pointed to both Montesquieu and Tocqueville as important historical personages; but Wilson held Tocqueville in a higher regard than he did Montesquieu. In Wilson’s estimation, Montesquieu had made observation of the British system, but he used these observations to forward an abstract political theory, the separation of powers. It was this “theory” of politics that had frozen the American Constitution in time, according to Wilson. Montesquieu was an important historical figure because of his influence on the Founders, but he had become a political hindrance for the further institutional development of the United States. On the other hand, Tocqueville was still politically useful to the current debates that Wilson was engaging
in. The Frenchman had been critical of his own nation’s Revolution and attributed the disaster of that Revolution to the difficulties of trying to impose a theory of abstract freedoms onto a population that was not prepared to accept them. Instead, he focused on the details of American society to explain American liberty. Therefore, both of these authors used a type of social analysis that Wilson agreed with. Montesquieu’s observations were a product of his time, but keeping with Wilson’s argument, these observations on the correct institutional design for government had, by the time Wilson was running for president in 1912, been superseded by newer ideas that would, if instituted, lead to better and more efficient government. Wilson believed that the Zeitgeist had undergone major transformations since the American Constitution was written. These transformations were moral, political, and economic. The United States, and later the World, would have to react to these changes in order to conform to the new age (Wilson [1913] 1961).

Wilson did not think that the idea of supersession was a radical idea; it was merely practical. Political practicality had been part of the initial political thought of the Founders and the generations that came after them, so Wilson was just part of what he saw as a very American tradition. As Wilson would say, “We (Americans) have all been disciples of Montesquieu, but we have also been practical politicians” (Wilson [1908] 2002, 59). This statement established the idea that while Americans were indebted to Montesquieu and his description of the separation of powers in a republican government, there was room for innovation. Americans had from the beginning of the republic recognized the importance of political adaptation.
In the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu had presented the Principle of Checks and Balances from his observation of the British political system established by Whig Theory. It was this form of systematic observation that Wilson saw as scientific. Wilson went on to explain how the founders managed to organize all of this material into a cogent notion of government:

The makers of our federal Constitution read Montesquieu with true scientific enthusiasm. They were scientists in their way,—the best way of their age,—those fathers of the nation. Jefferson wrote of “the laws of Nature,”- and then by way of afterthought- “and the Nature’s God.” And they constructed a government as they would have constructed an orrery,—to display the laws of nature. Politics in their thought was a variety of mechanics. The Constitution was founded on the law of gravitation. (Wilson [1912] 1961, 41-42)

It is here that it is possible to see Wilson's theory of history and how the application of that theory led to the mistake that the founders made. The founders were scientists of a kind, but not in the modern sense. They were trapped in their Newtonian age. In his *Jefferson Day Speech* in 1916, Wilson, in a debate about the increasing powers of the federal government, would say, “You cannot draw example of the deeds of Thomas Jefferson….There is no parallel in the circumstances of the times of Thomas Jefferson with the circumstances of the time in which we live” (Cooper 2009, 335). Wilson concluded that the Founders were the best minds of their age, but even this fact could not allow them to see beyond the veil of intellectual limitations that history produced. Wilson could conclude that Jefferson, Madison, and the rest of the Revolutionary Generation were restricted to an age where the dominant scientific view was incorrect.

Also according to Wilson, Jefferson was particularly enamored with the connection between science and politics. The inclusion of “Nature’s God” must have
been an afterthought in Wilson’s estimation. It was difficult for Wilson, the man of faith, to think it anything but an afterthought. Wilson did not see this as an assertion of Jefferson’s deism which was an essential part of the influence of Enlightenment thinking on Jefferson. It sprung from the same source that Jefferson’s view of natural rights came from. Wilson probably would not have accepted the idea that such a proclamation could be so central to the philosophical underpinnings of the *Declaration of Independence*. Jefferson’s God was not a transcendent being, but the cold and absent divinity of the Deists. There was no connection between God and man in Jefferson’s formulation of God. God was not transcendent, but distant. There was no room for an active Spirit in Jefferson’s Deity. Wilson might have viewed God as a distant divine being, but he was still transcendent. Wilson conflated the Christian notion of spirit with the Hegelian notion of Spirit. Spirit was necessary in Wilson’s political thought where it was not in Jefferson. Spirit was at the very core of Wilson’s political thought. The idea that Jefferson had thoughtfully removed God (and by extension spirit) out of politics must have been abhorrent to Wilson.

According to Wilson, The ideas of the *Declaration of Independence* and the Constitution that followed eleven years later were constructed like a scientific instrument. Wilson did not contest the fact that government should be fabricated through the thoughtful association with science, only that with the benefit of hindsight it had become apparent for any right-thinking individual to see that the political apparatus created in 1787 had become inappropriate. American society had changed sufficiently, and the scientific paradigm of the day had transformed into something very different. The intent
to translate a scientific theory into a model for government was correct; however, the
form and principles championed by the founders had become dated. The institutional
design prescribed by the founders and embodied in the Constitution was simply
outmoded and needed to be replaced,

The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living
thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of
organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its
environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer
pressure of life. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as
checks, and live… This is not a theory, but fact, and displays its force as fact,
whatever theories may be thrown across its track. Living political constitutions
must be Darwinian in structure and in practice. Society is a living organism and
must obey the laws of life, not of mechanics; it must develop. (Wilson [1912]
1961, 42)

This passage is a clear expression of Woodrow Wilson’s belief in the organic
nature of society. He drew on that dichotomy between what the Founders thought to be
true and what he knew to be true. Wilson claimed that he had the force of facts behind
his conclusions, and facts always trumped theory. The difference between Wilson and
the Founders was time; consequently, Wilson implied that if the Founders have had been
part of his generation, then they would have come to the same conclusions about
government that he did since both the Founders and he were reasonable individuals
thinking seriously about the institutional design of government. The Founders did not
have the lens of Darwinism in which to view political issues; Wilson did. The
evolutionary and developmental notions that Wilson took initially from his reading of
Darwin, he moved to Burke and, ultimately, to the organic theory of society. He
combined this with his concept of spirit which would justify the progressive notion that
he held. Wilson would be able to splice these two concepts together because of his particular cognitive abilities.

Wilson, The Synthetic Thinker

One of the most noted facts about Woodrow Wilson is that he held a doctoral degree, the only president in the history of the United States to do so. This fact about Wilson is often trivialized, but it is important because as a student and scholar it became incumbent on Wilson to develop a fully articulated theory of history, more so than any other president. Wilson worked extremely hard at forging what was for him an adequate intellectual framework to explicate politics in what he felt was the most realistic way possible. Wilson would call this theory constitutional history and at its root was the organic-progressive principle.

It is important to try and understand how Wilson thought because he made several intellectual leaps when constructing his idea of spirit. Although many have commented on Wilson’s thinking, this synthetic tendency was most lucidly summarized by Arthur Link in his analysis of Wilson’s intellectual abilities. According to Link, Wilson had a tendency to think synthetically. He took from a variety of others and then mixed bits and pieces together (Link 1958, 5). This was the origin of the organic-progressive principle. It was composite in its nature, and the conflation that Wilson made in producing it was also due to his synthetic thinking. It is not that synthetic thinking is inherently incorrect, but the mere fact that one is combining others ideas made it potentially problematic. What this meant was that Wilson was not an original political
thinker. According to Link, Wilson did not generate any novel ideas about the political system or make any unique observations on domestic or foreign politics. What he did do was to assimilate and synthesize the ideas of others. This helps to account for the multi-faceted nature of the organic-progressive principle, but Link may have been incorrect in concluding that Wilson offered nothing new in his view of politics.

The second characteristic in Wilson’s thinking was his ability to reduce an argument to what Link called the essentials of the problem. (Link 1958, 5) This too is helpful in understanding Wilson’s thinking since it shows that Wilson was not particularly concerned with details. When Wilson detected what he perceived as evidence of the organic and/or progressive argument in the work of others, he saw those arguments in the broadest of strokes without being particularly concerned with the details.

Wilson had pride in his ability to see the big picture and not being bogged down by minutiae. This would be the source of what he called constitutional history, a notion that he had developed before he began his graduate studies. He would comment on his method of thinking early in his graduate education. During his first semester at Johns Hopkins, Wilson wrote in a letter that he was not enthusiastic about his history courses because the research was archive-driven. He hated spending hours reading through historical documents and critically evaluating them. This legalistic technique of doing historical research was a new import into the United States from Germany and was
somewhat unimaginatively called the German method. This German method of historical research was not what Wilson had in mind for himself.

Wilson wished to think in broad ideas not fine details. Wilson did not believe that history could be understood by looking at obscure particulars. As Wilson wrote about a class on colonial history, the research was:

…digging into the dusty records of old settlements and colonial cities…and other rummaging work of a like dry kind, which seem very tiresome in comparison with the grand excursion among imperial policies which I had planned for myself.

(Bragdon 1967, 37)

Wilson could only stand such rummaging through these old musky papers for a few weeks before he went to discuss the situation with his Professor H.B. Adams, or as Wilson, wrote to “have it out” with him. (Cooper 2010) Wilson seemed to explain his position well, and the professor accepted Wilson’s proposal. Wilson stopped practicing the institutional history that Adams was imposing on his students. In its place, Wilson was allowed to do the kind of research he wanted to do. It was a more inclusive type of historical research that bordered on ethnographical studies, something like an anthropology of politics. Its goal was to offer explanations for the types of political institutions in specific political communities. It was this realignment of Wilson’s historiographical methods that allowed Wilson to begin writing what would become

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8 Important note: The German method of historical research should not be confused with German idealism. The goal of this new form of historical research was to make history a more objective discipline. German idealism was a philosophical school of thought that included Kant and Hegel. Both concepts came from Germany or what would become Germany. Until 1871, German was a cultural, not national designation. It was only after that year that the collection of small kingdoms, principalities, free cities, and other political communities of central Europe unified into the modern state of Germany. Even though these two concepts shared a common geography, in an ontological sense, they differed greatly from one another. Moreover, the German Historical Method was a response to German idealism. Wilson’s dislike of this historical research method was rooted in the fact that he was a strong proponent of idealism.
Congressional Government, ultimately becoming his doctoral dissertation. (Bragdon 1967) The thesis of this work would argue for a Darwinian inspired, organic society and the transformation of the American federal government from the traditional presidential form to an English style parliamentary system. Wilson’s experience in graduate school was not one of transformation. Wilson did not become consumed by his discipline; instead, Wilson bent his discipline around his pre-existing notions of politics.

The difference between constitutional and institutional history is more a matter of methodology then content. Institutional history was the detail driven scientific method developed in Germany in the nineteenth century. Wilson believed that this method of history did not capture the essence of history. Wilson was critical of the German method of historical research in his 1895 essay, *On the Writing of History*:

Ordinarily the historian’s preparation for his task is such as to make it unlikely he will perform it naturally. He goes first, with infinite and admirable lobar, through all the labyrinth of document and detail that lies up and down his subject; collects masses of great matter and small of substance, verification, illustration; piles of notes volumes high; reads far and wide upon the tracks of his matter and makes page upon page of reference; and then back and begins his narrative. ‘T is impossible then, that he should begin naturally. He sees the end from the beginning, and all the way from beginning to end; he has made up his mind about too many things; uses his details with a too free and familiar mastery, not like one who tells a story so much as like one who dissects a cadaver. (PWW, Vol. 9, 302)

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9 Wilson was in Baltimore when he was writing *Congressional Government*. One of the major points of the book was the superiority of the practical in comparison to the theoretical side of American government. The only true measure of the Congress was what it did and how its institutions functioned, both formally and informally. With the national capitol being only a short train ride away, it would seem that Wilson had an excellent chance to undertake direct research of the Congress to see firsthand the activities of the federal government and behaviors of the members of the Congress. One would intuit that this type of research would forward the point that Wilson was trying to make in his treatise. However, during the entire time that he was composing the manuscript, he never went to Washington to observe or do original research on the Congress. (See Bragdon, 1967)
The German historical school was a cold and factual method that missed the point of studying history for political purposes. Constitutional history was an attempt to look for the larger concepts beyond the formal structures of political institutions and examine how they developed over time. This led to Wilson’s concept that history moved in stages since institutions developed along a path, a concept that would later become known in political science as path-dependency. This was Wilson rationale for engaging in grand theorizing.

Conceptually, John Hopkins was based on the German research university model. This German method was based on a rigorous, and supposedly more scientific method, of writing history that focused on narrow interpretations of a preponderance of documented evidence with the goal of making historical research more objective. The German historical method was deductive, which made the sweeping claims of the inductive philosophical thought that Wilson was so prone to difficult, if not impossible. It was not surprising that the German method of historical studies was being promulgated there. The program was called the Historical Seminary since instruction was not lecture based but constructed around the German seminar method (Bragdon 1968).

Of the three members of the history and social science teaching staff at Johns Hopkins, two, H.B. Adams and Richard T. Ely, had studied at the University of Heidelberg, receiving their doctoral degree from that institution (Cooper 2009; Bragdon 1968). Both men were mentored by the Swiss-German political scientist Johann Bluntschli. Bluntschli was a strong advocate of Hegelian statism (Pestritto 2005a). Moreover, after his death, Bluntschli’s personal library had been acquired by Johns
Hopkins. The Bluntschli Library, a converted biology laboratory (and probably the only lab that Wilson willingly entered during his entire life), was the location of Johns Hopkins’ history department during Wilson’s time at the University. Although Wilson rejected the German method of historical research, he also was exposed to and influenced by German idealism throughout his time in graduate school. He was already comfortable with the organicism that he found in the ideas that he was being introduced to since he had already seen similar ideas in the tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition that he grew up with and in the ideas of the Anglo-liberal historical writers that he lionized.

Wilson and the Christian Tradition

Keeping in mind Wilson’s synthetic tendencies, it is possible to see the antecedents of his theory of history in his religious thought. A young Wilson would write a short essay titled *Work-Day Religion*. In it, Wilson pondered what it meant to be true to his faith. Wilson believed that it was the duty of a Christian to try to emulate the pious demeanor of the Christ. This in itself was nothing new; from the establishment of Christianity as an organized religion, believers have tried to emulate the virtuous deportment of their messiah. However, as subsequent history has proved, this is a difficult task because the Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ life are vague and, in some cases, contradictory. As a consequence, Wilson, like Christians throughout the ages, had to first determine what edicts could be attributed to Jesus. The traditional method used by Christians is an intense examination of Jesus’ sayings and deeds as recorded in the Bible. From this study, Wilson developed what he considered a lucid reading of the Gospels’
messages, securing an excellent sense of just what righteous behaviors he was supposed to duplicate.

This early attempt by Wilson to interpret the Gospels into one cogent message is a model for the intellectual behavior that made Wilson into Link’s synthetic thinker. Wilson’s analysis of the New Testament displayed his ability to cut through verbiage and find the essence of a moral lesson, even though the Gospels vary so greatly in substance, tone, and emphasis. Because Wilson used those skills that he would later utilize in constructing his theory of history, the soundness of the conclusion that he reached is particularly interesting. Wilson’s conclusion was summarized in *Work-Day Religion*. Wilson wrote: “All His (Jesus) teaching lead us to be cheerful and unobtrusive” (PWW Vol. 1, 177). This is somewhat of an odd conclusion. Any familiarity with the Gospels would introduce doubt about the conclusion that Wilson drew from scripture. To use the qualifier ‘all’ would seem to place a crushing burden on Wilson’s position. If Wilson is correct, then everything that Jesus taught in the Gospels would have to forward the concepts of cheerfulness and unobtrusiveness. If one defines teaching as including an individual’s deeds, then this is clearly not the case. For example, Jesus was anything but cheerful and unobtrusive when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple (Matthew 21:12). It is disconcerting that Wilson’s ideas do not seem defendable even against a rudimentary argument.

Wilson was “a citizen of another invisible world” (Latham 1958, 6). He was raised in the Southern Presbyterian Church. His father was minister, and his mother a devoted member of the Church. According to Link, Wilson absorbed his father’s
religious thinking including, “the omnipotence of God, the morality of the universe, a system of rewards and punishments, and the supreme revelation of Jesus Christ” (Latham 1958, 6). God made laws that men, and nations, were bound to follow. Because men were free moral agents, they had a choice whether to follow the divine rules or not, but to not do so would result in hardships and divine sanction. As part of Presbyterian theology, Wilson had a strong belief in predestination, which was viewed as God ordered plan for everyone and thing in the universe from the beginning to the end of time (Cooper 2009; Magee 2008). Wilson’s definition of faith allows the believer to act without necessarily having to understand (Latham 1958). Hegel’s spirit first affects individuals unconsciously. Spirit in its Hegelian or religious forms compels us to act, even if we do not fully understand it. Predestination coupled to salvation can easily be transformed to a faith in progress. For a believer, God would not guide humanity towards anything but the best outcomes. This brings with it a belief that God has ordered the world, and although we may not understand it at first, it still is the will of God. I believe that these aspects of Wilson’s religious thought impacted his political thought.

There was a progressive attitude engrained into the divine plan according to Wilson. In 1876, Wilson wrote a short essay entitled Christian Progress. As the title implies, Wilson linked his understanding of proper Christian behavior to the concept of progress. He did this by looking at the most obvious source that he knew. The Bible is the absolute source of divine authority for Christians, and in its pages, Wilson saw the progressive ideal recapitulated again and again. Wilson would call this soul-progress. He described it as follows:
The Bible everywhere represents the Christian life as a progress, a progress of the soul. But, although it always speaks of the Christian’s journey as a pleasant one, since it is the only road in which true happiness can be found, it never describes it as a path strewn with flowers, but rather as one attended with and obstructed by many difficulties. In order to advance, the Christian must needs strain every muscle. (Pestritto 2005b, 73)

This interpretation of Christianity reflects Wilson’s theory of history. History is progress and to not recognize this is to deny the truth and to misunderstand the purpose of humanity. Moral progress ran parallel to material progress. Even if one comes to understand history in the proper way it is still a difficult trek. One cannot simply wait for history or salvation to happen; one must be an active participate in the process. Christian eschatology became equivalent to the notion of progress. Christians have made the claim that Jesus was the embodiment of the logos, and Wilson extended that claim. According to Wilson, the logos is amalgamated to the concept of progress. It may even be that the logos is a divine progressive commandment. Wilson’s devotion to the concept of progress is much clearer with the knowledge that he harbored such beliefs.

The religiously inspired soul-progress simply became progress; consequently, this was a concept that was understandable in a religious and a secular form to Wilson. This created a problem because in a religious context, one does not have to prove, only believe. In comparison, in a secular or scientific context, one must provide evidence. A religious argument has a different set of criteria than a secular argument. When Wilson moved between these two poles, he did not always modify his arguments to conform to the conventions of the mode of thought that he was in. This was possible because Wilson had made the secular and the religion function the same in his scheme.
It is important to understand that Wilson’s view of salvation was that it was a corporate activity. Unlike evangelical denominations, he believed that salvation was not a task that could be undertaken at the individual level. Therefore, agency was provided through society. In October of 1914, Wilson gave a speech to the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Pittsburgh where he declared that he did not believe that Christianity was “a means of saving individual souls.” Moreover, social reform was a task that he believed was rooted in the true meaning of Christianity (PWW Vol. 31, 221 cited in Cooper 2009, 280). Wilson was a proponent of the social gospel movement. This is evidence of Wilson’s collective attitude which is also evident in his theory of history. History, like salvation, is undertaken by the group. The individual will benefit from the progress that is functioning in religion and history, but those goals can only be achieved by group action. In the religious realm, this group effort takes the form of salvation, and in the social realm, it takes the form of society unity. This helps to explain why Wilson’s units of analysis were corporate entities—societies, nations, and races. This is not to conclude that Wilson was not concerned with individuals; clearly he was, but no improvement for the individual could take place outside of the group. Individuals were free, but only because society had created the political institutions to ensure that freedom.

Wilson was commenting on the ontological question of faith. For a believer like Wilson this is the fundamental question: how do we know of God? This is an important issue since it is the foundation of one’s values, and by extension, political beliefs. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God reveals himself thought revelation. The experiential nature of this process leaves an impression on those who undergo it, but revelation is accessible
only to those individuals who experience it. The ontological core of the experience cannot be shared with others. It is an experiential black box. We can see the individual before and after the experience and register the change that has occurred within that person. It may be possible to tell the story of the experience of revelation, but the context is not open to investigation. This is why Wilson used the concept of the Zeitgeist because it took the experience of one’s personal religion and made it collective.

For example, it is possible to see the power of revelation in the New Testament story of Saul on the Road to Damascus. This is a story that must have been familiar to Wilson, given that he read the Bible every day. The story recounts Saul’s encounter with the divine figure of the Christ. This is an iconic example of a Biblical conversion narrative. Saul was blinded by the illumination of glory. In this state, he continued to Damascus, conferred with a Christian mystic, and the scales fell from his eyes. Saul then changed his name to Paul and began his career as an evangelist and author of scripture. It is a well-known story from the Christian cannon, and this is the point- it is only a narrative. We know that Paul converted, but the reader does not know why. There must have been some compelling reason why Saul would change his life so completely, but there is no indication what this reason was. There is nothing that denotes what Paul learnt through the experience. From his behavior, there was an internal change in Paul’s heart, or soul, or mind, but in a pedagogical sense, the outside observer learns nothing of the context of the argument that Paul experienced, only that he experienced it.

Revelation is not rational because it is not intra-subjective. Wilson read the Bible every day and was an active member of the Presbyterian Church. It was recorded that
Wilson said the following:

My life would not be worth living if it were not for the driving power of religion, for faith, pure and simple. I have seen all my life the arguments against it without ever having been moved by them…There are people who believe only so far as they understand—that seems to me presumptuous and sets their understanding as the standard of the universe…I am sorry for such people. (Latham 1958, 7)

Wilson had to balance between rationality and faith. He believed that without faith an individual could not make the intellectual jump to those greater ideas that would improve humanity beyond its limited means. Before one could exercise their reason, it was necessary to have faith because it was only with faith that one could have self-confidence in their reason. Knowledge was secondary to belief, according to Wilson. Moreover, knowledge is limited in the mind where faith is absent. Spirit was invisible, but Wilson had faith that it was real, and not only real, but omnipresent. The individual’s perception of spirit began as an unconscious process. It appealed to the passions not the intellect. Some never develop a conscience understanding of spirit, and for those who do, conscience knowledge of the spirit is a later development. One must feel spirit before they know it. Religious conviction strengthens the likelihood that one will act on this initial feeling.

It was necessary to have faith because it brought with it the concrete belief in spirit. Once an individual came to believe that there was a spirit in the world, it was possible to see the manifestation of that spirit not only in religion, but in history itself. Spirit moved human societies along, and this brings the argument back to Wilson’s evolutionary point-of-view and to the organic-progressive principle. Because spirit was progressive were it could only be present in an organic society because only organic
societies had the structures that were conducive to change. This could stand as a religious argument on its own, but Wilson did not stop here. Instead, he took this argument and applied it in a secular context.

Spirit in Secular Thought

The problem of using both religious and secular sources was a problem that Wilson had to bridge. Wilson had to solve the problem of reconciling revelation with reason. This is a particular thorny task for Americans since religion is so influential in the national polity. It is important to note that this cannot be explained by applying the concept of civil religion to Wilson and his political thought. Wilson might have had odd perspectives on his religious beliefs, but they were not so innocuous that they could be simple blended into a general public attitude. His solution must be accounted for in a more compelling manner.

German idealism provided a mechanism that could link the two seemingly diametrically opposed ontological perspectives together. Hegel claimed that the rational flowed out of the irrational (Hegel [1821] 1976, 10). Rationalization through history was an essential piece of Wilson’s overall political thought and perhaps the most important because it allowed him to justify the basic structure of his intellectual framework. Wilson believed that the rational position for an individual was to be free, and politics was evolving towards that point. Wilson’s examination of history led him to conclude that same impulses that were fundamental to religion and German idealism were equivalent to one another. Therefore, he saw a family resemblance between the religious thought he
was exposed to as a children and the academic thought he learned as a young men. If Hegelian spirit was coequal to the third part of the Christian Trinity, then this provided proof that spirit must be a real substance since it appeared in two independent strains of thought. It was a preponderance of evidence pointing to an ideal of spirit that had specific characteristics. Wilson could identify the existence in his theory of history.

This was a tricky business for Wilson because the truth of history was only partially revealed in early times. According to Hegel, irrational had some truth in it, but this was an incomplete truth. It was more of a feeling than an idea, but it was there nevertheless. There had been thinkers in the past that had helped to move their societies along progressively but very slowly in starts and stops. Many of these individuals were religiously inspired, so they focused on the concept of spirit that was manifest in the Christian tradition. These thinkers were pushing the bounds of thought to their limits for their own particular time and society. No matter where in history one looked, there were always political institutions that were evolving. The problem was that the further back in time one was the more limited the set of tools for understanding the true forces of history become. They might have been insightful, but they could not be fully enlightened; still, basic concepts might have been vaguely discernable to a few great minds in the past. So, it might have been possible for a few in the past to see the animating power of history, but it would have been difficult for them to describe sufficiently to themselves, much less to explain adequately to the members of their societies. The Founders faced the same obstacles as thinkers in earlier times; they were limited because they were burdened with social and conceptual limitations. They did not have enough information to develop
perfect political institutions. Granted that in comparison to these older thinkers, the Founders were much more sophisticated in their political thought. For Wilson, the Founders were correct for their time, but that time had passed. From the perspective of the present, the Founders were no longer correct. For Wilson, this compiled political thought was nearly complete, and the truth of history was becoming more and more discernable because the spirit that drove history was becoming more understandable.

This process that Wilson saw in history had an all important political purpose. Those few insightful individuals from past ages were struggling to describe the relationship between their respective government and society. This brings the argument back to the concept of the organic society. Since societies are organic, they change over time. Therefore, those societies were substantially different from other societies in regards to both space and time: Space meaning other societies and time meaning that the social ideas change over time and that what is true for a society now will change in the future. Therefore, the work of past political thinkers had little, if any, political relevance for Wilson or his contemporaries. Studying these older views might have offered a historical window on how thinkers of earlier days thought of their own times, and it might be possible to suggest the origins of organicism, progressivism, and the present of spirit within some of these thinkers, but the political importance of the lessons of history were not applicable to the present.

This explains how it was possible for Wilson to find an animating force in both German idealism and the Christian tradition and then combine them into one single entity to act as the dynamic engine in his theory of history. An integral component in both of
these intellectual sources is spirit. Christianity has the Holy Spirit, the conduit between humanity and God. German idealism has the Spirit of the Age, or the Zeitgeist, the collective consciousness of humanity. Both forms of spirit, no matter from where they originate, perform the same function. They invisibly nudge humanity along by providing access to a greater truth. The concept of the Holy Spirit was an earlier and cruder description of the same phenomenon. Even through Hegel was trying to create a rational system divorced from metaphysics, the Zeitgeist takes on the attributes of a metaphysical entity. This was Wilson’s view of the matter. He believed that the combining of religious and philosophical thought about Spirit was permissible and did not detract, but in fact added to the validity of his religious beliefs.

For Americans who had a strong religious tradition, and especially Wilson, this Hegelian philosophical landscape was inviting because it still had room for a modified version of the divine within it. The Germans had removed the blatant presence of the Christian God from their philosophy and replaced it with a notion of spirit that somehow resided in humanity. Yet, that separation was never fully explained and just what that spirit was remained an open question. Hegel never entirely precluded the influence of a divine being. Hegel may not have talked about God, but his philosophy certain behaved like there was a universal moral arbitrator. It was religious without a Godhead. When Hegel’s ideas, modified as they were through the process of transmission travelled across the Atlantic, Wilson was able to seize upon those idea precisely because they were amenable to the existence of a divinity. Hegel had tried to take God out of his philosophy as best he could. When Wilson was exposed to idealism, he tried just as hard to
reconstruct a connection between the religious and the secular. Wilson’s conception of these two forms of spirit found in the Christian tradition and German idealism were almost undistinguishable from one another because they are describing the same thing.

Wilson reasoned that politics were an evolutionary process, but he could not accept the idea that life was little but a brutal competition between individuals as the social Darwinists held. Instead, he saw evolution guided by spirit. Wilson was an enlightened Darwinist with the difference being that when Wilson applied Darwin’s theory to history, he saw it as a way to describe a process of ongoing human progression that was moving towards enlightenment. Evolution was not the brutal and chaotic process that Darwin had described. In its political manifestation, Wilson saw a process that led to greater order over time. If one described the international arena as a Darwinian competition between nations, Wilson would amend this argument by adding that the struggle between nations was a temporary condition. Darwin’s theory was innovative because it changed the scientific paradigm, but it was not completely new in Wilson’s estimation. It had been prefigured by earlier thought, although only in bits and pieces. The older Christian concept of a Holy Spirit mirrored the idea of the Zeitgeist. Although the two were different in many regards, both were ultimately benevolent in nature. This opened possibilities for the collective actions of a human society if that society followed the urging of this spirit.

Wilson’s appeal to scientism was an attempt to imbue his political thinking with a prestige that was attributed to the natural science, not an attempt to radically redirect the study of politics. He connected his progressive inclinations to that of science.
All that progressives ask or desire is permission-in an era when “development,” “evolution,” is the scientific word- to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine. (Wilson [1912] 1961, 42)

Wilson made what he viewed as a reasonable request, but it was a request with major repercussions. It would reprioritize the basic institutional structure and functions of government. It was not an insufficient change that Wilson was asking for. Of course, Wilson did not see it as a request, since it was fact that needed to be recognized, not an opinion that needed to be change. Because Wilson had new information, he was clearing up a misconception about the nature of government that had been perpetuated for a long time.

**Conclusion**

The organic-progressive principle that was essential to the Wilsonian view of the world was moored to the idea of spirit. Wilson’s theory of history was based on this principle. In Wilson’s conception, the linkage between organicism and progressivism was a function of spirit. Wilson saw spirit as a real and tangible substance in the world. This Spirit was a vital force in the world, and any attempt at understanding human society and the political institutions that these communities produced required the intense study of this spirit. Because the methods of what Wilson perceived as modern science swept over these spiritual things, that idea of science was inadequate as a way to study politics in any meaningful way. Modern science was suffering from a narrowing in what was considered acceptable methodology and that narrowing was to its detriment. Wilson argued for a much broader definition of what could be considered scientific.
Wilson connected his evolutionary politics to his idea of spirit. He felt that the study of spirit was scientific since he could connect it to Darwinism. For Wilson, Darwin was innovative. This was not limited to Darwin’s effect on biological science or even the spread of Darwin’s evolutionary ideas to the social sciences; it was because Darwin changed the paradigm of thought. It caused a conceptual shift from thinking about society from a mechanical to an organic entity. Wilson used the idea of organicism to connect Darwin to both Burke and Hegel. This reconceptualization was important, and it had its benefits. There are aspects of political activities that can be viewed through the organic lens, but Wilson connected this new mode of thought to the idea of spirit. This was not just the recognition of a new paradigm; it created a new relationship that was not a direct result of this new paradigm. Wilson piggy-backed his idea of spirit onto his evolutionary thinking.

As a result, it was impossible for Wilson to study history and politics without accounting for spirit. Wilson had to contend with the dominant form of political methodology of his day which with was centered on institutional theories. These institutional theories were like studying the tip of a political iceberg that floated on the surface. Below the surface was the much larger mass of society, the complex structure that held up the political system. To gain a true understanding of politics, an individual had to understand it in the context of the society that produced it. Wilson was rebelling against the notion of the narrow institutional theory that he believed was an imprecise and shallow method to understand politics. Wilson’s attempt to adopt the methods of science
to the study of politics was not a comprehensive remaking of the discipline in the mode of the new modern definition of science.

But, Wilson had his own idea of what constituted science, and instead of Wilson conforming to the definition of science, Wilson launched into a campaign to change the definition of science. This was similar to what Wilson had done in graduate school. He had his own concept of what history was and the methods he would use to pursue his studies in that discipline. When he encountered professors who had a different definition of history and used different methods to study it, Wilson did not modify his ideas to be more amenable to his instructors. Instead, Wilson stood by his preexisting notions and implemented his ideas and created what he believed to be a complete new notion of study—Constitutional history. The same process caused Wilson to argue for the expanded definition of science. The new modern definition of science invalidated the concept of spirit in history and, as a result, made Wilson’s theory of history irrelevant.

Wilson may have thought that he was only arguing to enlarge the scope of science, but, in doing so, he was fundamentally breaking the rule of this new definition of science. Wilson believed that he presented an objective theory of history, but he conveniently shelved the concept of parsimony. It was permissible for Wilson to do this, but as a result of this decision he lost the claim that he was participating in a scientific undertaking, if one defined science in the narrow way that most American scholars envisioned it at the end of the 19th century. Wilson’s concept of science was an older, pre-Enlightenment definition of science. It was this definition of science, a systematic and collective enquiry into a topic, which Wilson championed. The problem was not that
this definition of science is not legitimate, but it is substantially different in the methods that it allows to the scientist and goes beyond the limitations of the modern definition of science. Wilson believed that because his notion of history and politics were based on an evolutionary outlook derived from Darwinism, his conception of the study of politics was an innovation, but his argument as to what constituted science was drawing from religious and idealistic source which produced a definition of science based on an older, not newer, criteria of science.

Wilson used the language of science as it was understood in the later 19th century, but he was concerned with issues that fell well outside the bounds of the modern definition of science. Wilson’s idea that there is an animating force or spirit in a society which drives it does produce problems. It is difficult to fit the idea of spirit into a modern scientific theory. Wilson’s ideas greatly complicated the cause of social phenomenon. This is viewed as a failure on Wilson’s part to connect the meaning of science, in its modern sense, and politics. Recently some political scientists have criticized Wilson. The main thrust of this criticism is that for all of the talk of science and being scientific, Wilson was not very scientific in his thinking. (Ubertaccio and Cook 2006).

This impulse to graft a spirit or greater intelligence onto the process of social and political growth was not isolated to Wilson. In the United States of America in the latter 19th century, religious thought was still a strong influence on the minds of many. Political evolution, like biological evolution, could be perceived as a mechanism that was controlled by an external force, be that God or perhaps a higher intelligence. This may be convenient for those who wished to believe in a deity and evolutionary thought, but it is
not a requirement of Darwin’s ideas. It was an extension of those ideas to make it more palatable to individuals, including Wilson, who wanted to accept these new scientific theories, but not have to compromise their religious beliefs.

This proved more difficult than it appeared. The belief in spirit offered no direct material evidence. There is no evidence to support this position, and it is much simpler to conceptualize the process without its heavy and speculative agency, for it is not necessary to have an entity at the top of a hierarchical structure controlling the process. According to the dictates of Ockham’s razor, the simplest explanation is most likely the correct one. Wilson’s explanation was anything but simple since it appealed to material and non-material sources. This was why Wilson had to distinguish between the material and the spiritual in political activity. It is possible to conceive the process as self-organizing controlled by forces internal to the process without an intelligence or intent. However, there is room to insert one, if one is so inclined and can make the necessary intellectual justifications to support that contention although this throws Ockham’s Razor to the wayside.

However, in German idealism, this application of Ockham’s razor cannot be applied since there is an assumption of spirit. This assumption is based on theory not on fact. Therefore, for Wilson to claim that his political thought was practical and not theoretical is somewhat disingenuous. Wilson’s political thought was just as theoretical as the rival theories that he was trying to displace. The difference was that they were based on different theoretical concepts. As Kant would say, he had to make room in his
reason for faith. Wilson did not only make room in his reason, but based his reason on ideas that came out of his faith to form his theory of history.

Wilson’s idea of spirit was a mixture of Christian and Hegelian definitions. Wilson created a system that used elements of both, but spirit functioned in a Hegelian-like matter for Wilson. This produces an explanation that was apparently both secular and sacred. In moving after from a transhistorical base for rights, spirit filled that vacuum. Therefore, it is now necessary to this discussion the topic of history. For it is through history that it is possible to see spirit in action
CHAPTER 3
WOODROW WILSON AND HIS THEORY OF HISTORY

Historicism and the Stages of History

In this chapter, the investigation of Woodrow Wilson’s political thought will turn to an analysis of the historicism that was present in Wilson’s theory of history. Wilson’s use of the organic-progressive principle allowed for a specific type of historicism to exist in his political thought and in his internationalism. Historicism is the concept of using history as the ultimate arbiter of development, political or otherwise. This was done by Wilson, connecting history and axiology to his concept of political development. For Wilson, like historicists in general, politics and history were inseparable. His was an attempt to find meaning in history in order to give the present a sense of order, if not nobility. Historicism has the effect of undervaluing the past by placing an emphasis on progress. It is the present, and the near future, that is prioritized. Historicism is about “becoming,” and this makes the past only important because it was the past that has led to the present, and few, if any, lessons can be drawn from history and applied to the present in any meaningful way.

When Wilson became president of the United States in 1912, he had little practical knowledge of international relations, but as a student and an academician, he had developed a sophisticated theory of history. Historicism is more than an attempt to describe a historiographical perspective or use history in the study of politics; instead, it deals with an effort to identify broad and sweeping patterns within the historical record.
and connect those patterns to political activities, both current and future. For Wilson, placing politics in an historical context would provide indications as to the direction that societies and, under some circumstances, the world was moving. The development of political institutions could not be understood outside of the historical context. The use of historicism fit into Wilson’s attempt to create a Darwinist inspired organic theory of political development, which allowed him to selectively mix aspects of German idealism with the English Historical School and the Christian tradition. Wilson did this because in all three, he saw evolutionary elements that he believed connected them together. However, when it came to his theory of history, the most influential source was German idealism. Wilson’s concept of history in the long view basically followed the outline that had been laid out by Georg W.F. Hegel.

Wilson’s theory of history is closely related to Hegel’s idea of universal history; however, as Wilson was synthesizing ideas from other traditions into his theory of history, it was not a blatant copy of Hegel’s philosophy of history, but it was extremely similar. The mechanism behind Wilson’s organic-progressive principle generated a soft form of historicism, one that moves conceptually away from the more radical forms of historicism. Like Hegel, Wilson did not wish to embrace the more radical and materialistic forms of historicism. This is what Pestritto called the idealistic form of historicism (Pestritto 2005). This qualification is important because Wilson needed a way to account for the existence of spirit, which Wilson tied to Hegelian “Zeitgeist.” In such a theory, the unfolding of history was the key factor in social growth. Wilson
believed that history as a process led not only to increasing material benefit, but to the moral growth of humanity.

However, unlike Hegel, Wilson did not believe that this would ultimately result in the complete secularization of politics from religion. “The body is not the cause, but the instrument of the spirit,” Wilson would declare. (PWW vol.7, 366) This was an inversion of Hegel’s idea of spirit. In Hegel, spirit ultimately became a secular entity; hence, it was caused by the body (Taylor 1975). Hegel believed that religion was important historically. Religion helped humanity approach the absolute truth, but, eventually, philosophy would overtake religion and replace it. This was a materialistic rationale since it ended in the world. Wilson believed that spirit came from a transcendent source; hence, the body was only the instrument of the spirit. This was an important, if not the key difference between Wilson and Hegel because it allowed Wilson to come to conclusions that would have been difficult in a strictly Hegelian context. Although there is debate about how much materialism influenced Hegel and his philosophy, it is fair to say that there was a strong tendency in Hegel to seek materialistic explanations. This was a tendency that other political thinkers, like Marx, used as a foundation in their theories of history. Wilson freed himself of this concern, giving himself greater latitude in applying his organic-progressive principle to his theory of history.

Politics was something of a religious duty for Wilson. The doctrinal beliefs in Wilson’s Calvinist Protestantism called for men to focus their efforts in this world. Wilson’s understanding of Protestantism demanded that men live in this world, and a failure to actively apply oneself in this world would affect one’s standing in the next.
Through predestination, God had established order in the universe. Predestination was one of Wilson’s strong religious beliefs. Wilson took this idea of destiny and built a Hegelian framework around it. Wilson was able to justify this as a dual system, one which valued both worldly and other-worldly considerations. Wilson wove these ideas into his description of America and its government.

The way to success in America is to show you are not afraid of anybody except God and his judgment. If I did believe that the moral judgment would be the last and final in the mind, as well as at the tribunal of God. I could not believe in popular government. (*The New York Times* July 5, 1914 cited in Latham 1958, 7)

In this view, God existed and was a transcendent force in the world which provided individuals with a moral sense. In 1911, Wilson would comment on what he believed was part of the solution for the great problems faced by the United States,

There are problems which will need purity of spirit and an integrity of purpose such as has never been called for before in the history of this country. I should be afraid to go forward if I did not believe that there lay at the foundation of all our schooling and of all our thought this incomparable and unimpeachable Word of God. (Latham 1958, 7)

This moral sense could be used as a guide for an individual’s actions. In addition, these same individuals could use that moral sense in creating their governments in this world. God might have the destiny of each individual mapped out, but this did not mean that each individual knew their destiny, so one had to act in the most moral way that one could. This moral sense would help them secure their place in the next world, but it was possible to use this same morality as a universalizing force in the governing of this world.

In Wilson’s mind, this dovetailed easily into Hegel’s holistic concept of universal history. Democracy was tied to Wilson’s religious belief. It was the moral values that religion imparted that motivated individuals to act for the good of others, not just themselves. In
Wilson’s estimation, this was part of the duties of a Christian, and those who did not act in such a way were in danger of God’s displeasure. Without this, the cooperation that Wilson saw as fundamental to self-government could not exist.

According to Wilson, there were four stages of political growth that could be discerned across the scope of history. It was possible to place every society into one of these categories. Wilson would explain these stages in *Constitutional Government in the United States*:

…government may be said to have passed through four stages and forms of development: a first stage in which the government was master, the people veritable subjects; a second in which the government ceasing to be master by virtue of sheer force and unquestioned authority, remained master by virtue of its insight and sagacity, it readiness and fitness to lead; a third in which both sorts of mastery failed it and it found itself face to face with leaders of the people who were bent upon controlling it, a period of deep agitation and full of the signs of change. And a forth in which the leaders of the people themselves became the government, and the development was complete. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 28)

This is key to a further understanding of Wilson’s internationalism since history was a universal force that moved all nations in its ebbs and flows. The unfolding of history was pushing the political order towards democracy and self-government, according to Wilson. He framed his organic-progressive principle around this point. Wilson’s variation on the Hegelian philosophy of history was mixing the view of the organic society, as Wilson understood it, into this larger Hegelian framework. This reinforced the soft historicism that was already present in Hegel.

This was not a simple Americanization of Hegelian thought, but the creation of a Wilsonian understanding of history and theory of democratization. Wilson had notion that was teleological. This is his idea of “completeness.” Democratic government is the
best form of government because it broke down the barriers between the government and those who were governed by it. Non-democratic forms of government are lacking in some essential way. It is only by passing through the four stages that governments grow to a maturity, or to put it in a Hegelian way, nations are moving from irrational to rational forms of government which are manifested through their political institutions. Wilson’s addition of elements into the Hegelian mix and his application of this modified version of Hegel to the history of the United States and the world had serious implications. In essence, Wilson believed that the world was at a point where history was not only changing but was at a point of world historical importance. It was for this reason Wilson believed that the time was right for a realignment of how the international arena should function. Simply put, Wilson believed that there was a sufficient number of nations that had developed far enough to create a critical mass in the international community, changing the system from one based on national self-interest to a more cooperative system based on collective security.

Domestic “completeness” meant that war and conflict would not be the result of isolated rulers making war on other isolated rulers at the expense of their people. The truly democratic and self-governing nation would not be an aggressive nation, according to Wilson. In his State of the Union Address in 1915, Wilson would declare, “Great democracies are not belligerent…we regard war merely as a means of asserting the rights of a people against aggression” (Cooper 2009, 305). The right to fight aggression could be a basis for collective security. The case could be made that cooperation between states is the best way to keep the peace. This is the argument of the Liberalism perspective in
international relations, and it is the case that Wilson would make in 1919. With the proper leadership (namely Wilson’s), it would be possible to transform the international system from one based on self-interest to cooperation.

In Wilson’s book, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics, A Sketch of Institutional History and Administration*, which was written to be used as a textbook, it is possible to see Wilson’s attempt to use political institutions as a yardstick in forwarding this grand theory of history. Because Wilson was concerned with institutional development, he is commonly described as an institutionalist, but it is important to recognize Wilson’s use of institutions as his unit of measure in his larger theory of history. Wilson’s focus on institutions is evident in the pages of *The State*. Wilson wrote the book from the summer of 1886 to the spring of 1889. Wilson described it as “a dull fact book,” since many of the chapters explained the details of several governments in a comparative fashion (Bragdon 1967, 174). This analysis was restricted to European nations and the United States, the nations that Wilson viewed as most developed.

Even though Wilson may have been disappointed with the results of his efforts in writing *The State*, it provides us a clear outline of his historical comparative method and

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10 The 1908 edition of *The State* included discussions of the following governments: primitive period, ancient Greece, Rome, the Teutonic states during the Middle Ages, France, Germany, Switzerland, Dual Monarchies (Austria-Hungary and Sweden-Norway), Great Britain, and the United States. These first chapters were the “fact book.” The last five Chapters (Summary: Constitutional and Administrative Developments, The Nature and forms of Government, Law: Its Nature and Development, The Functions of Government, and The Objects of Government) were somewhat different in character, and they provide an excellent window onto Wilson’s theory of history.
the conclusion that he reached by using this methodology. Wilson called this the historical-comparative method or ‘realism’. Wilson presented a system in which it was possible to examine societies and assign them to specific categories along a linear progression of more or less developed stages. The stages of history that Wilson presented in *The State* more than roughly corresponded to Hegel’s epochs of human history. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel categorized history into the following periods: the Oriental World, the Greek World, the Roman World, the German World, and Modern Times. Setting the Oriental World aside for a moment, chapter two of *The State* is about the Governments of Greece in antiquity (Hegel’s Greek World); chapters three and four are about the Government of Rome and Roman law (Hegel’s Roman World); and chapter five is about the Teutonic Polity and Government during the Middle Ages (Hegel’s German World). Chapters six through eleven are about the then contemporary western governments, and four chapters discuss the nature of modern governments (Hegel’s Modern Time). Wilson’s scheme is similar to Hegel’s although Wilson’s is more explicitly political. Still, the basic innovations that Hegel points towards are the same for Wilson. Both culminate with modern times, and, in both, modernism is a distinct period, the major characteristic of which is that social growth is so great that developed societies have fundamentally different capacities then they had in the past.

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11 Wilson intended to write another book that he was going to entitle *The Philosophy of Politics*. He believed this would be his magnum opus. Unfortunately, as Wilson’s teaching and administrative duties increased, he never had the time to write it. All that remains of the projects are a few notes and a brief outline. See Bragdon, 1967, Chapter 13

12 This is not to be confused with the realist school of thought in International Relations. Wilsonian realism is an inversion of this other type of realism. The language can be confusing. For this reason, historical-comparative method with be used when referring to Wilson’s methodology.
Wilson believed that these new capacities would be used for the betterment of those societies and the world. When they were not, Wilson had a difficult time explaining it. Wilson lived until 1924, so he only experienced the beginnings of the rise of authoritarian regimes in the Interwar Period, but events in Russia and Italy caused him frustration (Cooper 2009). Societies in the past did not act like societies in the present because they could not; past societies were fundamentally different in their moral make-up and, therefore, incapable of those actions.

The problems with Wilson’s historical theory center on a basic tension that is inherent in the organic-progressive principle. Wilson’s definition of organicism was inspired by his attempt to integrate Darwin’s idea of adaptation into political thought. The result was a belief that all societies were unique because they were framed under different environmental pressures. But because of history’s universal, nature all societies were heading towards the same point in history, the achievement of what Wilson called political liberty. Wilson defined this concept as “… the right of those who are governed to adjust government to their own needs and interests” (Wilson 2008, 2). This was Wilson’s final phase of political development which would result in democratic government. Adjustment, a concept found in Burke, was the goal of democratic government. In Wilson’s thought, adaption and adjustment become similar, if not identical, processes in his theory of history. In Wilson’s mind, the struggle that had propelled history was not one based on class but was the struggle to achieve political liberty. The four stages of history and political development were the successive victories
in that struggle. Wilson used his theory of history to manage the cross currents of organicism and progressivism.

Wilson’s view of history is the view that history is a dynamism comprised of tidal forces that push and pull individuals and groups. It was possible for some to swim against the tide, but, like any swimmer fighting the current, this was a difficult and unsustainable task. The progressive movement of history was stronger than any obstruction that a society could erect. It was just not an unhealthy condition since institutional stagnation went against not just history, but the spirit that animated it. This was a spirit that Wilson vested with not just political, but a moral importance. (See chapter 3 for a detailed explanation of spirit.) Because of this, Wilson had a strong notion of when a nation was standing on the right or, for that matter, the wrong side of history. This contributed to a certainty in Wilson’s thinking, and this had a direct impact on his internationalism, establishing a path-dependency model complete with milestones appropriate for nations at particular times in their history.

The idea of viewing the progressive nature of history - be it for a people, a nation, or the entire world - was what Hegel called universal history. *The State* was Wilson’s attempt to present his own modified version of universal history. Wilson’s universal history uses social and political institutions as the gauge of historical attainment. Wilson’s description of government is similar to Hegel’s concept of the World. As Hegel stated in *The Philosophy of History*, “The term world includes both physical and psychical Nature” (Hegel 1991, 16). Hegel’s conception of the world and Wilson’s idea of government are both manifestations of the Zeitgeist. It is important to note that
Wilson’s analysis was not wholly materialistic, reiterating the importance that Wilson placed on spirit in his overall political thought.

The Problem of Relativism and the Progressive-Organic Principle

One of the consequences of Wilson’s reliance on Hegel resulted in a system of political thought that was relativistic. This observation is similar to one made by Pestritto that focused on the difference between historical and transhistorical values. According to Pestritto, Wilson’s idealistically inspired historicism broke with the original set of values that were worked into the fabric of the United States at its beginning (Pestritto 2005a). Wilson’s was an attempt to shift the basis of American government from a transhistorical (the axiology of the founders) to a historical framework. If one maintained a transhistorical outlook, then there would be no space left to go, no need for forward movement, no reason to progress, according to Wilson. In a system based in transhistorical value the ideas that are the basis of legitimate government are already fully formed and present in the world. If one advocates this position, then the research agenda is to search history for examples of these values. It may not be easy to find these examples, but history and experience are valuable aids.

In a historical system, like the one that Wilson proposed, value develops over time. This type of system minimizes the past since it posits that the understanding of value in yesteryears was not as sophisticated as the present. Progressivism rests on a bed of historical values. Moreover, it would be a fallacy to apply current values systems to the past since they simply did not exist then. In addition, this is not only a temporal
phenomenon, but a cultural one as well. It is not possible to compare the values of one society to another. Hence, value becomes relative to time and place. At some endpoint, the correct values will become fully known. This is Hegel’s famous ‘End of History.’

This argument is well founded, but it raises questions about how one applies relativism to political analysis. In order to have a better understanding of Wilson, it is necessary to develop the argument more than Pestritto did. It might sound counter-intuitive to call Wilson a relativist since, as previously noted, Wilson strove for a moral direction in his political thought. Wilson had to move through history, but longed to reach its end. There is a subtlety here that should be examined. It is possible to untangle this Wilsonian conundrum if we consider the different ways relativism can be applied and not look at it as a monolithic concept.

It is helpful to distinguish between variations in relativistic arguments to clarify Wilson’s position. It is possible to apply relativism in at least three different ways and depending how it is done, the effects can vary.\(^\text{13}\) The first type is descriptive relativism. This is the simplest form which claims that different societies differ on the basis for their values. This is based on anecdotal observation but goes no further than that. Also, it leaves room to argue that one society might have a more highly developed set of values if one is so inclined to try to make such an argument. The second type is an ethical relativism that claims that actions that are defendable in one society at a given time might not be in another. This claim challenges the possibility of applying a universal moral frame that could be applied between societies, and, by extension, nations. This starts

\(^{13}\) This typology comes from the work of Dr. Robert H. Kane
down a slippery slope making it difficult to argue for any moral framework. Finally, there is prescriptive relativism which claims that it is wrong for individuals in one culture to judge the actions of those in another culture. This is important because prescriptive relativism becomes a basis for action, or as the case may be, inaction. Applying this concept makes any kind of moral judgment between cultures, which includes judgments across time, impossible.

Wilson’s theory of history was relativistic in certain ways, but Wilson tried to qualify his ideas, so he could avoid the more radical forms of relativism that challenged his religious convictions. Wilson’s concept of organicism met the requirements of descriptive relativism. Wilson stated that historically societies have adapted to their own particular set of pressures, and through this process, societies became different from one another. Wilson’s concept of organicism was a qualified form of ethical relativism. Ethical relativism dovetails into Burke’s idea of prejudices—societies have certain customs that have developed over time, and even though these prejudices might be judged harshly from outside of the society, they are still valid within the society in which they originated. The reason why it is qualified as customs change and this makes such prejudices temporary if one applies a long enough timeline. Wilson commonly notes that the benefit of education is the removal of distasteful customs. For Wilson, education is not just beneficial for the individual, but can lead to the moral improvement of society.

Wilson’s theory of history was descriptive and ethical, but Wilson was not making a claim of prescriptive relativism, and I believe that Wilson thought he had built an adequate bulkhead against it. However, once one crosses the line into relativistic
thinking, it becomes difficult to try and continue to make claims based on moral standards. This is the description of the tension that was inherent in Wilson’s political thought. The qualifier for Wilson was the progressive side of the organic-progressive principle. In time, all societies would share something like a common ethical basis. In some way, and Wilson was not clear on this, the circumstantial differences between societies would fade away as they became more self-conscious of the world-spirit. Some societies were closer to realizing this state than others. For the less advanced nations, this would take a long time, but the more advanced nations were apparently on the cusp of this condition. This would be the result of history. The claim that society is organic is a relativistic statement, but the claim that history has a final purpose may not be.

In the end, we all end up in the same place and the question becomes what is more important in this - the process by which it is achieved or the final outcome? The problem is that no person has ever experienced the benefits of that final outcome. Wilson, like everyone else, might have lived in the hope of the better world that would be the result of the unfolding of history, but he was forced to live in the world as it currently was: intellectually and morally incomplete. But, to Wilson, that completeness was near, or at least near enough to take an institutional form. England and the United States were close and other nations in Europe were near enough to participate in Wilson’s plans. In what would become what Wilson believed to be the hallmark of his new age, the institutional form would be the League of Nations. Wilson’s internationalism was a step that brought the world closer to this goal. I believe that this final destination was important to Wilson and was the connection between the relativistic theory of history he
held and the morality that he valued. The question is if organic-progressive principle successfully fends off prescriptive relativism. For all of his insistence that politics had to be practical, Wilson’s appeal to some future time in which all societies would come to something like a moral consensus (the signaling of which would be an institutional confluence) seems rather impractical, especially in 1919 in the wake of the First World War. This is a criticism of Wilson, but it is not unique to him. It can be extended to Hegel and all forms of idealistic historicism as well.

The organic-progressive principle when combined with the long arc of history enables Wilson to make what seems like competing claims on the ebb and flow of history. It was the development of political institutions together with the relationship that government had to the rest of society that Wilson saw as the critical factor in human history. The more historical distance the, less variation in institutional development.

From the dim morning hours of history until now, the law of coherence and continuity in political development has suffered no serious breach. Human choice has in all stages of the great world-processes of politics had its parts in shaping institutions; but it has never been within its power to proceed by leaps and bounds: it has been confined to adaptation, altogether shut out from raw invention. (Wilson [1898]1903, 555)

Wilson framed this process in terms of laws, equivalent to natural laws. It is a bold statement to claim that there are laws of both coherence and continuity in politics. It is somewhat unclear what Wilson means be claiming that institutional development is coherent. What is it exactly that coheres? It cannot be institutions since over the course of history government institutions have come and gone. There are old and venerable institutions of government, and this is perhaps what Wilson was pointing to. In addition, Wilson saw links between institutions. For example, the King’s council developed into
the Parliament; the Parliament was the model for colonial legislatures, and the colonial legislatures were models for the Congress. According to this logic, a line could very easily be drawn between the medieval King’s council and the United States’ Congress. This seems to be what Wilson’s Law of Coherence is describing. This is an evolutionary logic. Accordingly, it recognized that institutional coherence could be maintained despite the changes (superficial or otherwise) that were the result of adaptation.

This raises the issue with the related idea of continuity, Wilson’s second law that he applied to history. The line of adaptation from a monarchical council to a republican Congress could be offered as proof of continuity of the legislative function using this evolutionary logic. However, the legislative function developed over time and just what powers defined the institution changed substantially to the point that without the post hoc benefit of history it may not be possible to see the continuity between the two institutions. This is a reductionist method in which history is telescoped, and, as a consequence, it fails to account for other factors. Ironically, this is a common criticism of the Whigs idea of history (Butterfield 1931). The Whig’s mechanical theories of government were the very ones that Wilson was trying to replace. This seems like a strange position for Wilson to take since he argued for a more complete accounting that then organicism was supposed to provide. This was his argument for why organicism should replace the older mechanical ideas of the Whigs. Yet, here Wilson is again reverting to a simplifying concept.

The question of what directed this world-process is not settled by Wilson in the above quotation. It does not seem that Wilson wished to turn this into a case of political
determinism, but the progressive nature he saw in the process made him come very close
to just that position. Wilson said that individuals had a choice in the forms their political
institutions would take, but there was one standard because of spirit. Wilson seemed to
argue that every society had its own choices in terms of what their political institutions
would look like, but, in the end, everyone would come to the same conclusion, not
because those decisions had been imposed on them from outside forces, but because they
were the correct choices to make.

Since Wilson was heavily influenced by Hegelian thought, it might be argued that
by applying the organic-progressive principle Wilson was trying to create a Hegelian
dialectic. The Hegelian dialectic is composed of a thesis that is in conflict with on
antithesis. The resulting resolution is the synthesis which then can become the thesis in a
new dialectic. This would mean that organicism was the thesis and progressivism was
the antithesis (or vise-versa), resulting in the synthesis of some type of political growth or
institutional development. But Wilson never framed his argument in such a way, and
even if he did, it would have been a sloppy dialectic. Unlike the elements in a standard
Hegelian dialectic, organicism and progressivism were not specific to a period in time.
Organicism and progressivism are guiding principles and therefore, cannot operate as
elements in the dialectical structure. The Hegelian dialectic is a mechanism that allows
for progress, so it would be awkward, if not impossible, to use progress as one of the
constituent elements in the dialectic structure as a thesis or antithesis.

Wilson’s concept of progress was a first principle in his political thought. It is the
\textit{sine qua non} of his theory of history. It is important to note that Wilson’s use of
institutional development as a measure of political growth varied depending on what stage of history a society was in. Institutional development was the surrogate measure for progress although institutional development was somewhat nebulous as a measure itself. Wilson could use institutional development when he talked of the transition of a government from autocratic to democratic. Remember that Wilson lived in a world of kingdoms, empires, sultanates, and colonies. Much of the variation in global political structures was reduced due to the First World War. In its way, progress was part of the larger issue of democratization.

In addition, Wilson discussed institutional developments in terms of refining institutions within democratic regimes. These regimes were in a stage of development that Wilson called constitutional government or the modern democratic state. This was Wilson’s fourth, and final, stage of history. To address a point of possible confusion, there had been democracies in antiquity, but they did not have the institutional structure to ensure political liberty, according to Wilson. Therefore, these were not true democracies in the modern sense and could not be considered in the same category. In what Wilson considered modern democracies there are two types: transitional and consolidated. The issue here is that these two types of democracies function under two different sets of social dynamics.

In a discussion about democratization, it is necessary to consider transitional and consolidated democracies differently. This is a problem for Wilson because he is much more apt to discuss institutional development in consolidated democracies rather than those navigating a democratic transition. Democratic transitions can be extremely fragile.
political processes and backslidings and reverses into autocratic forms of government are common. It is much easier to refine preexisting democratic institutions than to build them from scratch. Constitutional government by Wilson’s definition is a consolidated democracy.

The open politics of the consolidated democracy that were necessary to Wilson and his definition of political liberty can be problematic in the transitional democracy. The process by which nations become democratic was attributed to the imperceptible movements of organicism, an explanation that was good enough for Wilson. Because of the direction that Wilson ascribed to history, the course towards democracy had already been set, so it seemed that Wilson was not really interested in explaining the way nations became democracies. It was just obvious to him that a properly developed society would demand democratic institutions. Democratization was not a leap from autocracy to democracy, but an evolutionary adaptation.

As a result, Wilson did not do a particularly good job in explaining how nations became democratic, but he was effusive on what nations should do once they were democracies. Of course, Wilson’s main focus was the United States which was and always had been a constitutional government by Wilson’s estimation. The fact that the United States had been created as a constitutional democracy was the exceptional characteristic of that nation. However, there is something unsettling in leaving the critical step of the democratic transition to the force of history by thinking of it as something akin to a natural process. This illustrates a larger problem when one makes an appeal to organicism. Organicism has the potential of just glossing over things without
having to explain it. An organic process was on imperceptibly complex process, so it is sufficient to merely state that it is an organic process and leave it at that, but this does little to explain the intricacies of the process. This was one of the major shortcomings in Wilson’s thinking.

Institutions as the Measure of History

The problem of ensuring political liberty was an institutional question for Wilson. Since Wilson is commonly considered an institutionalist, it is only right to spend some time examining his view of institutions and the part their played in his theory of history.

Wilson defined an institution in the historical content:

Speaking in the terms of history, and particularly of political history, an institution is merely an established practice, an habitual method of dealing with the circumstances of life or the business of government. There may be firmly established institutions of which the law knows nothing. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 14)

This is an expansive definition of institutions, but one that should be expected given Wilson’s belief that the Newtonian concept of government needed to be replaced by the Darwinian concept of government and society. Wilson referred both to the idea of a formal institution found in government (or law, as he put in the passage above), plus the idea of the social institution. A social institution according to Wilson’s definition was a less formal type of institution. According to this definition, a social norm could qualify as an “institution of which the law knows nothing.” This helped to reinforce his belief in the organic society since according to this definition, the idea of an institution is valid in and outside of government. The slow processes of the organic society results in
institutions, informal and formal, and the institutions nested in the civil society have an effect on the formal institutions of government.

Wilson’s four stages of government were based on the relationship between the government and the governed. The ‘forms of development’ that Wilson referred to were political institutions. These institutions allowed for political participation and were the platform from which government administrated society. This can be described as inputs (from society to government) and outputs (government to society). Institutional development is important to most versions of democratization, but was especially important to Wilson. Institutions played an important part in Wilson’s idea of democratization because of the emphasis he placed on organicism and adjustment. Adjustment was an ongoing process in an organic society, and there has to be effective ways to move social consensus into the realm of government. In an enlightened formulation of politics, political institutions were the formal means by which governments ensured the liberties of the governed.

Ultimately, institutional development was the crux in Wilson’s theory of history and his idea of democratization. Because Wilson defined political liberty as adjustment, Wilson envisioned a specific set of political institutions that would need to be present in order to ensure the preservation of political liberty. Always the Anglophile, Wilson believed that democratic institutionalism would take the parliamentarian form. According to Wilson, the British parliamentarian system was more transparent, allowing for open debate and, as a result, produced a higher caliber of leadership than the obscured committee system found in the United States Congress. More open government was
more democratic and, therefore, better government. Wilson saw forces within history that moved political communities along a continuum of political growth which was manifest in institutional development. Since all nations were subject to this, institutional development was a valid measurement to gage the progress of a society against the backdrop of history. Wilson applied his organic-progressive principle to history, and this created a certain set of institutional expectations that Wilson believed would be common to all healthy societies. The tension on the organic-progressive principle was that Wilson had to delineate what was organic, or specific to a particular society, and what was progressive, or universal to all societies.

Wilson made the claim that all societies would vary in their political development, yet he was quite specific in the institutions that he expected to see in the final stages of development. This was a tension between the competing notions of organism and progressivism. Organicism would account for the variation in political development. Progressivism would account for the specific institutional outcomes. This might seem like a conundrum for Wilson. However, in this struggle, the Hegelian concept of progress always won out in the long run.

The order discoverable in institutional development is not, indeed, the order of prefect uniformity: institutions, like the races which have developed them, have varied infinitely according to their environment. Climate, war, geographical situation, have shaped them: the infinite play of human thought, the infinite many-sidedness of human character have been reflected in them. But the great stages of development have remained throughout clear and almost free from considerable irregularities. Tested by history’s long measurements, the line of advance are seen to be singularly straight. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 556)

On one hand, Wilson wished to show the variation between different societies. This was important to his evolutionary thinking since different societies were exposed to different
environmental factors: climate, war, geographical situations. All of these were organic factors, and societies were free to adapt to these environmental variations as they saw fit. When Wilson talked of understanding society in terms of Darwinism, he was selectively pointing to adaptation. Organicism was a vehicle for progressivism. Therefore, the demands of progressivism always won out over organicism.

Wilson did not support the brutal and competitive notions that Social Darwinists had reached. Woodrow Wilson was no social Darwinist. Darwin’s theory was a natural process. It was non-directed, but Wilson never gave up God. Therefore, there could be meaning behind adaptation. All of this translated into Wilson’s political thought and internationalism. Evolution was not a struggle that pitted individuals, or in this case nations, against one another. Instead, evolution was a basis for international cooperation. Wilson presented it as a progressive force leading to a positive good. Wilson did not apply the full scope of Darwin to his understanding of history, but he selectively pointed to the concept of adaptability of organisms to environmental pressures. Living organisms were co-equal with societies, in Wilson’s thought, which allowed the two to function in the same way. In this conception of history as a great movement, history could not follow its proper course without societies having the ability to adapt. It was the ability to adapt that allowed societies to act in an organic, rather than a mechanical, way.

Wilson’s focus on parliamentary institutions illustrates the problem that he had in balancing the organic (distinctive) and the progressive (standardized) sides of his political thought. He had to separate the form or general characteristic that was common to that institution from the idiosyncratic characteristics of an institution in a particular society.
The following are two examples of Wilson trying to draw this line that dealt with political parties and bicameralism. Wilson defined a Parliamentary system as a legislative body that had strong parties and produced a cabinet that carried out the executive duties of government. This was the ‘form’ of the parliamentary system. Idiosyncratic to England, as a specific society, were things like the specific details of the party system. In England at the time, the two dominate parties were the Whigs (Liberals) and Tories (Conservatives). Political parties were necessary institutions for democratic government because they organized public opinion into feasible policy choices, but the ideological positions or constituent bases of those parties would be different from case to case.

It is not clear if Wilson believed that all parliamentarian systems had to be bicameral or not. In the English system, the upper house was the House of Lords. Wilson did not argue that every nation with a parliamentarian government would need to exactly copy the House of Lords, for this would require that these nations have peerage. The House of Lords was based on the traditional divisions in English society, a relic of an older political order that was unique to that nation. English democratic institutions had to conform to the traditional social division in the country. In nations with an aristocracy, something like the House of Lords could form, but in others, where the social tradition of peerage was absent, this would not be possible. Moreover, the idea of a House of the legislative branch being based on a criterion like peerage had an anti-democratic aspect to it. It was not something that one would expect in a modern democratic state. Wilson did

\[^{14} \text{It might be argued that every parliamentary system would have parties that represent liberal and conservative ideologies. Wilson suggests this, but never develops it.}\]
his best to minimize the role of the English upper house. Wilson viewed the House of Lords as a vestigial institution that was politically weak.

The House of Lords, is in legal theory, coequal in all respects with the House of Commons; but, it’s authority is, as I have already more than once said (sec. 859, 868, 890), politically very inferior. Its consent is, in law, as necessary as that of the House of Commons to every act of legislation: but it does not often without consent when the House of Commons speaks emphatically and with the apparent concurrence of the nation on any matter: it then regards it as a matter of imperative policy to acquiesce. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 395)

This description of the House of Lords is classic Wilson. First, Wilson made the argument about the difference between theory and practice- on paper the House of Lords is coequal, but in reality it is not. In the past, the House of Lords was a powerful institution. Historically, the nobility was an important and active part of government, the institution having evolved from a a non-democratic source, the medieval King’s council. The House of Lords had a judicial as well as a legislative function, but as England became more democratic. These functions decreased to the point where the House of Lords was little more than a rubber stamp for the House of Commons. Wilson would declare, “The Parliament of the nineteenth century is, in ordinary speech, the House of Commons” (Wilson [1898] 1903, 388). This was Wilson expounding on the evolutionary logic of government. (This was a point so important to Wilson that he had to remind the reader of The State that he has brought it up three times already.) As English government integrated more democratic elements, its institutions adapted, with the House of Lords becoming weaker and the House of Commons becoming stronger. This type of democratic institutional development is what Wilson expected of all nations.
As can be seen in the example of Wilson’s description of the House of Lords, the line between what is necessary and what is superficial was not clear cut. The House of Lords might have been an anachronism, but what about the concept of an upper house? In a structural sense, was this not important to the form of parliamentary government to have two houses or, perhaps, unicameralism was sufficient? This is a specific example, but it highlights a larger concern. Wilson states that there were common forms of development, or a general and universal core of what makes democratic institutions, but at the same time, there are differences in these institutions. Wilson does not clearly give a definition of what exactly denotes the difference between the two. This is a critical oversight on Wilson’s part since his theory of history is so closely tied to institutions and their development. This has the unfortunate effect of dulling Wilson’s analysis.

Evolution Not Revolution

According to Wilson’s theory of history, in the long run and against the backdrop of history, all of the idiosyncratic differences between societies would be relatively insignificant because all were moving in the same direction in terms of institutional development. This is Wilson’s historicism asserting itself. As has been already mentioned, Wilson’s stages of history were framed as institutional advancements in government ending with the governed and government combining into one entity. However, getting to this political goal was not something that a society could rush into. The speed of social and political change was of critical importance to Wilson. History was a progression, but it was not a progression that could be sped through. Organicism
was a powerful but was a slow force of social nature. Institutional development happened at its own pace.

Using Wilson’s organic-progressive principle, let us look at the example of German history over the course of the twentieth century in regards to the speed and direction of political change. In 1910, Germany was an Imperial and autocratic state. In 1920, it had become a republic. In twenty years’ time, Germany became a dictatorship under the Nazis. Jumping another thirty years ahead, Germany was split between democratic and communist regimes. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, all of Germany was a consolidated democracy. Now, Germany is a major player in the European Union. This was a great deal of change to transpire in less than a century.

The political history of Germany is a good illustration of the problems using an organic lens. Much of the change that Germany experienced was a result of war, and it might be justified or argue that many of the changes were exogenous, imposed on the German people and, therefore, not organic in their origin. Democracy was tried twice in Germany before it took root, and Wilson would probably explain this by referring to the “evolution, not revolution” axiom. The organic-progressive principle might work if all other things were equal (*centeris paribus*), but finding a society that was so isolated that

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15 It would have been interesting to have Wilson comments of the rise of Nazism in Germany, but he died in 1924. However, in April of 1923, Wilson wrote an essay entitled, “The Road Away From Revolution.” Mussolini had recently come to power in Italy, and the essay was a comment on this early form of fascism. (Cooper 2009) It is possible to see from the title that Wilson believe that fascism was a violation of the “Evolution not Revolution” axiom and that Italy’s slide into dictatorship was somehow not in line with the organic flow of politics. Remember that Italy was on the winning side in World War One and had been one of the Big Four at the Paris Peace Conference. Like much of Europe, Italy was socially, politically, and economically exhausted from the War. (see Musollini’s Italy: Life Under the Fascist Dictatorship 1915-1945 by R.J.B Bosworth, 2007 for a detailed explanation of Italy's transition into a fascist state) From Wilson vantage point, the descent of Italy from a seemingly health democracy to dictatorship must have seemed radical.
no outside pressures affected its domestic development was not an easy task. Wilson believed that organicism had an explanatory force behind it, but it was actually very difficult to apply in a real world setting.

One of the difficulties in using an organic explanation is trying to distinguish what is genuine organic change within a society and what is imposed on a society from outside. To evaluate the institutional development of Germany using Wilson’s long lens of history, one would conclude that Germany has advanced over the course of the twentieth century. It has become democratic and self-governing. Of course, as part of that advancement, Germany was the central player in two world wars and responsible for the deaths of millions of people, all resulting from decisions of the German nation. The practical Wilsonian politician must have a feel for the idiosyncratic differences between nations. This is the Wilsonian politician’s primary concern; the long historical measure is secondary since it is the idiosyncratic differences that propel policy decisions.

The “evolution not revolution” axiom was an important caveat in Wilson’s stages of history.

…the most ardent reformers have had to learn that too far to outrun the more sluggish masses was to render themselves powerless. Revolution has always been followed by reaction, by a return to even less than the normal speed of political movement. Political growth refuses to be forced; and institutions have grown with the slow growth of social relationship; have changed in response, not to new theories, but to new circumstances. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 555)

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16 Wilson had blamed Prussian militarism for the Germans’ aggressive attitudes. Wilson would tell Walter Page, the American Ambassador to England at the outbreak of World War I, that one of the major reasons for the war was, “England having the earth and Germany’s wanting it” (Cooper, 2009, 343). Wilson did not blame the English for their acquiring of an empire. That was a part of history, due to their efficient form of government and imitative as a people. Perhaps, this was part of spirit’s plan since other less advanced societies and races could learn from the English example. The Germans were being the aggressor in this case, according to Wilson.
This is Wilson’s response to the idea of revolution. Wilson’s issue was not that ideas may be too revolutionary, but that they may be imposed too quickly. It is not a matter of content, but timing. Ideas must be slowly introduced and absorbed by a society; otherwise, these ideas they would elicit a political backlash and slow down the speed of progress.

While the idea that a society must accept political change in order for it to be smoothly implemented is a valid one Wilson’s focus on how political change is instituted was centered on procedure; he said little about the ideas themselves. In an essay entitled Socialism and Democracy, Wilson would compare these two regime types. He would reach the following conclusion:

The germinal conceptions of democracy are as free from all thought of a limitation of the public authority as are the corresponding conceptions of socialism: the individual rights which the democracy of our own century has actually observed, were suggested to it by a political Philosophy radically individualistic, but not necessarily democratic. Democracy is bound by no principle of its own nature to say itself nay as the exercise of any power, Here, then, lies the point. The difference between democracy and socialism is not an essential difference, but only a practical difference- is a difference of organization and policy, not a difference of primary motive, Democracy has not undertaken the tasks which socialists clamour to had undertaken; but it refrains from them, not for lack of adequate principles or suitable motives, but for lack of adequate organization and suitable hardihood… (PWW vol. 5 561)

Granted, this was written in 1886, when many socialists were clamoring for a living wage, an eight hour workday, and safety regulations which today are all enforced by the government and for the most part accepted by society. It might be to these demands that Wilson is referring, but these were superficial demands based on a deeper principle. The radically individualistic philosophy that Wilson is citing is that of the Rights of Man, an idea that he rejects and, in its place, he put the organic society. Because of this, Wilson
did not see a principled difference between socialism and modern democracy. Wilson was probably just as inclined to reject Marx’s theory of alienation as he was to reject the Rights of Man. Those theories were abstraction, and both were rivals to organicism as Wilson framed it. If enough people clamor for something, then, from an organic point of view, it is justified for the government to act upon that demand, no matter what it is. Wilson’s theory of history was based on the development of institutions that allowed governments to adjust to the needs of organic societies. This was the true process behind history; therefore, the values that democracy or socialism claimed to hold dear were not that important in his analysis. This is why he could examine democracy and socialism and not see a major difference between the two.

This is problematic and especially so in a democracy. It raises the question of the tyranny of the majority. Wilson, who had read Tocqueville, must have been familiar with this concept. I believe that Wilson answered this through his historicism. Tocqueville was considering a political problem that was symptomatic of another, less advanced, stage of history. Tocqueville’s examination of the United States was a comparison to the French experience. The problem of the tyranny of the majority was mitigated in the United States through social institutions. Wilson could have easily read this as the difference between the historical progressions of the United States and France. Wilson believed that as late as the 1890s, France had not yet become a democratic state. The

17 Democracy in its ancient form was not truly participatory according to Wilson. Only citizens were allowed to have a political voice, and there was a large class of enslaved persons. (Wilson [1898] 1908) These were regimes that had democratic tendencies, but were not in the same category as a modern democracy. Although this criticism was not consistent, slavery was a legal institution in the United States until 1865, but Wilson never referred the United States as not being democratic in the antebellum period. Also, the fact that women were legally barred from voting and minorities were all but legally barred from genuine political participation did not affect Wilson’s definition of a modern democracy.
social unity that was characteristic of the modern democratic state overcame the tyranny of the majority. Therefore, any idea, if it is vetted by a society, would be acceptable. The basis for value in this system is not concrete rights, but a process that can ensure Wilson’s concept of adjustment. Wilson does not think that there are any dangerous ideas and that the social filter is sufficient to detect any problems long before government would act upon them.

Societies had to work out political change in an organic way. In 1918, Wilson was reported to have said the following about the Russian Revolution to a British diplomat.

I believe in letting them work out their own salvation, even though they wallow in anarchy for a while. I visualize it like this: A lot of impossible folk fighting among themselves. You cannot do business with them, so you shut them up in a room and lock the door and tell them that when they have settled matters among themselves you will unlock the door and do business. (Macmillan 2003, 70)

As a policy choice, the door between the United States and Russia stayed locked for another seven decades. Wilson did not view the Russian Revolution as particularly dangerous at first since it could be explained by his theory of history. Revolutions have the potential to cause social chaos within the societies where they transpire, but Wilson did not see this or other revolutions as having a detrimental intellectual impact, and they certainly could not reverse political development in its society of origin or other societies that felt the indirect effects of revolution. For example, Wilson viewed the French Revolution as not being completed, so its full intellectual impact could not truly be felt. (It was, by the time Wilson wrote this, almost a hundred years old. The French were still locked in their room working their politics out.)
In 1885, Wilson would write referring to Continental Europe and excluding England:

“Democracy in Europe, outside of Switzerland, has acted always in rebellion, as a destructive force. It can scarcely be said to have had even yet, any period of organic development” (PWW Vol.5, 67). Wilson would compare European democracies to that of the United States:

Democracy in America, on the other hand, and in the Eng(lish) colonies has had almost from the first, a truly organic growth. There was nothing revolutionary in its movements: it had not to overthrow other polities: to had only to organize itself. It had, not to create, but only to expand self-government. It did not need to spend propaganda: it needed nothing but to methodize its ways of living. (PWW Vol.5, 67).

Wilson even concluded the American Revolution was not the best strategy that could have been followed:

When America was discontented, and, because of the resistance by England of Home Rule, began to clamor for home sovereignty, the truest remedy would have been, not revolution, but the enlightenment of the English people. But the process of enlightenment was slow; the injustice was pressing; the revolution came on apace. Unquestionably culture is the best cure for anarchy; but anarchy is swifter than her adversary. Culture lags behind the practicable. (Pestritto, 2005b, 223)

Revolution may have been necessary, but it was never preferable, even in the American case. Culture, which would affect politics organically, would only affect in a relative stability environment. The violent and destructive nature of European democracy (and here Wilson seems to be pointing to the French Revolution) made it impossible for these political systems to develop. French and the other nations of Continental Europe would have to limit their pension for violence and instability in order to truly develop as democracies. It may have been that Wilson saw the situation after the First World War as a period when war-torn Europe would have been so exhausted by the war that the
destructive impulse of the Continent would be at rest. This would a time when democracy could organically develop in Europe. This might explain Wilson’s reason for America entering the conflict, “to make the world safe for democracy.”

The problem was that revolutionaries were thoughtless, for no one who was enlightened and understood how the organic society functioned would try to rush change. A person so benighted may back the wrong ideas, but it appears that Wilson saw the primary difficulty with revolution as a failure to execute reform in a moderate, and therefore effective, manner. Revolution caused a political backlash, and the harder and faster one pushed reform, the more likely this backlash was. If this backlash happened, it could be harmful to the future development of the nation. Using Wilson’s logic, a backlash could slow down reform to the point of stopping.

The Russian Revolution for the first few months appeared to be democratic in nature, but the Provisional Government could not maintain, order and the Bolsheviks took control. Russia moved from the Czar to the Communists. Wilson probably saw the Bolsheviks as the reactionaries who brought with them a conservative backlash. Conservative in Wilson’s mind meant that you retained the past. Conservative in the Russian case would be absolutist since it mirrored the attitude of the czar. The problem with revolution is not about ideas, but the process which those ideas are imposed on a people. The antithesis of true and genuine change was revolutionary action, according to Wilson. Organic change was slow but powerful in Wilson’s estimation and not sudden and violent. Revolution was a short term engine of political change, but it had the potential to cause long term complication.
Wilson believed that political growth was slow, but orderly. Moreover, it was possible in comparing the institutional development between nations to find identifiable patterns in political growth. This was the effect of the existence of progress as a force in history. The study of political science was based in part on the attempt to find these patterns. This was the foundation of Wilson’s historical-comparative method. Wilson’s insistence that societies were organic implied that societies were fundamentally different from another, but the progressive ideal implied that all societies were heading in the same institutional direction. In this way, Wilson’s organicism seemed to undercut his progressivism. This incompatibility was even more compounded by Wilson’s assertion that the Westminster model was the highest form of democratic institutional development. Wilson’s idea was that there might be specifics in the differences between the composite institutions in a government, but the general form would be parliamentarian in nature because, in Wilson’s mind, that was the only form democratic government could ultimately take. This meant that not only were all nations following the same path but that the path would end at a very specific set of institutions that would be common in all developed nations. Because of this institutional expectation Wilson’s idea of democratization had a very high institutional bar set for it.18

As the subtitle of The State highlighted, the text was a historical and practical analysis of politics; the key word being “and”. Wilson considered the historical in a

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18 It is akin to listening to the recordings of people who speak the same language with different accents repeating the same sentence. If the recordings are slowed down, it is possible to hear each sound and identify the difference in pronunciation of those sounds that create the different accents, but if the recordings are played in real time, it is possible to understand each of the individual speakers since everybody says the same words. The short term differences are overcome by long term outcomes.
different category than the practical. This was due to the progressive nature of history. One could not draw much, if any, practical knowledge about government from history. Because history unfolded over time, important concepts had not been present in the past, so the examples of government were markedly different. The historical elements of government were only important insomuch as they provided a series of benchmarks showing the evolution of government to its present state. This was proof that organicism and progressivism were organizing principles in history. Just as these two had been present in the past, they had to be taken into account for those trying to engage in reform in “the now”. The modern student of politics could not learn from the idiosyncratic events in history, but it was possible to learn that progress, which was universal across history, was organic. If the student could learn this, then they would have to except the concept of the organic society and base any strategies of reforms around that principle.

Why Wilson Had to Reject the Social Contract

In order to make this progressive idea of history work, Wilson had to reject social contract theory as an explanation for the formation of government. If Wilson, or any political thinker, was to have a coherent theory of history, it was essential to offer an explanation of how government originated. This was, literally, the first step in creating a functioning theory of history. The social contract was a well established origin story, but one that Wilson disagreed with.

There have been several variations of the social contract, but all are based on the premise that in some hypothetical time in the past, humanity lived in an environment
without government, the State of Nature. This was a period without social organization of any kind because without the security that government provides, there can be no stable social base on which to build a community. According to the theory, individuals that lived in this state of nature existed as primitives, only able to have a standard of living little better than that of an animal since cooperation with other humans was not possible. This was the way of the world until, at some point in history, these solitary individuals came together, made an agreement between them, and created government. Social contract theorists debated what motivated these individuals to come together at some prehistoric time.

But one point connects all of these variations of social contract theory: a group of free individuals came together to form a political body which would provide a degree of security that did not exist in the state of nature. In this moment of creation, individuals surrendered some of their autonomy to the new political authority in order to retain other basic rights. It was a rational choice: surrender a little freedom to ensure the rest. This created the corporal society. Otherwise, to retain all rights within the individual and not sanction a political body would result in never gaining the certainty that the body politic could create. What is the characteristic of man in the state of nature, what is surrendered, and what rights are retained varies from theorist to theorist, but all follow that same basic outline. Wilson, on the other hand, stated that modern research had ‘reconstructed’ the outline of early history. Therefore, any conjecture about how the earliest political organizations were formed was unnecessary because it was unhistorical (Wilson [1898]
Wilson rejected the social contract out of hand not only because it was ‘unhistorical’, but also because this origin story violated his theory of history.

Wilson’s notion of the organic society was used to replace the need for a social contract. In place of the social contract, Wilson inserted the family as the origin of political power. This origin story created a set of very different problems that government was faced with from its inception.

The original bond of union and the original sanction for magisterial authority were one and the same thing, namely, real or feigned blood-relationship. In other words, families were the original units of social organization; and were at first, no doubt, in a large degree separate. The man and his wife and offspring lived generally apart. It was only by slow stages and under the influence of many changes of habit and environment that the family organization widened and families were drawn together into communities. A group of men who considered themselves in some sort kinsmen constituted the first state. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 3)

Wilson’s argument can be understood in terms of replacing a mechanical with an organic explanation for government. The social contract is the basis for the Newtonian and/or Whig theory of government, so by using the family, Wilson was undermining the mechanical idea which he disagreed with. Government was the result of the biological function of reproduction. Wilson’s turn to Darwin was based on the idea that government was a living thing, and by using the family and reproduction as the basis for the first governments, he was furthering this claim. Government was intimately tied to biology from its very beginning. Although if this relationship is scrutinized, one realizes that Wilson does not conclude that government is biological, only that it is the result of his belief in the human propensity to pair bond, which is the root of all that is political
after this initial union is formed. Family is the first cause of government, not a rational choice.

It is interesting to note that Wilson talks of man and wife, not male and female. Wilson believed that the social institution of the family existed in the most primitive stages of human history.

Promiscuity belongs, not to the most primitive times or to the regular order of social life, but rather to exceptional seasons of demoralization or confusion; of times of decadence rather than to the origins of the race. Polyandry has grown up only where the women were fewer than the men, and has almost necessarily broken down when the numerical balance between the sexes was restored…

Where it does exist, it is invariably confined to a small minority of wealthy and powerful men: the majority, from choice or necessity, are always monogamous. First and last, the strong monogamous instinct, which man shares with all the higher orders of beasts, has tended to exclude promiscuous or multiplied sexual connections, and to build up a distinct family order round about monogamous marriages. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 5)

According to Wilson, the concept of family is not a social institution that needed time to evolve; instead, it is an instinct that humans have hard wired into their brains. This is something of a contradiction in Wilson’s thought, since it seems that an institution like the family would be subject to organic adaptation, but Wilson took an odd intellectual stand here by stating that family was formed at the dawn of time and that deviations of this institution always reverted back to an older norm. This is a point where Wilson seemed to have misstepped in his application of the organic-progressive principle as this

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19 Wilson quoted the *History of Human Marriage*, 1891 by Edward Westermarck, when making his claims about human sexuality and the family. Westermarck (1862-1939) was a Finnish scholar who has been described as a sociologist, philosopher, and anthropologist. He taught at the University of Helsinki from 1906-1918 as a professor of practical philosophy, and, in 1918, he was appointed a professor of philosophy at the University of Turka. At the same time, he was also on the faculty at the London School of Economic and political science from 1907-1931 as a professor of sociology. Westermarck has been called the first Darwinian sociologist and the first sociobiologist. Coincidently, he was one of the representatives for Finland during the League of Nations negotiations regarding the Aland Islands.
is not consistent with the attributes of organicism. Claiming that deviations, which could be concerned variations, in a institution do not result in modification but that the institutions tends to revert back to its older form is not an evolutionary perspective. On the contrary, it is the opposite of Darwin’s theoretical innovation. However, the family may have been a different type of institution since it is the institution of origination, although Wilson did not clarify this point.

Human society is by nature monogamous, and it is only the wealthy and powerful that go against this natural propensity of the species. In terms of sexual norms, the average member of society is happily monogamous, according to Wilson’s reading of history. It is only the wealthy and powerful that created a problem by breaking those norms. This is an example of the suspicion Wilson had of the “economic elite” as a group. This flaunting of sexual norms, which Wilson believed to be natural in the wealthy and powerful, is an example of a larger issue that was critical of his historicism. This is an important point; Wilson did not see history as a simple class struggle; it was something more than that. It was the self-interested as a group in a struggle against the force of history. It is possible to see the origin of the indictment Wilson would make against the elite in regards to democratic practice in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century; there was a natural gravitation towards participatory government (just as there was a natural sexual norm), but the wealthy and powerful, a self-interested elite, acted as a barrier to the fulfillment of that natural progression.

Family was a natural institution which overrode the early need to believe in a social contract for Wilson. He believed that the evidence so strongly favored his position
that there was no need in belaboring the point, “The defects of social contract theory are too plain to need more than brief mention. That theory simply has no historical foundation” (Wilson [1898] 1903, 12). According to Wilson, there is no point in the historical record where the formative moment could exist; hence, social contract theory was not historically legitimate. He could not believe in something that, according to his reading of the historical and anthropological record, never happened.

In this scheme, it was the early patriarchal structure within families which led to the genesis of political authority. The father becomes the master which created the basic superior-inferior model on which subsequent political institutions would be built.

Among these Aryan peoples there was first the family ruled by the fathers as king and priest. There was no majority for the sons so long as their father lived. They might marry and have children, but they could have no entirely separate and independent authority during their father’s life save such as he suffered them to exercise. All that they possessed, their lives even and the lives of those dependent upon them, were at the disposal of this absolute father-sovereigns. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 5-6)

This is important because this created a situation that approximated Hegel’s slave-master relationship. Fathers were able to claim the roles of master and secure their need for recognition, but only at the expense of their sons. The next generation could not ensure their own recognition and this, according to Wilson, created an elementary imbalance in society that was passed down through the generations. This was the idea that the few ruled over the many, although there were more than some in the masses that longed for power and status of their own. Over time, these masters became the origin of the wealthy and powerful, the group that Wilson pointed to as the inhibitors of moral and political development. As political communities grew larger and political institutions were
formed to maintain the relationship between the governed and the government, this imbalance remained. Also, it is important to note that a father’s mastery was both as king, a secular position, and priest, a religious position. This helped to cement their authority in society since they could claim both secular and religious authority.

This was more than class struggle for Wilson; it was a spiritual struggle as well. Wilson claimed that society was organic; if this is true, then the power of a community is maximized if all of the members of society are working together towards common goals. The grafting of a hierarchical structure onto an organic society limits the potential of that society. The use of a hierarchy may have been an historical fact (such as the House of Lords), but as history moved on, these bulky social structures would have to be trimmed away in order for society to progress. It is the breaking down of these barriers which releases the dynamism of a community. Wilson saw history as a process of breaking down these obstacles. This seems like an unusual claim, since Wilson said that families were a natural institution and were in place even before humans formed into political communities. It was from the family that the original political inequality arose. Therefore, the corrupting impulse of the family had always been present. The more primitive forms of society were closer to the structures based on the family; therefore, these earlier societies were hierarchical and inequality was more entrenched. It was only as time passed that these societies developed and were able to slowly shed these non-egalitarian institutions. It was the desire to achieve a political organization more conducive to this organic nature which animated history. Wilson was not just suggesting an individual undergo a process of self-actualization, but that whole societies could share
in this process. The Wilsonian stages of history were the attempt by the differing societies of the world to undo this original mistake which had been committed by the first families.

This is important because by replacing the social contract with the slave-master relationship as the source of government, one removes the rational basis for it. In holding up the family, Wilson claimed that there was a natural basis for government. It may have been rational in the Hegelian sense, in that it was the full expression of spirit for that time; however, it could not be considered rational by Wilson since the demands of the spirit had changed radically over time. This would have invalidated the social contract. Early manifestations of spirit appealed to the passions, and in this earliest of times, the creation of government would have had to be an emotive, not intellectual, event. The social contract is an intellectual construct, an act of rationality by the group that decides upon it. The slave-master relationship is not a rational construct, even if it is based in the family. The quest for recognition, the basis of the slave-master relationship, is based on the passions. Wilson accepted it as the primary political problem that acted as a barrier to a fair and equitable government. This is important since it gave political institutions a direction, a goal to reach and a purpose for history. Humans longed to be free, but politics were burdened with the slave-master relationship that interfered with that longing. True freedom would only be possible if the slave-master relationship could be solved. The creation of more open and, in time, democratic institutions allowed society to conform to its organic nature by allowing more and more of society to participate in its decision-making. In doing so, everyone was granted some political voice. Democracy allowed for
slaves to become their own masters. One of the titles from Wilson’s speeches *Freemen Need No Guardians* from *The New Freedom* summarized this point, (Wilson [1913] 1961, 47-58). This historical process allows for political progress to go from the irrational to the rational, a basic Hegelian axiom. Government must become more and more rational (equal to Wilson’s institutional development), and it severely weakens the argument to contend that the origin of government was via an act that social contract theorists would deem as sufficiently rational. The absolute sovereignty of the father/king created a division between the government and the governed, the model that government would take, in this historical view, for centuries.

Families, Slaves and Masters, and Democratic Solutions

With the historical argument against the social contract in place, Wilson felt free to insert the family into the role of originators of the first political organization. This reformulation gave Wilson a way to explain the great change that modern democratic government brought with it. Wilson stated the following:

It is the proper object of the family to mould the individual, to form him in the period of immaturity in the faiths of religion and in the practice morality and obedience. This period of subordination over, he is called out into an independent, self-directive activity. The ties of family affection still bind him, but they bind him with silken, not with iron bonds. He has left his ‘minority’ and reached his ‘majority.’ It is proper object of the state to give leave to his individuality, in order that that individuality may add its quota of variety to the sum of national activity. Family discipline is variable, selective, formative: it must lead the individual. But the state must not lead. It must create the conditions, but not mould individuals. It discipline must be invariable, uniform, impersonal. Family methods rest upon individual inequality, state methods upon individual equality. Family order rests upon tutelage, state order upon franchise, upon privilege. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 638)
Political organizations had been modeled on the family, and by its nature, the family was an institution based on inequality. Political organizations modeled on the family would bear these negative characteristics. Wilson did not seem to believe that the family could break free of these politically harmful characteristics. In Wilson’s estimation, the family and the political model it provided would always perpetuate the slave-master relationship. As a result, political institutions would be built on this slave-master relationship. This allowed for the idea that it was only with the democratization of government that this long time characteristic of government could be removed. What the advent of the modern democratic state did was to solve the slave-master problem by making everyone their own potential master, or give individuals substantial inputs to decide how they were to be governed, according to Wilson. The family was still important to society, but its adult members were no longer under its political authority, or under the political authority of a political organization modeled on power imbalances that Wilson believed could be traced back to the first families.

It seems like Wilson’s concept of the state was based on a laissez-faire principle. Wilson said that state “must not lead,” and this certainly sounds like a non-interference claim. However, Wilson believed that the individual in a modern society was stifled by the corrupt forces in a corporate dominated society. The state must not lead the individual. However, this did not apply to big business or other industrial and financial entities. The job of the state was to curb the unfair advantages that these corporate forces had over the individual. Government was supposed to create the parameter in which individuals were to operate, that is to regulate the market. In a modern economy, Wilson
believed that the state would have to step in order to keep the markets fair and open. In 1918, Wilson would tell Stockton Anson, his brother-in-law and confidant:

Now the world is going to change radically, and I am satisfied that governments will have to do many things which are now left to individuals and corporations. I am satisfied for instance that the government will have to take over all the great natural resources… all the water power; all the coal mines; all the old fields, etc. They will have to be government owned. (Cooper 2009, 433)

He was politically insightful enough to know that his feelings on the matter should not be made public, “Now if I should say that outside, people would call me a socialist, but I’m am not a socialist” (Cooper 2009, 433)

Remember from an earlier point, Wilson did not believe the goals of the socialists greatly varied from those of democracies. Both wanted a fair and just society; the difference was the speed at which they strove for these gains. The socialists were guilty of the political mistake of wanting too much, too fast. They would engage in revolution, not evolution. This would result in a backlash from the conservative forces in society that accompanied revolution. This backlash would slow progress down. It was this fact that Wilson found distasteful with the socialists, and this was the theme of his essay Socialism and Democracy written in 1886 (Pestritto 2005b). Wilson’s fear that people would think him a socialist was because the policies he was proposing were the same in content as the socialists. However, since the world was changing ‘radically’, this meant that the spirit was changing as well. Hence, evolution was taking place, and the demands of the socialists could be secured by evolutionary means not revolution. It would take the form of a policy change, not a political upheaval. At that point in time, those policy changes would become rational because they would be justified by spirit.
Government would not be controlling the individual because these economic functions could no longer be undertaken by the individual and had to be absorbed by government. Wilson still believed in the individual except the individual in a modern society could not be free if critical economic functions were not carried out. Still, these could not be achieved on the individual or corporate level; the only body left to engage in these functions was government. Therefore, Wilson’s seeming appeal to laissez-faire was not opposed to government intervention in the economy as long as it was something that the individual was not capable of doing. Wilson definition of what was possible for the individual to undertake in the new economic conditions of the modern industrial society was shrinking due to the changes in spirit; therefore, government had to become more, not less, active. Government assuming more power would have been a serious problem in earlier times, but because of the advent of democratic institutions, the government was no longer predatory and could safely manage the needs of the people without raising fears. Democratization solved the slave-master problem making government a partner, not a subjugator, of the people.

Only once this slave-master relationship was removed from politics could government and the expectations that society placed on government be radical changed. Part of that change was creating a state which was non-threatening to the liberty of the individual as a facilitator of society.

This, then is the sum of the whole matter: the end of government is the facilitation of the object of society. The rule of government action is necessary cooperation. The method of political development is conservative adaptation, shaping old habits into new one, modifying old means to accomplish new ends. (Wilson [1898] 1903, 638)
The modern democratic state was not just a change in the government; it was a transformation in the relationship between government and the rest of society. Government was now the organizer of social effort, the necessary centralizing force in social cooperation. In order to make this broad historical claim, Wilson had to reject social contract theory out of hand.

The question of what is the proper role of the state towards society was critical to Wilson’s understanding of what denoted a dynamic society. Wilson was a statist; that is, he believed that the government should take a substantial role in the management of society. Wilson is often called an institutionalist; that is, he believed that institutions were important. This is true, and this tendency can be directly tied to his organicism. Any society was in a condition of flux, and that flux created evolving demands. Therefore, that flux and the demands it created needed to be interpreted into a practical policy. One of the primary functions of the state was its ability to gauge the demands of society, debate the possible solutions, then institute specific policies to meet those demands. Wilson believed that through political leadership, which would prove that government action would be beneficial to society, collations could be formed to legislative majorities that would create policy. Those who opposed it would have to accept it; such were the rules of democracy. This required a special set of institutions that Wilson called constitutional government.

Wilson defined this idea of constitutional government as follows:

[the] ideal of a government conducted upon the basis of a definite understanding if need be of a formal pact, between those who are to submit to it and those who are to conduct it, with a view to making government an instrument of the general welfare rather than an arbitrary, self-willed master, doing what it pleases,- and
particularly for the purpose of safeguarding individual liberty. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 4)

A constitutional government was a particular form of democratic government. It was only in a constitutional government that true political liberty could be ensured. As Wilson defined it: “… political liberty is the right of those who are governed to adjust government to their own needs and interests” (Wilson [1908] 2002, 4). Of course, not all governments were constitutional according to Wilson’s definition, and, therefore, not all societies would benefit from having a strong statist government. Government separated from the people over which it ruled could easily be predatory in nature, squeezing goods and resources out of society for the benefit of the ruling class. The unique quality of the United States was that it had embodied the idea of constitutional government. A constitutional government was one in which the state was not predatory since the governed had control over the government.

Wilson highlighted the difference and the sameness of nations in his theory of history. As we will explore later in this chapter, the progression that he saw in history lead not only to democratic institutions but to a situation that Wilson called constitutional government. England and the United States were the leaders in this process, and both were considered by Wilson to be constitutional governments. Other nations were close behind, but the paragons of institutional development were England, followed by the United States.\(^{20}\) However, Wilson was most interested in recent history, which he called

\(^{20}\) Wilson believed that the United States had some important reforms to make before it could claim parity with England in its institutional development; he believed that the federal government should change from a presidential to a parliamentarian form of government. When Wilson spoke of reforming government in the United States, this was the general gist of his argument. Wilson believed that it was only via parliamentarian government that true leadership and transparent government could be achieved in the
constitutional history, since this was the newest innovation in institutional development. The United States had ridden the crest of the wave of the idea of institutional government. The United States was unique because it had been conceived under the auspice of the concept of constitutional government. The ideal of constitutional government was new in 1787, but this did not mean that the United States could remain static in its institutional development. On the contrary, because it was a constitutional government, the United States had the pre-existing institutions that would allow for change. This latent power could always be activated if the popular demand arose. With the right leadership and public support, the United States could modify itself to meet any new environmental pressure. Because of the transformation of the United States from an agrarian to industrial society since the writing of the Constitution, changes in the institutions and functions of the government had become necessary.

Wilson placed the beginning of Constitutional Government at 1215 with the signing of the Magna Carta by King John. This is an important date in history for many political traditions just not the progressives. Wilson interpreted it as justification for his understanding of history. This was the first and most simple form of constitutional government, but over time it had become more sophisticated (Wilson [1908] 2002). I believe that, for Wilson, this was the first time that spirit rose to the fore in the mind of men and that spirit manifested itself politically. Humans longed to be free according to

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United States. Although his insistence on how this was to be accomplished changed over his career, his belief in it never wavered. Earlier in his career, Wilson believed that formal changes would have to be made in the system; later, he settled on informal means. In *Congressional Government* (1883), he called for this formal change. In *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908), written twenty-five later, Wilson was still critical of federal system, but suggests more informal remedies that would, nevertheless, move the federal government to a more parliamentarian model. What is important at this juncture is that Wilson saw this change as part of the progressive course of history.
the Hegelian-Wilsonian definition, and the Magna Carta was viewed by Wilson as the first serious attempt to make this freedom into a political reality.

The writing of the Magna Carta was the beginning of self-government and the tradition of constitutionalism. According to Wilson, a constitution was the reflection of the spirit as perceived by the generation who wrote it. In expressing the spirit to the best of their abilities, it was a rational act to create the best government possible at that given time. The Magna Carta was not a constitutional government, but it started the process that would, in time, lead to constitutional government. It also helps to explain why Wilson turned to the English Historical School. Constitutional government was an English creation, so it seemed natural to refer to English writers to aid in explaining it. American government was an extension of this older English tradition, a branch off a tree whose roots were planted at Runnymede. This was a pragmatic idea that had propelled English thinking and predated the Rights of Man Theory by several centuries.

Constitutional government was the solution to older, less developed, predatory type of governments. This was Wilson’s final stage of political development.

And so the growth of constitutional government has been the growth of institutions, of practices, of methods of perfecting the delicate business of maintaining an understanding between those who conduct the government and those who submit to it. The object of constitutional government is to bring the active, planning will of each part of the government into accord with the prevailing popular thought and need and thus make it an inertial instrument of symmetrical national development; and to give to the operation of government thus shaped under the influence of opinion and adjusted to the general interest both stability and an incorruptible efficacy. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 14)

In this form, there would still be those who governed and those who submitted, but this submission would be conditional according to Wilson. There is something of a problem
with this. Because Wilson’s theory of history is relativistic, it offered no permanent set of values on which the legitimacy of government could be based. Wilson offered up the idea that symmetrical national development would be the goal. This was based on the premise that a consensus on what denoted symmetrical national development could be reached.

Wilson focused on the idea that a constitutional government would be efficient. If government was efficient, it would not be wasteful and all of the dark corners where the self-interested abuser of government power hid would be exposed. Wilson continued to describe the process of making such a government.

Whatever institutions, whatever practices serve these ends, are necessary to such a system: those which do not, or which serve it imperfectly, should be dispensed with or bettered. And it may be said that the history of constitutional government has been an experimental search for the best means by which to effect these nice adjustments. (Wilson [1908] 2002, 14)

These variations in institutions are the result of organicism.

This historical path or what a contemporary political scientist would call a path-dependency model, was the basis for comparisons between nations to determine where they were on this linear and progressive path toward political maturity. Once a point on this line of development is reached, it is not possible to regress. Wilson would talk of slowing the process down, but never reversing it. The engine which pushed a society along this historical arc was essentially organic in nature. It was the sum total of thousands, if not millions, of discrete actions undertaken by and between individuals that collectively formed the basis of a social consensus which was unique to that specific society. However, because of the progressivism that was also fundamental to Wilson’s
political thought, the idiosyncratic experiences of individual societies would still result in a common outcome.

It would seem that Wilson wanted it both ways. On one hand, he seems to believe that every political community will be unique in its history. On the other hand, despite those unique experiences that collectively make up that society’s history, all nations should reach the same conclusions, resulting in similar institutional development. The difference in perception is the length of the timeline that is applied. In the short term, societies seem to be very different from one another, particularly if one makes the connection between history and the development of political institutions between societies. However, the progressive perspective argues that over the long run, those differences would fade away. The longer period of time one used, the more those differences would melt away until they became insignificant. If one applied a long enough timeline, those idiosyncratic experiences between societies would disappear altogether.

Conclusion

Wilson’s theory of history was a form of soft historicism which was closely related to Hegel’s stage theory of historical development. Wilson looked for the same type of universalizing ideas that were characteristic of Hegel. Wilson settled on institutional development as his measure of progress. Because Wilson drew ideas not just from Hegel, but from the English Historical School and the Christian tradition, his theory of history was somewhat more convoluted than Hegel. The problem inherent to Wilson’s
theory of history was the juxtaposition of organicism with progressivism. In way in which Wilson framed his argument, these two concepts flowed seamlessly together. Wilson did not adequately account for the problems that arose from this pairing.

Characteristic to organicism was political adaptation and the ways that different societies responded to unique pressures which resulted in changes to their specific institutional development. Characteristic to Progressivism was the belief that all societies were moving towards a fixed point which would result in similar democratic institutions.

One of the paths to which Wilson’s argument leads was a communitarian conclusion. According to Wilson, society and the community that it creates is a part of human nature.

Society is in no sense artificial: it is as truly natural and organic as the individual man himself. As Aristotle said, man is by nature a social animal; his social function is as normal with him as is his individual function. Since family was formed, he has not been without politics, without political association. Society, therefore, is compounded of the common habit and is an evolution of experience, and interlaced growth of tenacious relationships, a compact, living, organic while, structural, not mechanical. (Wilson 1908, 576)

Society and community are not a later addition to humanity. The families were not only the first political organizations, but they were the first societies as well. As the name suggests, according to social contract theory, society is a later development in human history. In the state of nature, there is no society. In such a state, hominids (or some human-like creature) are little better than animals, and it is only over time that sociability becomes a defining characteristic. No savage could be noble, according to Wilson, since nobility was a social and moral attribute. This was yet another reason why Wilson had to reject social contract theory. Just as government changes over time, so does society.
Societies become more sophisticated, but they are always present. Moreover part of that larger society is political. Community, society, and politics are all are intertwined as part of an organic whole; they are not made. Wilson would conclude that in modern times, “Men as communities are supreme over men as individuals.” (PWW Vol.5, 560)

This is part of the justification of the organic society argument. Wilson rejected the idea of a static contract and replaced it with a living compact. It was not that Wilson rejected the idea of constitutions, on the contrary, he loved the idea of order. In 1919 as he spoke in support of the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson referred to himself as a “covenantor,” claiming that he wished to create from the world what his forefathers had created for America (Copper 2010). What Wilson disagreed with was the static nature of the sort which he saw ascribed to constitutions. The living, or organic, compact was one that was undergoing a continual negotiation. This is a restatement of his belief in the superiority of the Darwinian point of view over the Newtonian. This dovetailed into a moral argument. As the negotiations which evolved government took place, so too did a negotiation that modified value. I believe that Wilson thought that there was a set of absolute values, but these values had not yet come to be related to humanity on the whole. Wilson believed that just as government was progressing towards a singularity in terms of institutions, so too was humanity progressing towards a singularity in terms of values. This universality was the process of history, a concept that Wilson borrowed from Hegel. This returns us to Wilson’s idea of spirit. The moral sense that accompanies civilization is not impressed on individuals by an external source. As has been explained in an earlier chapter, this notion of spirit is integral to Wilson’s notion of politics. Wilson
saw social contract theory as an obstacle to the idea of spirit. Since spirit provided
guidance to political development, it was necessary for him to choose between the social
contract and the spirit, and not surprisingly, Wilson chose spirit.

Wilson’s internationalism created a goal and purpose for the major nations in the
world. Wilson had to redefine what would denote the proper relations between states.
This posted a different question for Wilson- if all nations were moving towards the same
historical end point, does that abstract idea of a common goal of institutional
development provide enough of a rationale for a system of collective security at the
present time (1919)? That goal might be far in the future for same, states and the current
government may or may not share a commitment to achieving that goal. National self-
interest, the force that moved international relations, seemed to Wilson to be a short
sighted goal, if not a dangerous one, after the horrors of the First World War. National
self-interest could delay or stagnate the overall goal of history. As Wilson famously said,
World War One was the war that made the world safe for democracy, although not
necessarily immediately democratic. Could long terms gains to the overall international
system justify the delayed gratification of individual states, particularly when those states
were democratic regimes given to the vacillations of public opinion? Wilson believed the
answer was yes. National self-interests were historically rooted, in Wilson’s estimation.
In the long historical view, the ephemeral nature of such concerns was becoming
apparent. Wilson’s theory of history predicted this to be true.
CHAPTER 4
WOODROW WILSON AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership in the Constitutional Government

Having examined Woodrow Wilson’s idea of spirit, and his politicized theory of history it is now possible to turn to his conception of political leadership. According to Wilson’s four stages of political development, the fourth and final stage is the stage of constitutional government. For Wilson, government functioned differently in the fourth stage than it had in the preceding stages. The predatory inclinations of government would be diminished in this advanced stage. The situation where the governing elite would prey upon its subjects would be relegated to earlier stages in the historical development of government. Under these new conditions the function of government would radically change; government was now free to be an active and positive force for the community and all of its members. For greater efficiency it was necessary to break down the institutional barriers, namely the Separation of Power, that inhibited the operation of government if it was to be a cooperative venture. One could posit that as nations learned to curve their internal predatory tendencies, they became less aggressive towards other nations. The domestic relationship between government and the governed would be thus transformed having a subsequent effect in the international realm.

It is possible to see in this Wilson’s organic progressive principle in action. Society’s development can be attributed directly to its organic nature, heading towards what Wilson sees as a unity of society. Wilson saw this as proof of Darwinian adaptation
and as a reason to reject what he viewed as the older, and incorrect, notion of Newtonian (or mechanical) politics. However, by rejecting these positions, and with his imposition of historicism, he broke away from the Rights of Man theory and the concept of natural rights that it produced. But by doing so he found himself in conflict with the ideas of the American founders on the proper role of political leadership.

Rhetorical Leadership

This shift in the notion of leadership is the topic of Jeffery K. Tulis’ examination of presidential leadership in his book *The Rhetorical Presidency*. It is from Tulis’ analysis that we can begin our discussion. According to Tulis, the presidency had transformed. During the Founding Era, or what Tulis called the “old way,” a president’s primary function was to enforce the laws legislated by the Congress. The executive branch’s main function was simply to execute the laws. Although the president was the chief executive, the office was still a clerkship or stewardship for the republic. At the beginning of the 20th century, the role of the presidency transformed and became, in Tulis’s terms, “rhetorical.” The rhetorical presidency, or the “new way,” functioned much differently from the idea of a president as a steward. According to Tulis’ definition, the rhetorical presidency was one in which the president instigated legislation and assumed more power from the legislative prerogative. What this did was invert the role of the president. Tulis’s first phase, or the old way, was one in which the president was active only at the end of the legislative process. In contrast, the defining characteristic of the rhetorical presidency was that the president was active during the entire legislative
process. Moreover, the rhetorical element of this new function was one in which the
president engaged in moral suasion, to convince constituencies that his legislative agenda
should be acted upon. This is the concept which has led contemporary political scientists
to conclude that the president speaks from a bully pulpit, and that his most important
power is the power to persuade.

Tulis traces the transformation of the presidency to the beginning decades of the 20th century, with Woodrow Wilson as one of the primary facilitators of this change. It would be incorrect to place all responsibility for this change on Wilson, but he was an important, perhaps crucial instigator of this change in presidential functioning. Wilson was not blind to the momentous nature of this change; it is possible to see his belief that he was at a unique and transformative time, which is consistent with his theory of history. It is important to note Theodore Roosevelt was also a transformative figure in Tulis’s analysis, therefore this change in attitude on the functions of the president was not a partisan issue in the traditional two-party system in the United States, as Roosevelt was a Republican, and Wilson a Democrat. At the time, these changes were attributed to the (then new) Progressive Movement in American politics. Wilson believed this was a necessary change in how government would react with society, and understood he was calling for a more powerful government which would be more influential in the life of everyday Americans. But, he argued he was not calling for a radical change in the way government worked (Wilson claimed it was not radical change, but other observers have disputed that claim). Instead, Wilson believed the change he was calling for was justified due to the increasing complexity of American society.
We used to think in the old-fashioned days when life was very simple that all government had to do was to put on a police man’s uniform and say, “Now, don’t hurt anyone else.” We used to say that the ideal of government was for every man to be left alone and not interfered with, except when he interfered with somebody else; and that the best government was the government that did as little governing as possible. That was the idea obtained in Jefferson’s time. But we are coming now to realize that life is so complicated that we are not dealing with the old conditions, and that the law has to step in to create new conditions under which we may live, the conditions which will make it tolerable for us to live. (Wilson [1913] 1961, 27)

This is a very different definition of the proper function of government than the one offered by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson here is a stand-in for what Wilson viewed as the older, and incorrect ideas on the relationship between government and society. This is important to the Wilsonian definition of the idea of liberty because it is based on adaption governed by environmental pressures. This is holding to Wilson’s idea of a Darwinist, not Newtonian view of society, making liberty a relative concept for Wilson. Liberty manifests itself differently in societies at different times, depending on the environmental pressure that a particular society faced.

The Power of the State

One of the effects of Hegel’s influence on Wilson is his belief in a strong state. This is one of the major differences between Wilson and the Founders. Moreover, Wilson believed the relationship between the individual and the state was a natural one in the most advanced societies, and was part of Wilson’s conception of the organic society. Wilson saw it as analogous to the relationship between the organs and the body. Each organ, like the individual, is distinctive. However, outside of the body, those organs are
not only useless, but soon die (Wilson [1913] 1961). It is possible to see this attitude in Wilson by looking at his lecture notes when he taught at Princeton.

The state is neither a mere necessity nor a mere convenience, but an abiding natural relationship; the invariable and normal embodiment and expression of a higher form of life than the individual: of that common life which gives leave to the individual life; and opportunity for completeness: makes it spiritual. (Bragdon 1967, 261)

Wilson’s insistence that the relationship between the individual and the state was a natural one had important implications to his political thought. The state was not viewed as an artificial construct. For Wilson, there was never a time in which the state or its antecedents, did not exist.

According to social contact theory, the incentives for creating the State were to protect the individuals rights; members of a community gave up some of their rights in exchange for the safeguarding of others. What this did was make government a necessary evil but one which still had to be limited. Wilson rejected this argument of convenience.

Misconception: That government is a necessary evil, and that liberty consists of having as little of it as possible. (Bragdon 1967, 261)

By contending that the state was a natural relationship and not artificial, Wilson no longer had to justify why the state was created, nor why its power had to be institutionally limited. Since the state was neither a convenience nor a necessary evil, it must be something else. For Wilson, the State, once it evolved to constitutional government, was a benevolent and positive good. Moreover, without the State the individual could not be fully self-realized, echoing Hegel’s contention that the State was natural and necessary. Instead of the Jeffersonians’ definition of liberty based on the maxim: the best government was that which governs least, Wilson’s reformulation was that the best
government adjusts to the needs of its people, and through those adjustments, enriches the lives of its citizens.

The organic progressive principle of Wilson’s political thought allowed for social change, and yet organic development was a slow process. However, Wilson’s perception was the United States was that at an important juncture not only in own its history, but world history was as well. Wilson’s brand of intellectual progressivism faced a dilemma in this situation. This was due to the problem of complexity resulting from the Industrial Revolution. While greatly improving the standard of living for Americans, the Industrial Revolution also released new and powerful economic forces in society, specifically new corporations, and a class of industrial-monied elite. In his speeches for the Presidency in 1912, collectively known as The New Freedom, Wilson talked of monopolies and trusts as being detrimental to American democracy. Wilson wished to curb the power of this new elite, while at the same time retaining the benefits of the Industrial Revolution. The modern world which Wilson so highly prized was the industrialized world (Link and McCormick 1983). Indeed, Wilson’s theory of history could not come to its fruition without the modernization which industrialism brought. Without it, the complete unification between the government and the governed could never come to pass and the collective nature of society would never be realized. In 1912, according to Wilson, the political problem of the United States was the abuses of the new industrial economy not being properly addressed by government. The institutions of government had to correct a society which had become unbalanced. (Wilson [1913]1961) This was a temporary problem in Wilson’s estimation; if viewed with enough historical distance, this imbalance
would hardly be noticeable, which is why its prompt correction was desirable. The
democratic institutions of government had been permeated by this new elite and Wilson
wished to make the government more transparent and open, which he believed would
break the elites’ control and return the United States to its proper historical course. This
could only be achieved through bold political leadership (the leadership Wilson believed
he could provide). The opening of the American political system to the watchful eyes of
the public would create a new social environment where the governed and the
government would form a symbiotic relationship. This was the result of Wilson’s theory
of history and idea of democratization.

Political leadership was the solution which Wilson proposed for this particular
American problem. Because the United States was already a constitutional government it
had the institutional capacity to solve these problems. What was lacking was leadership
and political will to do so.

I do not want to see the special interests of the United States take care of the
workingman, women, and children. I want to see justice, righteousness, fairness
and humanity displayed in all the laws of the United States, and I do not want any
power to intervene between the people and the government. Justice is what we
want, not patronage and condescension and pitiful helpfulness. The trusts are our
masters now, but I for one do not care to live in a country called free even under
kind masters. I prefer to live under no masters at all. I agree that as a nation we
are now about to undertake what may be regarded as the most difficult part of our
government enterprise. We have gone along so far without very much assistance
from our government…It is perfectly clear to every man who has any vision of
the immediate future, who can forecast any part of it from the indication of the
present, that we are just upon the threshold of a time when the systematic life of
the country will be sustained, or at least supplemented, at every point by

It is possible to see here Wilson’s idea of a much more active government as a necessary
step for ensuring the future common good for all Americans. Also, Wilson uses the
Hegalian terminology of “masters” in his writing. Democracy was for Wilson a solution to the slave-master relationship. This was the inherent problem with government, not the tendency of government to become tyrannical as Locke and other social theorists had warned. For Wilson, rigidly compartmentalized government placed an undue restriction on the power of government to aid its citizens.

The possibility of tyranny and the ill effects of the slave-master relationship are similar. It might be possible to conclude that they are the same thing. However, there is a major theoretical difference between the two. In Locke, the potential for tyranny is always present and it is only through the zealous management of the social contact that it can be avoided. Moreover, if that social contact fails, individuals have a right, if not a duty, to revolt and replace it. Unlike Locke, Wilson believed that with the resolution of the slave-master hierarchy, the likelihood of the government abusing its power would no longer be a possibility. The slave-master relationship was based on what Wilson considered a natural, even unconscious reason. It was based on the desire for recognition. Address the reason behind that desire and the problem is solved. Revolution was no longer an urgent activity that was based on the need of righting a serious political wrong. Instead, revolution could be replaced by adjustment to achieve similar outcomes. In order to have timely adjustment, political leaders would have to be allowed to shepherd the process through the legislature in the most efficient way possible. The institutional limitation that had been placed on government’s ability to act were once necessary, but the fear of a tyrannical government was no longer a problem according to Wilson. Because of the unique place the United States was at in its history, these limitations of
government were no longer necessary and were a hindrance to the proper function of
government.

For Wilson, the functions of government were directly related to who the leaders
were in power. In a constitutional government, or to use Hegel’s term, “modern times”,
direct leadership was restricted to a small category of skilled individuals. However,
certain aspects of government were shared by all of society. This returns us to Wilson’s
concept of spirit (see chapter 2). Spirit resides within society, and it is this spirit which
dictates the capacities of that society. Government was the facilitation of this spirit.
Society through the course of history set the progressive direction of development. But
the direction of that development had to be interpreted by those who governed: this was
Wilson’s definition of leadership. History was a book in which spirit wrote, but someone
must be able to read from that book in order for it to be profitable for humanity.

Qualities of Leaders

In his essay Leaders of Men, Wilson set out his basic understanding of leadership
and the duties of leaders. First, Wilson turned to the group of men who could possibly
provide leadership in a democratic society. Wilson broke this category into two groups.
The first were the men who stood near the Mass of Man; the second were men who wrote
(Pestritto 2005b, 211). Both of these groups were important because they had some
understanding of spirit and the direction of history, the greater of which was in the men
who wrote. However, those with a literary bent tended to lack the abilities which were
necessary to lead the rest of society. For Wilson, to know spirit was much different than being able to use that knowledge to lead.

What Wilson does in this essay is redefine the “statesman.” This can be seen as a comparison between the classical statesman (the ideal which the Founders took as a model), and the new Wilsonian statesman. The classical statesman as found in antiquity was one which combined the knowledge of right ends with a realistic understanding of conventional circumstances (Pestritto 2005a, 206). For Wilson, this definition of a statesman was one he could not agree to. As we have seen, in Wilson’s political thought there were no concrete right ends for a statesman to strive towards. In Wilson’s political understanding of the concept of spirit and its manifestation through history no ends can be discerned, only a notion of Right based on an idea without a transhistorical end.

Wilson saw a distinction between those who led and those who were governed. What distinguished the two groups was the extent to which they were conscious of spirit. Everyone in society was exposed to spirit, but some had a more coherent understanding of it than others. The masses had the lowest awareness of spirit, or to use the Hegalian term, “zeitgeist.” They could feel it at the level of their passions, but they did not possess an intellectual understanding of it. What this did was pull society in the right directions, but for reasons that the average individual would find difficult to lucidly explain. It was only through discussion and deliberation that one could come to such conclusions.

The leadership class would be made up of men of ability, and this ability would
enable them to gain an education\textsuperscript{21}. For Wilson, an education meant that one increased their consciousness of spirit; it functioned to open the mind. This understanding would not be fully complete, but a recognition that something greater existed which tied humanity together.

Knowledge has come into the world in vain if it is not to emancipate those who may have it from narrowness, censoriousness, fussiness, an intemperate zeal for petty things. (Wilson [1897]1996, 26)

Education, then, is a process in which one gains an openness to the world around them through the exposure to spirit. This is the Wilsonian definition of education, heavily influenced by Hegel.

In *Leaders of Men*, Wilson divides the men of ability into two subgroups: men who stood near the masses and literary men. Later in the essay Wilson adds a third group to his subcategories of men of ability: the men who think. This group is quite insightful but leaves little to no record of what they actually think and it is up to others to record their thoughts. Although this third group of men are important, they are far removed from practical politics. Wilson acknowledges them as a subgroup, for, in his estimation, they are important. But in this triparte division of men of ability, the men who think are of nominal importance in terms of political leadership.

\textsuperscript{21} In this discussion we are examining political leadership which is different from the administrative side of government. Wilson would describe a split between the political and administration sides of government. This was the basis for his political-administrative dichotomy which was key to his work in developing the field of public administration (See Wilson’s 1887 essay *The Study of Administration* and in the secondary literature see *Politics and Administration: Woodrow Wilson and American Public Administration* edited by Jack Rabin and James Bowman, 1984). According to this dichotomy, decisions are made on the political side and then are implemented by bureaucrats on the administrative side in a completely unbiased matter. This dichotomy was influenced by Wilson reading of Hegel since the administrator is akin to the Hegel’s concept of the technocrat. Both political leadership and the administrative technocrat would have to be educated, but the purpose that these individuals served in government would be very different. The Wilsonian political-administrative dichotomy has largely been disproved.
The common characteristic of these three groups is they have a certain consciousness of spirit. They are somehow tapped into the Zeitgeist. Wilson seems to be using Hegel’s definition of history. “The inquiry into the essential destiny of reason – as far as it is considered in reference to the World – is identical with the question, what is the ultimate design of the World (Hegel [1822] 1991, 16)?” This is a very politicized understand of education and is essential to Wilson’s definition of political leadership. This Hegelian–Wilsonian definition of education is very different than the idea of economic reason which was becoming prevalent in Wilson’s time.

Wilson argued that reason was much more expansive than the economic meaning that it was gaining in the social sciences. According to Wilson we feel first, and then after our education, we can think and realize the forces that first caused us to feel as we do. The wholesome experience of nature which Wilson referred to deals with the ability to discern spirit in the world. It is this ability which makes one reasonable, according to Wilson’s definition. Moreover, justifying reason solely an economic basis was damaging to the nation as a whole. The logical extension of this pure economic thinking was the monopolistic attitudes that were so damaging to the markets and economic lifeblood of the United States. Although it made economic sense to limit competition as much as possible by big corporations and business trusts, it was undermining the freedom of all but a small elite. Spirit was necessary because it was wholesome to the political and moral development of the society. To merely see things through an economic lens was
non-organic and, therefore, not holistic in its outlook. This myopic view was slowing down the organic development of the American people.

Wilson’s definition of education was based on Hegel and it is important to remember that this Hegelian understanding was only five decades old when Wilson was absorbing it into his own political thought. This was less than a lifetime, and so, for Wilson, it seemed like quite an innovation in thought. This Hegelian notion is very politically important to Wilson because it rejects the idea that reason is the assertion of self interest. Therefore, self interest could not be assumed to be the sole basis of action. Moreover, those individuals that Wilson saw as the true class of men who could be political leaders needed to lead without self interest, an indication of a truly education individual. Self interest and ambition were seen as suspect, accordingly. Wilson divided education into two parts. There was the type of education which I have just described, and then there was education for vocational knowledge: the law, medicine, accounting, etc. This type of education was important only in that provided one a livelihood. However, it was this first few years of higher education which made one aware of spirit, and was the most important for political leadership, for it was here, in what Wilson perceived as the undergraduate years, that one was to acquire this type of education which could change their attitude toward the world and their fellow man.

In the comparison between the classical statesman and the Wilsonian statesman, we can see a difference in the motivations of the statesman. Both were supposed to do the right, but they did the right for different reasons. The classical statesman was to have a knowledge of trans-historical rights and apply them to the current conditions what
surrounded him. It was balancing these two elements that allowed him to approach the
good. The Wilsonian statesman could only operate from knowledge of current conditions
for there was no room for trans-historical rights in Wilson’s political thought. This was
problematic as the knowledge of current conditions was in continual flux due to the
organic nature of society.

From this we can discern two elements in Wilson’s definition of leadership. The
first is the ability to interpret spirit. This is a talent that all men of ability have, but it
must be sharpened by education. One must not only be educated to recognize spirit but
one must also survey the society around them for hints of the elements which their
particular society’s spirit is composed of. In Wilson’s estimation, political leadership is
about reform. Since society is always changing due it its organic nature, government is
continually responding through reform to that change. This means that every generation
must undergo some degree of reform, or political development will stagnate. Stagnation
is the worst possible outcome for society according to Wilson’s political thought.

The political leader, in Wilson’s definition is one who nudges (but does not
shove) society out of its comfort zone. Since society is organic, it is in a continual state of
flux although Wilson recognized that most change would be punctuated, coming
sporadically. While, he never explains the dynamics of the system in any great detail, he
assets that change was desirable. In Wilson’s vision a constitutional government was one
in which institutions have been adequately developed for input by all competent members
of society. Through this system, society could then act as a unified whole, removing the
potential for self interested groups to game the system. Wilson was very explicit in
stating, that while he did not know what specific changes would be necessary in subsequent generations he was quite certain that some type of change would be required. It was the job of each generation’s leaders to decide what types of reforms would be engaged in and to determine the relative speed of that change.

This second of Wilson’s leadership element was the ability to communicate with the masses, a key to democratic governance. Having the ability to identify spirit was a necessary, but not sufficient factor in leadership. The problem with the literary man is he cannot reduce and simplify his words to a point where the rest of society can comprehend and translate them into collective action.

The men who act stand nearer to the mass of men than do the men who write; and it is at their hands that the new thought gets its translation into the crude language of deeds. The very crudity of that language of deeds exasperates the sensibilities of the author; and his exasperation proves the world’s point – proves that, though he may be back of the leaders, he is not the leader. (Pestritto 2005a, 211)

The literary man is too cerebral; he knows more about spirit and the course of society than its average member, wishing to move society along quickly, already knowing what the eventual goals for it are. However, he does not act strategically in this; he shoves instead of nudges attempts to maneuver society to that place.

The literary man has a detailed understanding of the direction of politics, but he wants too much, too fast. He wishes to explain it all in the detail to which he understands it. This overzealous attitude is the reason why literary men do not usually make good politicians. Education and political communication may share similarities, but there is a critical difference.

In his thought there was due and studied proportion: all limiting considerations were set in their right places as guards to ward off misapprehension. Every
cadence of right utterance was made to sound in the careful phrases, in the perfect adjustments of sense. Just and measured reflection found full and fit expression. But when the thought is translated into action all its shadings disappear. (Pestritto 2005a, 211)

According to Wilson, society does not want complex, nuanced messages the sine qua non of a literary man. The literary man is an artist, but his audience is a relatively limited group of the other men of ability. They can appreciate the subtlety of thought in a way that the masses cannot. The masses feel spirit but it is not an intellectual exercise for them. Wilson made a distinction between “vision and digestion.” It was these two “very different things” that resulted in serenity (Wilson [1897] 1996, 19). This idea described the relationship between those who governed and those who were governed; the true statesman has vision but that vision means little if it cannot be digested by the masses. The serenity of society that Wilson saw as a goal of government was impossible without both. Politics might be understood intellectually by those inclined to study it as such, but the practitioner of politics had to aim at the passions in order to be a successful leader in order to excite the masses. Passion played a central role in government. In 1910, in a speech given during the New Jersey gubernatorial campaign, Wilson said that government was not an “intellectual matter.” It was a place to invoke the “splendid, handsome passions” which included love, honor, and patriotism. It was only through the use of these ennobled passions that the base passions of hatred and envy could be overcome (Cooper 2009, 124).

Notwithstanding the good that one could do tapping into these noble passions, Wilson contended that political leadership was a rough business. For one with highly
tuned senses, like the literary man, the process was almost too brutal for such an individual to engage in. Wilson would ask the question:

How can any man whose method is the method of artistic completeness of thought and expressed on, whose mood is the mood of contemplation, for a moment understand or tolerate the majority whose purpose and practice it is to strike out broad, rough hewn policies, whose mood is the mood of action? (Pestritto 2005a, 211)

The difference between the man of action and the literary man was the difference between organicism and progressivism. The man of action saw the organic society for what it was. He understood how to manipulate it through a slow but strategic use of rhetoric. The literary man saw the larger progressive motion of society and longed for society to move along that continuum. A truly effective leader would be able to unite these more practical and intellectual perspectives. In many ways, Wilson seemed to embody this ideal leader. This did not mean that the literary man did not have an important role to play in politics, he was indeed a figure that Wilson called the literary politician. In an essay called *The Literary Politician*, Wilson describes this person:

I mean the man who has the genius to see deep into affairs, and the discretion to keep out of them – the man to whom, by reason of knowledge and imagination and sympatric insight, governments and politics are as open books, but who instead of try to put haphazard characters of his own into those books, wisely prefers to read their pages aloud to others. A man thus who knows politics, and yet does not handle policies. (Wilson [1896]1971, 69)

In this definition, the literary politician seems to have the good sense to stay out of politics, despite having one of the characteristics of an effective leader (the ability to recognize spirit); he is lacking the other, the ability to communicate with the masses. This renders him inadequate as a political leader.
Edmund Burke is an example of a great literary man but a poor political leader.

It is better to read Burke than to have heard him; and the thoughts which miscarried into the parliaments of George III have had their triumphs in parliaments of a later day – have established themselves at the heart of such policies as are liberalizing to the world. His power was literary, not forensic; he was no leader of men; he was an organizer of thought, but not of party victories. “Burke is a wise man”, said Fox, “but he is wise too soon.” (Pestritto 2005b, 215)

There is a great irony here- Burke was Wilson’s intellectual hero, but he was his hero due his intellect and not to his ability to lead which, by Wilson’s own admission, was poor at best. Burke’s record as a Member of Parliament shows that he was never able to garner support for any of the political issues of day. This calls into question the position of Wilson as a leader. He referred to himself as a literary politician during his academic career, yet he was confident enough in his own abilities to move into the rough and tumble world of politics. However, he did not wish to become a victim of the Burke problem. In 1917, he would tell the muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens:

An intellectual- such as you and I- intellectual is inexecutive. In an executive job we are dangerous, unless we are aware of our limitations and take measures to stop our everlasting dispositions to think, to listen to-not act...when my mind felt like deciding, to shut it up and act. My decision might be right, it might be wrong. No matter, I would take a chance and do- something. (Copper 2009, 400)

The important element for Wilson is to show the ability to act. If one moves from the life of contemplation to the life of action, then he must accept a new set of standards. Action is important in and of itself. However, having an understanding of the spirit of one’s society is helpful in determining what form that action should take in order to be successful. Wilson may have described
different categories of men of ability, but he seemed to believe that he could fuse these different character types together in his own person.

Unlike Wilson, Burke’s shortcoming was he did not fully understand the organic-progressive principle. “He was wise also too much. He went on from the wisdom of today to the wisdom of to-morrow, to the wisdom which is for all time: and it was impossible he should be followed so far (Pestritto 2005b, 215).” In this, the wisdom of today is the organic side of the organic principle. It is what men are willing to accept and the things which leaders need to say in order to excite and mobilize the masses. The wisdom of tomorrow is the progressive side of the principle. It is what the literary man knows but which is still obscured from the masses. Wilson also conceived something of an ultimate goal for government and this is his “wisdom for all time,” although what that wisdom exactly is, he does not say. Wilson rather projected this wisdom as institutional goals. Domestically this would take the form of transforming the American system of government into a more parliamentary form while transforming the international system from one based on conflict to a system based on cooperation. These were procedural goals, to create systems that could be used by future generations to implement changes that they would inevitably demand. Wilson wanted to create the institutions, even though he did not know specifically what those future needs would be. While an extraordinary individual like Burke could envision a similar grand vision, he failed to communicate effectively to the masses, which in democratic politics, is of the upmost importance. Burke might have been able to see the long term goals of his society, but the masses did not have that same ability. Burke was like a great sculptor who envisioned a beautiful
statue in the marble, but the workman standing next to him only saw a piece of rock that needed to be cut out of the quarry’s walls. Both perspectives are correct. The sculptor’s perspective might be more noble or beautiful than the workman’s, but the workman’s is critically necessary before the sculptor can even begin to achieve his idea. Each step must flow out of the other. This was Wilson’s concept of organic change, and organic change was, according to Wilson, slow. The astute can see changes far in advance and this is a great advantage, but it is not the stuff of leadership. Leadership is mobilizing the masses, but is also remembering that the masses do not have the capability to envision the future in the same way that men of ability have: “If you would be a leader of men, you must lead your own generation, not the next.” (Pestritto 2005b, 216)

Moreover, leaders who push too far, too fast are held in suspicion by many. Wilson points to a type of elitism based on merit which arouses resentment: “Burke’s genius made conservative men uneasy[.] How could a man be safe who had so many ideas?” (Pestritto 2005b, 216) This adds a factor to political leadership. Great minds can lead but they must be aware of this latent resentment. Pushing too far, too fast, is not only a blunder which detracts from one’s political support but is can actively increase disapproval toward one’s political agenda as well, and maintaining this balance is not an easy task.

Burke is a negative example, and Wilson uses him to describe what leadership is not. As Wilson said, “Men are not led by being told what they don’t know.” (Pestritto 2005b, 215) According to Wilson, leadership is not baffling an audience with great ideas; it is not a way to encourage people to listen and support political positions.
Persuasion is a force, but not information; and persuasion is accomplished by creeping into the confidence of those you would lead. Their confidence is gained by qualities which they can recognize, by arguments which they can assimilate: by the things which find easy entrance into their minds and are easily transmitted to the palms of their hands or the ends of their walking sticks in the shape of applause. (Pestritto 2005b, 215)

As we can see from this, Wilson viewed persuasion and information as different things. Persuasion is a force or a power, something akin to an act of will that the leader exercises over an audience. Leadership, for Wilson, is a forensic activity, or, at least, this was the final step in that process. It is in the giving of lucid and concise speeches that the substance of leadership can be found. It is through this that men are told what to do. Wilson believed that a speaker with the right motives and strong convictions would inspire confidence and that could always win over a crowd. It is important to remember that when Wilson was writing, the broadcast age had not yet begun. Radio was still several decades in the future, and for Wilson giving a speech was still something of an intimate exercise. He thought in terms of audiences of hundreds or thousands. Therefore Wilson could envision political leadership in the guise of a speech to Parliament or to the members of the Senate.

So according to Wilson, the man of action must know spirit in order to be a leader, but he must not simply expect that this knowledge would be enough to lead. Wilson seemed to be describing the shape which political communication would take in the future. To use more contemporary terms, Wilson seemed to have been describing what are now known as talking points: the ability of a politician to “stay on message.” Wilson sounds very much like a modern campaign manager. The process of leadership that Wilson lays out seems very similar as well to the idea of political leadership in the
context of the perpetual campaign. For Wilson, the political leader must be a simplifier of ideas: “Mark the simplicity and directness of the arguments and ideas of such men [.] The motives which they urge are elemental; the morality which they seek to enforce is large and obvious; the policy they emphasize, purged of all subtlety.” (Pestritto 2005b, 217) The definition which Wilson offered was one that was taken up by presidents who came after him. Over the course of the twentieth century, we can see the examples of Franklin Delano Roosevelt with his Fireside Chats, Ronald Reagan playing the role of the Great Communicator, and Bill Clinton “feeling our pain.” In all of these, it is possible to see a simple and direct communication from leaders to the masses.

Political communication was a form of benevolent manipulation, according to Wilson. It was to him a question of the application of force through rhetorical skill.

The competent leader of men cares little for the interior niceties of other people’s characters: he cares much – everything for the external uses to which they may be put. His will seeks the lines of least resistance: but the whole question with him is a question as to the application of force. There are men to be moved: how shall he move them? He supplies the power; others supply only the material upon which the power operates. The power will fail if misapplied; it will be misapplied if it be not suitable both in its character and in its method to be nature of the materials upon which it is spent; but that nature is, after all, only its means. It is the power which dictates, dominates; the materials yield. (Pestritto 2005b, 214)

Political leadership was getting the public to do what the leader deemed to be correct according to his knowledge of spirit. In essence, the masses become the medium.

However, Wilson did place a restriction on the use of that power. In order to act in a legitimate way, the leader had to act for the good of the people, but from this the question arises: how does one determine what that common good is? Since Wilson’s organic progressive principle broke away from natural, or transhistorical rights, the rightness of
action can only be determined by the leader who undertakes it. Wilson saw this determination by the leader to be based on a feedback loop which involved all of society, but the key element in this process was based on the skill of the leader – his native intelligence, intellectual training, and sense of duty to society as a whole. This placed much faith in the leader’s ability to act in a benevolent manner towards society.

Wilson, depending on this point, did not suggest institutional restrictions on leadership, because any such restrictions would be a hindrance to leadership in the modern age. It is important to remember that Wilson did not view government as potentially dangerous, but benevolent aid to society. Without a fear of predatory government, Wilson concluded that, “Men are as clay in the hands of the consummate leader.” (Pestritto 2005b, 214) This statement sounds rather ominous, yet Wilson did not see it that way. For Wilson, the truly consummate leader must have knowledge of both the organic and progressive nature of society. He must be tapped into the spirit to understand what is necessary and what is possible. Therefore, he could not be anything but publically minded. Men might be clay, but the political leader must shape them into forms that are dictated by the spirit. Therefore, spirit holds political leadership to a general course. In a more advanced society, Wilson did not believe that a political leader could emerge and use the abilities of speech and style to purposes that are too far removed from the spirit of his age.

Education and Leadership

It is possible to see in the preceding argument a criticism Wilson had of education
in American institutions of higher education. Ironically, for all of Wilson’s appeals to scientism he bore a near distain for the dominance of the natural sciences in the new university system because the applications of its epistemological standards devalued the material that Wilson believed to be essential to understanding history. To use what Wilson saw as the narrow modern definition of science would be just as much of a mistake as the Founders had made in using the Newtonian, not Darwinian, concept of society. Wilson had very little interests in the natural sciences nor did his education take him into a scientific laboratory. He elaborated his position in his essay *Mere Literature*.

A singular phrase this, “mere literature,”- the irreverent invention of scientific age… “Mere literature” is a serious sneer, conceived in all honesty by the scientific mind, which despises things that do not fall within the categories of demonstrable knowledge. It means nothing but literature, as who should say, “mere talk,” “mere fabrication,” “mere pastime.” The scientist, with his head comfortably and excusably full of knowable things, takes nothing seriously and with his hat off, except human knowledge. The creatures of the human spirit are, from his point of view, incalculable vagaries, irresponsible phenomena, to be regarded only as play, and, for the mind’s good, only as recreation- to be used to while away the tedium of a railway journey, or to amuse a period of rest or coalescence; mere byplay, mere make-believe. (Wilson [1971] 1896, 1-2)

To Wilson the place where the spirit of the age resided was in great literature. This is why he was so concerned that students be allowed to read the books that he valued because these granted their readers some insight into the spirit of the age. The new and narrow focus on the nature sciences were crowding out traditional studies of the humanities.

Wilson was apprehensive because he felt this focus undermined the broader education of students who would be the leaders of the future. Wilson feared that universities embracing the new modern positive science where detrimental to the political
health of the nation since such pedagogical methods undercut an education that would aid students in understanding the true structure behind history. Schools that adhere to these newer methods were “agencies of Philistinism.” Wilson explained the reasoning behind his conclusion thus:

Our present plans for teaching everybody involve certain unpleasant things quite inevitably. It is obvious that you cannot have universal education without restricting your teaching to things as can be universally understood. It is plain that you cannot impart “university methods” to thousands, or create ‘investigators: by the score, unless you confine your university education to matters which dull men can investigate, your laboratory training to tasks which mere plodding diligence and submissive patience can compass. Yet, if you do so limit and constrain what you teach, you thrust taste and insight and delicacy of perception out of the schools, exalt the obvious and the merely useful above the things which are only imaginatively or spiritually conceived make education an affair of tasting and handling and smelling, and so create Philistia. (Wilson [1971] 1896, 2-3)

For Wilson, an understanding of history was the most important thing that an individual could learn. It drove moral understanding and established the common social relationships between individuals in a society. Everything else was built on that. The vocational or professionalization of individuals would not be beneficial to society unless that individual understood enough to know their role and responsibility within to society.

Moreover, it was not an easy thing to learn and not every member of society had the mental capacities to do so. Wilson’s dull men were not bad nor evil just limited in their intellectual abilities, and not true political leaders in the Wilsonian mold. Higher education was the process in which the most talented of young men would come to sharpen their senses. An integral part of this process was to introduce them to the larger world which was facilitated by the various lessons learned through reading literature. These were the places were the literary men would have left their mark. A true literary
man was not an effective leader, but through his works he could train those men who were nearer to the masses. Burke, like other literary men, was better to read than to listen to because by reading one could have a lesson imparted to them. The university was the institution in society where such things were taught to students who could learn them. The university had a civilizing mission for it allowed for a political community to form that was based on cooperation, not self-interest.

The true leader in a democracy was not a mere politician, but a statesman. This was an enlightened figure, educated and connected to the world spirit. Understanding the spirit would create a common frame of reference for all people in a society upon which they could build a consensus for common action. Democratic government was persuasion and how better to get people to support your cause then by invoking their passions, and making them aware of the zeitgeist. One qualification to Wilson’s argument was that leader you must have already correctly interpreted the direction of the World Spirit and have translated that into a workable policy. Like the master author, the statesman must have a fluent grasp on the meaning of the World Spirit. The master author uses this understanding to write, the statesman uses this understanding to govern.

Wilson would take this concept of education and put it into practice when he was president of Princeton University with the creation of the English tutorial system. This would become known as the Princeton preceptorial system and involved hiring forty-six young scholars for a maximum of five years who would serve as reading discussion leaders. The whole point of the system was to assign and discuss readings outside of the formal classroom setting. The preceptors work with a small group of students who would
convene once or twice a week in a seminar-like format to discuss what the students were reading. These tutors would work with “small groups of students, whose guide, counselors, and friend they will be in their work.” Wilson would state that the purpose of this was to create a “real community of interests, pursuits, and feeling” among the faculty and students. This process would “make a reading man of (the Princeton student) instead of a mere pupil receiving instruction.” Princeton became Wilson’s pallet in what he believed was real education reform. (Copper 2009, 84-85)

This design was close to what Wilson described in On Being Human as being the essence of a true education. In this essay, Wilson was describing what a liberal education was. Wilson understood that individuals would have vocational and professional educations as well, but before that one would have to gain a grounding in the world and establish their humanity. Only an individual properly educated, in this sense, could be truly human. This would be achieved by reading those authors who had an understanding of the spirit of the age. Wilson called these writers masters. A proper reading of the masters who for the most part were a collection of authors from the English Historical School, would give students exposure to the spirit that undergirded their times.

Wilson was willing to fight for this program. It was expensive costing $2.5 million (in 1905 dollars) was no small investment for a relatively small school like Princeton was at the time. Wilson would urge that this investment was necessary when he told the Princeton Board of Trustees, “no more distinguished gift could be made to American education.” It was more than a gift; it was the institutionalization of what Wilson viewed as true educational reform in the United States. Wilson was an opponent
of the other major educational reform movement in higher education, which was the free
elective system, the brainchild of Charles Elliot the president of Harvard. Wilson
believed that the free elective system was terribly misguided and merely compounded the
problems that were already present in education while not addressing the real problems of
education. It was the antithesis of what Wilson was trying to achieve. Without the
necessary guidance, students ‘free’ to chart their own path through the most critical years
of their education were more likely to widen the gap behind themselves and the goals of
education. The preceptor system was Wilson putting into motion a way not just to
education Princeton students in the classroom setting, but to aid them on the path to
becoming human by exposing them to master authors in a setting outside of the formal
classroom. This system would ensure that students would receive a true education and be
exposed to the world spirit (Copper 2009, 84-85).

Leadership was a learned process that most, excepted the most extraordinary
individuals, would learn has part of their formal education. Wilson differentiated
between serving public opinion and controlling public opinion. Serving public opinion is
doing what the public wants and controlling public opinion is akin to manipulating it. In
Wilson’s estimation, a constitutional government serves the public interest. The
difference between serving and controlling this interest returns us to Hegel’s concept of
spirit. Spirit is out there, somewhere, with everyone in a society exposed to it. The
difference between the categories of people is their level of awareness of spirit. While
the average citizens feel spirit, public men are using the basic notions of spirit to form
policy options, that are then decided on by the voters either by direct (like a referendum)
or indirect methods (reelecting office holders with declared policy agendas). This is why Wilson favored a strong, Westminster party system, because it was only through a strong party that clearly articulated its policy positions before an election and then followed through with them afterwards that his concept of democracy could operate. The public may not clearly know what it wants so it is the job of the political leader to interpret spirit and guide the passions of the general public. According to this definition, the political leader is not dictating public opinion, he is only steering it. However, the line between serving and controlling is razor thin. Serving public opinion looks like controlling it from the standpoint of individuals who do not have the vision of the talented and educated leader.

For example, the people have a sense of fairness, and fairness is something which they gain through access to the spirit. Therefore, they believe it is wrong for unscrupulous employers to take advantage of their workers. This would be the effect of spirit on the public. Public men, seeing this, then, must create a policy to address this manifestation of the question of fairness in the work-week. This could take the form of legislating a standard work week. Politics is not determining if there should be a standardized work week, but rather the details of that policy. One party might back a 45 hour work-week, the other a 40 hour work-week. Public men on either side will try to garner support for their policy prescriptions. That, I believe, was Wilson’s idea of forming and directing public policy. This procedure is based on the idea that the entire process starts from a vague but discernable consensus from which the details of specific policies are hammered out in the public arena. This is different than trying to control
public opinion. In controlling public opinion, government officials can ignore or even go against the sense of spirit which resides somewhere in the public mind.

Wilson believed that democratic politics were self regulating and self correcting. The greatest test for leadership is the democratic process itself: “The whole question of leadership receives a sharp practical test in a popular legislative assembly.” (Pestritto 2005b, 220) Policing was a self contained quality of the democratic system. For Wilson, a truly democratic system was one in which there was little to no danger from leadership. Democracies could only make good decisions, needing only the creation of democratic institutions which addressed the specific interests and needs of a particular generation. But as momentous as this conclusion was, Wilson admits he did not understand just how this would all work.

The revolutions which have changed the whole principle and method of government within the last hundred years have created a new kind of leadership in legislation: a leadership which is not yet, perhaps, fully understood. (Pestritto 2005b, 220)

This might sound somewhat shocking. However, if we apply the logic of Hegel’s argument of the unfolding of history, it minimizes the impact of the statement. According to the dictates of Hegel, an observer may not have a complete understanding of the affect of history because the changes which had accrued were so new. An enlightened figure was aware, but not always completely conscious, to the point of understanding of the impact of history on the present. Wilson seemed to claim that he was one of these observers.

Wilson saw leadership like everything else in the organic society as change.
It used to be thought that legislation was an affair proper to be conducted only by the few who were instructed for the benefit of the many who were uninstructed: that statesmanship was a function of origination for which only trained and instructed men were fit. Those who actually conducted legislation and undertook affairs were rather whimsically chosen by Fortune to illustrate this theory, but such was the ruling thought in politics. (Pestritto 2005b, 220)

This does not mean that Wilson believed any random person could act in the role of a representative. Wilson was pointing to the idea of meritocracy, the idea that everyone is given a chance. By opening up the political system to what Wilson viewed as underrepresented groups in government, the pool of potential candidates would be increased. Leadership would not only be open to the wealthy, but ability would become a factor as well. According to Wilson, this was the reason why Abraham Lincoln was such a compelling story.

Most of us are average men; very few of us rise, except by fortunate accident. Above the general level of the community about us; and therefore the man who thinks common thoughts, the man who has had common experiences, is almost ways the man who interprets America aright. Isn’t that the reason that we are proud of such stories as the story of Abraham Lincoln,—a man who rose out of the ranks and interpreted America better than any man had interpreted it who had risen out of the privileged classes or the educated classes of America. (Wilson [1913]1961, 60)

Men of ability can come from all of the social-economic classes and the potential pool of leadership stock should not be limited only to the economic elite class. There is a native intelligence that Wilson sees as a necessary, but not sufficient quality for those wishing to engage in political leadership to possess. This is not to say that the talent does not form an elite class of a different category, only that talent and social-economic condition does not correspond in Wilson’s estimation.
Wilson saw Lincoln as a good example of serving the public because Lincoln connected what was required by the spirit and what the public would support. In Wilson conception, public opinion did not equal complete acceptance. Lincoln pushed for abolition of slavery which was so violently opposed that it resulted in the War Between the States, but despite the standpatters Lincoln was able to “lead” America to abolition. In the same vein, Wilson was trying to “lead” America to a sense of economic fairness despite the monopolistic. For Wilson, a good, or perhaps great political leader, could discern changes even when those changes were still embryonic. The true political leader would not just be able to read a poll, but to gauge the public’s feeling relative to the Spirit of the Age and the direction that society was moving. (I use the term reading a poll to illustrate a point, but Wilson would not. He lived in the generation before scientific public opinion poll were taken. However, this is the gist of Wilson’s idea, and how it could be applied in a more informed generation.)

When Wilson made such claims it is important to remember his racial attitudes because he was not suggesting an opening up of leadership and government positions for everyone. Wilson, like many of his day connected race with ability, and Wilson concluded that members of less developed races were, on the whole, unsuited for leadership at that time. Although he did hold out the possible that with education members of less advanced races could, eventually, assume leadership positions. In his essay *Stray Thoughts from the South* (1881), Wilson pointed to what he called the elevation of African Americans through education. Wilson suggested that within two or three generations American-Africans would be prepared for leadership positions in their
own communities. For a twenty-first century observer, Wilson’s open society would still be painfully restricted for minority groups.

With this caveat in mind, Wilson believed that men of ability should understand that to be a true and effective political leader, they must defer to public opinion. The leader had to find a fundamental level of public support for any political reform, in order to have any hope of gaining the necessary momentum to work its way through the legislative process. Wilson would describe an effective legislative leader as following: “The legislative leader must perceive the direction of the nation’s permanent forces and must feel the strength of their operation. There is initiative here, but not novelty; there are old thoughts, but a progressive application of them.” (Pestritto 2005b, 222) The permanent forces that Wilson was referring to were those underlying forces that were created by the spirit of the community. Spirit was the bedrock on which a society, and perhaps humanity, should be built upon. A true legislator would be able to weight those forces and know when the time was right to act upon them in order to pass legislation.

Conclusion: Leadership as Wilson Defined It

In summation then it is possible to see that Woodrow Wilson’s political thought, 22 Wilson’s stance on African Americans, their place in American society and education would be similar to the position that Booker T. Washington announced in his Atlanta Cotton Exposition Speech twenty years later (Norrell 2009). This would become commonly known as the Accommodation Argument. Washington, like Wilson, would claim that generational change was the only true remedy for racial equality in the South. This position would be contested and other voices in the African American community, W.E.B. DuBois in particular were critical of it. This criticism was that Washington’s argument was little more than capitulation to the demands of white segregationists. DuBois argued that inequality was a moral wrong and needed to be addressed immediately. DuBois’ solution also rested on leadership. According to DuBois, the “Talented Ten Percent” of African Americans would have to provide the leadership for the rest of the race (Lewis 1994).
and in particular his organic-progressive principle, led him to a new definition of leadership. In breaking away from the concept of natural rights and replacing it with an evolutionary model of politics comprised of an organic society imbued with a Hegelian-like notion of spirit, he produced a new set of goals for political leadership. This new model has been given the name of rhetorical leadership by the political scientist Jeffery K. Tulis. I believe that Tulis made a strong argument, but I do not completely agree with his interpretation of Wilson. Wilson’s leadership was rhetorical, in that it relied on speeches and the ability to move men to action. However, Wilson’s definition of leadership was framed around his understanding of spirit and his theory of history; ideas that Tulis did not emphasize in his analysis. But, to truly understand Wilson if merely to disagree with him, these factors must be taken into account.

Wilson believed that this new definition of leadership was necessary owning to the growing complexity of society and demands of democratic government. Wilson did not view this as a break with the past, but a necessary and natural modification in keeping with the requirements of the organic society. This is an important point to remember about Wilson. Although later scholars would argue whether Wilson was proposing radical shifts through his reforms, or reactively responding to the new social environment, Wilson himself believed that he was promoting both political and social evolution, and that not engaging in these changes would cause society to become stagnant. Therefore, astute leadership was essential to move society in a positive direction. Without leadership there could be no reform or movement along the progressive arch that Wilson envisioned. Wilson’s concept of political development that
centered on social evolution and stagnancy was a condition that could be damaging, if not
dangerous, to society.

Wilson judged political leadership by two major criteria. First was the idea that
the leader was an interpreter of spirit. Wilson, like Hegel, believed that everyone was
aware of the spirit of their Age to one degree or another. However, the mass of men,
busy with the task of everyday life could not devote themselves to thinking about the
demands and direction of spirit. These men were only unconsciously aware of spirit,
feeling it on an emotional level. (Wilson [1897] 1996) It fell to a class of men of ability
with native intelligence and training to give spirit form to lead the masses to where they
wanted to be, despite an ability to articulate it. Wilson’s second criterion was clear
political communication. A leader had to clearly, yet forcibly communicate simplified
ideas to gain public support for his well considered reform agenda. This is why Wilson’s
definition has been deemed rhetorical since it is based on the ability to communicate
ideas in a manner which the public can absorb and act upon. It is not that older ideas
about statesmanship were not concerned with communicating ideas, but for Wilson this is
the primary focus.

In Wilson’s estimation leadership was a forensic exercise. The primary function
of political leadership was to undertake this change in a controlled manner. One of
Wilson’s maxims was “evolution, not revolution”; for him, revolution was a thing to be
feared. In Wilsonian terms revolution was either many reforms at once or reforms
happening too quickly. It was not that there could or should not be change, but that the
change was well managed. This meant that the true political leader had to intuit what
reforms would be accepted by society, how to introduce them, and then how to guide them through the legislative process. This was something of a Goldilocks Principle: too few reforms or too slowly, were just as harmful as too many reforms, too quickly. This is why a political leader had to be tied into the spirit of not just his society, but of a larger world-spirit. This knowledge comes from a very exacting educational process, one that Wilson tried to propagate during his own academic career. The core of this process was reading the works of those whom Wilson deemed to be great literary men, or, to use Wilson’s term, literary politicians who had an understanding of spirit. The insightful reader could gain from the understanding of these literary politicians. However, Wilson restricted most of these authors to the not so distant past and ethnocentrically limited them to the Anglo-American world. Wilson was not interested in the spirit of past ages or societies, but in his own as he was concerned with training a new generation of leaders. These writers were near enough to the present incarnation of spirit that their experiences could aid students who were to become that next group of political leaders. Still, Wilson had to make allowances for the autodidact who managed to become a great leader. With the exception of a talented few, like Washington and Lincoln, Wilson believed that, for most, formal education was key to learning how to direct a reform agenda.

The Wilsonian definition of leadership is not without criticisms. The major focus surrounds the potential danger that could arise if leadership is allowed to operate as Wilson understood it. (Pestritto 2005a, Carrese 2005, Stid 1998, Zentner 1996) Scot Zentner calls the tendency in the United States for chief executives to assume more and more power *caesarism*. Zentner points to the New Deal as *caesarism’s* historic starting
point in American political history, but the idea goes back to Wilson and his idea of political leadership. This idea is also present in Arthur M. Schlesinger’s thesis of the Imperial Presidency (1973). The environment for these theories of immoderate uses of power by the president can be seen to originate in Wilson’s evolutionary politics. In such a scheme it is necessary to discredit the concept of natural rights and replace it with a relative system in which rights and values change over time. By discrediting natural rights it becomes difficult to judge the actions of political leaders. The idea that a Hegelian-like spirit is the foundation of political leadership places a great deal of internal responsibility on the individual in power to devise strategies to gain the public support they needed to move their societies closer to the spirit of their age. The talents of leadership and that of demagoguery are very similar, if not the same, according to Wilson. The difference between the true political leader and the demagogue is intention, and it is difficult to judge intention until after the fact. Nor is it sufficient constraint when it comes to questions of leadership. In democracies, Wilson’s fourth and final stage of political development, the public’s ability to judge if an individual should hold and/or keep a political office are essential to the health of the system. Anyone not acting in the public interest should be turned out of office by the voters. Wilson’s concept of leadership made it more difficult for the public to those decisions since it is difficult to determine intention in the public arena. This change in the definition of leadership instead of strengthening the system potential weakened it.

Under the best of conditions it is difficult to judge the merit of candidates, but the Constitution was written with a failsafe institutional mechanism. This was the genius of
the Separation of Powers described by Montesquieu, and put into practical form by the Founders. Wilson wished to lessen, if not completely do away with, these institutional constraints found in the text of the Constitution, particularly the Separation of Powers. (Wilson 1908, Carrese 2005) While this would free leadership to act, it would have created a political system much more vulnerable to a demagogue or some other profligate taking office. Wilson believed that the likelihood of Madison’s self-interested politician arising had been greatly reduced due to the changes in society and government. Since Hegel’s slave-master problem had been overcome by democratic government, the problem of self-interest blocking collective action had also been solved, although there were still the standpatters that made this difficult. However, with proper leadership and targeted institutional change, the United States could move into a new period in which the relationship between the governed and the government would change. It was a change that the people could support and believe in. Wilson reasoned that society had progressed to a point where the older fears of predatory government had given way to the possibility of more cooperative actions between society and government. With those problems resolved, it was now only a question of leadership, in Wilson’s estimation the Ship of State would not have to worry about being commanded by a self-interested pilot.

Wilson’s argument also focused on the idea that every generation would be able to produce enlighten individuals who would provide proper leadership. The Separation of Powers not only protects government from the threats of self-interested individuals and demagogy, but it sustains the republican form when the less than capable are in office. In this way, the institutions created by the Constitution compartmentalize government
that maintained the stability of government. It could remain stable even if the government was experiencing problems be that an assault by those who would use their political position for self-gain, mismanagement by less than able individuals, or mere neglect.

Ironically despite all the attention that Wilson gave to institutional development, his ideal of political leadership threatened the framework of the American system. Naively perhaps Wilson believed that individuals attaining office would always work towards the betterment of society. By wishing to free these individuals from institutional restrictions he proposed a reformulation of the institutions of government. It is not that political leaders fail to regard public opinion or lack concern in how they communicate with the public. What is troubling in Wilson his he wished to do away with the institutional checks on that executive power and depend solely on the good will of the individuals in leadership. Wilson believed that the truly capable would always win out over the less capable and that demagoguery could be effectively restrained if it ever appeared; and that there was little likelihood of this possibility occurring anyway in a properly functioning constitutional government.

It is not that political leaders are not of good character. Some, if not many, are civic-minded and take seriously their roles as public servants, but to conclude that this is always the norm is a dangerous notion. Moreover, to rely on a method of measuring the actions of political leaders and government against a potentially changing set of social norms removes another safeguard. These social norms can take the appearance of rights, except they are not necessarily permanent, so it can be argued that in a given situation they no longer apply or have changed. This makes it difficult to use them to create a set
of standards to hold political leadership to. Coupling this to a claim that the true
statesman and the demagogue use the same set of skills and the difference between them
is only their intentions is more dangerous still.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Woodrow Wilson is an important figure in American political thought and international relations theory throughout the 20th and into the 21st century. I have argued that Wilson can best be categorized as a historicist, who relied on a Hegelian-like concept of spirit. This had a substantial impact on how Wilson conceived political leadership. This study has covered Wilson’s concept of spirit, his theory of history, and his idea of political leadership. These were all important contributions to American political thought and as a result of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, would be injected into international politics as well. It was at this peace conference that Wilson tried to implement internationally the ideas that he had developed domestically. Wilson was not an original political philosopher, but a synthetic political thinker. In order to combine ideas about the evolutionary nature of politics, the Christian tradition, German idealism, and the English historical school, Wilson developed what I have called the organic-progressive principle.

His ideas were interesting in their own right, and can be considered an example of progressive though. However, Wilson occupied an unusually place in history. He spent decades as an academic studying government and history, giving him time to refine his idea about how to understand history and the political process, and was the closest analog to the life of contemplation to be found in the late 19th century. But Wilson would move from a life of contemplation to a life of action as a political leader, and, eventually, president of the United States. In this capacity, he took his ideas and tried to apply them
first domestically and, later, internationally. It is for this reason that I have made the attempt to try to understand his political thought. Any gains in better understanding Wilson are valuable to the political theorist, political scientist, historian, or interested lay person.

As was presented in Chapter 1, Wilson saw a shift in the intellectual world from a Newtonian view and Darwinian one. He interpreted this to mean a shift from viewing the world as mechanical process to understanding the world as an organic system. This was not a shift in just the physical sciences, but a shift in the social sciences. This would be called by a later philosopher of science a paradigm shift (Kuhn 1962). From this Wilson drew two conclusions. First, that viewed historically the political process was evolutionary. In order to understand how societies developed politically one had to apply an evolutionary model. In this way Woodrow Wilson was a modernist in his thought because he actively incorporated Darwin’s theories with his own. This evolutionary thought was the spine that supported the rest of his political thinking. Secondly, in accepting this evolutionary approach, Wilson came to understand that society needed to be viewed as an organic entity. Wilson believed this was important both in an academic sense to understand how society functioned, but also in a practical sense because anyone in a position of political leadership would have to understand this process in order to be successful in winning support for their legislative agenda.

Wilson did not accept nor apply Darwin’s theory of evolution without an important reservation stemming from his own strong religiosity. Wilson understood God to be a distant figure, and was not himself a biblical literalist. Because of this, he did not
have a problem accepting evolution as a way of explaining what he believed to be the divine plan. This enabled Wilson, and like-minded individuals, to posit that science was not a threat to religious belief, but a way to better understand God through his creation. What Wilson did have a problem with was the idea that evolution was brutal process. Evolution was framed by Darwin as a competition, and like any competition there were winners and losers. This was a notion that conflict with Wilson’s conception of progress. Wilson, with an unshakable belief in the doctrine of predestination, reasoned that God had a plan for humanity. He interpreted this plan as evident in the evolution of social systems. This was reinforced by Wilson’s belief that the Bible was a progressive text-progressive in the sense that humanity moved in a generally positive direction through history and that God’s divine plan was beneficial. Wilson defined eschatology as a progressive process. From a young age, Wilson seemed to believe that human existence was a progressive undertaking. This progressive background was important because everything else that Wilson absorbed into his political thought had to fulfill this criterion. Politics was not just an evolutionary process, but it also had to be a progressive process. The brutal struggle between individuals that Darwin envisioned in the natural world was not the type of evolution that Wilson saw taking place in political development. This split Wilson from the other Social Darwinists of his day. Wilson would agree with writers like Hebert Spencer only in so far as they defined politics as organic, but Wilson would adamantly disagree with the policy positions that Spencer, and other Social Darwinist proposed.
As was presented in chapter 2, Hegel’s concept of spirit, or Zeitgeist, was key to understanding how societies developed. I argued that Wilson took this idea of spirit from Hegel and combined it with the idea of spirit found in the Christian tradition. It is here that Wilson became somewhat creative in combining these two concepts of spirit. There are several different interpretations of Hegel, and many scholars have pointed to Hegel’s secularization of the spirit. The question of how far this secularization went in Hegel’s philosophy is a somewhat contentious question, but my purpose was not to argue Hegel in this paper. However, Wilson responded to this secularization thesis by rejecting claims that in accepting Hegel he was also accepting this movement towards secularization. Wilson refuted the claims that spirit had material causes and left open the possibility that spirit operated through the body, originating in a divine realm. In doing this, Wilson was then free to unite the Hegelian and Christian concepts of spirit together. In this way the rivalry between the more secular and the more religious ideas of spirit ceased and instead became self-reinforcing. Spirit gave Wilson’s evolutionary idea a positive direction. This need to account for both God and Science is a problem that Americans and their politicians are especially sensitive to. Wilson wanted to be a man of both faith and reason and through a modified form of German idealism he was able to satisfy this conflict.

Wilson found an evolutionary explanation of politics in German idealism, and he was particular attracted to Hegel. I have argued that Wilson’s political thought was taken in large part from Hegel. Wilson accepted the idea that political development and history were linked and that it was impossible to understand political development outside of the
context of history. This connection between politics and history is known as historicism, and Wilson framed his view of government as a historicist. Historicism is more than applying history to one’s understanding of politics; it is a claim that politics as a manifestation of human development, cannot be understood as anything but a historical process. In Hegel this process became even more acute because of the emphasis he placed on spirit. History not only becomes the context for politics, it also becomes the arbitrator of value. Wilson’s outline of history in his book *The State* is similar to that presented by Hegel in his philosophy of history. In both schemes, history was laid out as a series of ever advancing stages. However, with this idea of spirit and history, Wilson needed a vehicle for progressivism. That vehicle became the notion of the organic society.

Wilson’s idea of the organic society came from Edmund Burke, and the subsequent group of Anglo writers known as the English historical school. Wilson, an anglophile, looked to these writers and their notion of organicism. If the political process was evolutionary, then society had to be viewed as organic as well, since, according to the logic of the times, only living things could evolve. Wilson’s concept of political liberty was formed around Burke’s idea of adjustment: the interests and needs of each generation had to be addressed through the process of adjustment. It is possible to hold the view that society is organic and not necessarily be a progressive. However, organicism and progressivism do complement one another.

The organic-progressive argument did not come without theoretical costs. In using this reformulation, Wilson had to reject the social contract and the concept of
transhistorical rights, removing the mechanism that had been used to legitimate government. It was now no longer possible to weigh government action against its respect for natural rights; Wilson had to replace natural rights with spirit. Therefore, governments were not judged by if they respected natural rights, but how well they conformed to spirit. The problem was that spirit changed, so one had to know what spirit wanted before it could be used as a criteria for judging the legitimacy of government. Since Wilson believed that spirit was a real and objective force, he believed that talented and educated individuals could know it for what it was. However, this introduced another set of issues involving how spirit was to be understood in the context of the organic society.

According to Wilson, the organic process was a slow process involving thousands of discrete interactions between the individual members of a society. The speed of the evolutionary process was an important element for Wilson. Wilson believed that evolution was the most stable and natural form for political development to take. As a result he was opposed to revolution because he felt it to be too rapid and forced. It could not be embraced by all of society and therefore should be avoided whenever possible, although Wilson did concede that there were cases where the demand for change was so great that it was not possible to wait for evolution to take its natural course. The American Revolution was such a case, although in the American case it was not that the colonists had not organically generated the idea of independence, but that the British had not come to accept the fact that the colonies should be allowed home rule. By contrast, in
the case of the French Revolution, the attempt at democracy had failed because the speed and logic of the Revolution was too fast and the justification for revolution was incorrect.

In chapter 3 this study turned to Wilson’s theory of history. Conceptualizing history as stages, left Wilson concerned with viewing political development over the long term. Wilson theorized a general, and recognizable pattern which all nations would follow. This was similar to the laws that been, and were continuing to be developed in the natural sciences. These were strong and immutable laws which could not be violated. However, the laws of historical development could be delayed in their implementation due to the speed at which political reforms were undertaken. Political and institutional development was a slow and steady process because it was an organic process. Wilson called this slow organic change conservative to differentiate it from what he viewed as radical or quick change. Change imposed on a society before the idea had permeated it, was bound to cause a political backlash and slow the speed of genuine political change, according to Wilson. For Wilson, revolution was the enemy of progress.

In order to support this historical framework, Wilson had to reject the social contract and replace it with the family. Only by doing this could Wilson make his theory of history work. With the family, and not the social contract, as the origin of government could Wilson explain the inequality that he saw in his historical survey of government. This inequality was the slave-master relationship. Modern democratic government relieved the conditions under which the slave-master relationship existed, thereby solving this problem that had plagued governments throughout history. Dissolving the slave-
master relationship by giving everyone an appropriate political voice and made everyone their own master. Societies would transform from elite rule becoming self-governing. This resulted in a transformation of government into what Wilson called constitutional government, the final stage of government. At this stage those in government would not be an autonomous group from the governed. The resulting inter-relationship between the government and society would remove the predatory impulse of government. Government would transform from a potentially threatening to a beneficial part of society, a point at which it would be up to the members of society to activity use the government as a vehicle for communal benefit and social cooperation. If government is not viewed as a potential threat to liberty, then the possible number of actions that the government can take on the behalf of its citizens grows exponentially. Wilson saw government as a natural and organic social phenomena, not as an artificial social contract. The resolution of Hegel’s slave-master problem was the key to unlocking the full potential of government as a champion for society. In this new dispensation government could, and should, become more activity in regulating society. This was the genesis of the administrative state. Or, to use Isaiah Berlin’s definitions, government was free to shift from exercising positive liberties to enforcing negative liberties. Berlin saw this as dangerous, but Wilson, because of his attitude toward government, saw it as a natural progression in the function of government.

This was his justification for wishing to undo the principle of the separation of powers as written into the Federal Constitution. The United States had been founded before the nation had full achieved social unity. After the Civil War, and by the early 20th
century it more clearly had. Therefore, the institutions in the Constitution were out of
date since they did not best address the needs of this new society. By the time Wilson was
president the effects of the Industrial Revolution had greatly changed American society
and Wilson saw this as a clear sign that American government also need to change in
order to address new problems that the nation now faced.

Wilson was able to turn this theory of history into a grand democratic theory by
outlining a historical political movement that resulted in institutional development.
Wilson focused on institutional development with historical progress measured in
institutional terms. Wilson was concerned with the changes that he believed were needed
in the United States, but this was also his foundation for his internationalism. From his
observations of the world around him, Wilson concluded that the other regime types,
such as monarchies and aristocracies were dying out in a world where spirit had moved
beyond those less advanced stages of government. Furthermore, Wilson looked to the
idea of progress and the common goals of history that all nations shared as guideposts
that direct nations towards cooperation. This was the basis for his hope that the
international system could be transformed from one that used national self-interest as its
organizing principle to one that was centered on cooperation.

In chapter 4 the discussion turned to Wilson’s idea of political leadership.
Leadership was tied to interpreting spirit and the ability to communicate in a simplified
and lucid manner to the people. In this, Wilson was describing leadership in a
democracy. According to Wilson’s stage theory of history the last stage was what he
called constitutional government. But, a constitution is not merely a written document
that laid out the blue print of government. On the contrary, this was opposed to Wilson’s view that a constitution was the embodiment of the Spirit of Age. A written constitution was only a snapshot of this spirit and such a document would have to have the ability to change with the following generations if it was to be useful to the political community in future.

It is possible to apply Wilson’s idea of spirit, history, and leadership to his efforts in international politics at the end of World War I. Wilson assumed this role at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919; he was one of the four world leaders who comprised the Big Four.²³ Wilson’s quality of the true statesman could be applied to the international arena as well as to the domestic situation. The leader was an interpreter of the spirit of his Age and it was possible to argue that spirit could be applied to the world, or at least a part of it, particularly to a group of democratic nations that were working together for a common goal. The second quality was that of political communication and Wilson used his position as president of the United States to make speeches that announced his foreign policy. The most notable example of this was his Fourteen Points Speech given to Congress on February 11, 1918. This speech is an excellent example of the lucid and simplified political message that Wilson valued so highly.

In his attempts at international leadership, Wilson seemed to be filling the role of a world-historical individual as described by Hegel. In The Philosophy of History, Hegel

²³ The other three members of the Big Four were David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister of England; Georges Clemenceau, Premier of France; and Vittorio Orlando, Premier of Italy. There were thirty-two nations invited to the Conference, but many of the major decisions were made by the Big Four. Later, during the conference the Italians left in protest reducing the Big Four to three. At that point, the major decisions were made by the United States, England, and France.
would define the world-historical individual in contrast to the national leader as follows:

It is quite otherwise with the comprehensive relations that History has to do with. In the sphere are presented those momentous collisions between existing, acknowledged duties, laws, and rights, and those contingencies which are adverse to this fixed system; which assail and ever destroy its foundations and existence; whose tenor may nevertheless seem good- on the large scale advantageous-yes, even indispensable and necessary. These contingencies realize themselves in History: they involve a general principle of a different color from that on which depends the permanence of a people or a state. This principle is an essential phase in the development of the creating Idea, of Truth striving and urging towards [consciousness of] itself. Historical men- World-Historical Individuals- are those in whose aims such a general principle lies. (Hegel [1822] 1991, 29)

The world-historical individual might have used the same qualities as the legislative leader, but his aim was quite different. Where the leadership on the national level is concerned with that which is to the best advantage of that society, the world-historical individual is operating on a larger stage. The restraints that limit the movements of the national leader are not as pronounced on the international level.

A world-historical individual must be bold in ways that a national leader cannot be. This is not to insinuate that leadership on the national level cannot be bold, only bold in a different way. Where the national leader must be selective in the reforms he undertakes the world-historical individual engages in creative destruction because he must push the world to a place where it has not been before. This is a difference in scope and involves more people with a much greater range of opinions, taking the form a world-spirit. Spirit was important within a society as a moderating force that political leaders had to consider, but there was also a world-spirit and this played a role in the decisions of the world-historical individual.

Wilson’s attempt to reform the international system was set in the mold of the
Hegelian world-historical individual. The task that Wilson laid before himself was monumental: he wished to shift the basis of the international system. However, as Hegel described, the world-historical individual as practical man “whose own practical aims involve those larger issues which are the will of the World-Spirit.” (Hegel [1822] 1991, 29) Here, it is possible to see that the world-historical individual would also be an interpreter of spirit, although in this case it is world-spirit. The spirit of a people or a nation and world-spirit are related to one another, but apparently were not exactly the same thing, since world-spirit could contradict the other form of spirit. However, world-spirit is in “the inmost soul of all individuals; but in a state of unconsciousness which the great men in questions (world-historical individuals) aroused.” (Hegel [1822] 1991, 29-30) The world-historical individual adhere to the same leadership method that the national leader does. Since world-spirit is present albeit in an unconsciousness state in soul of all the world-historical individual can use this to his advantage. Their fellows, therefore, follow these soul-leaders; for they feel the irresistible power of their own inner spirit thus embodied.” (Hegel [1822] 1991, 30) This description is very close to the one presented in Leaders of Men.

It might seem a difficult task to distinguish between these different types of spirit, but world-spirit can be found in practical politics. Therefore, the world-historical individual tried to achieve real and practical political goals could result in outcomes of world-historical importance. Wilson’s attempt to create, and then have the United States join, the League of Nations had this two tiered purpose. On the practical level it was a scheme to prevent future wars. The First War World was a great catastrophe in world
history and it was believed to be in everyone self-interest to avoid another conflict. The second was to change the tenor of world politics transforming to a system based on the liberal idea of cooperation among states. This was what Wilson believed to be possible given the changes in world-spirit.

It is possible to see Wilson ideas about constitutions applied to the Treaty of Versailles. Wilson used the living constitution argument to explain the Draft Covenant of the League of Nations to the members of the Paris Peace Conference on February 14, 1919. First he explained the function of the new supra-national organization. The League was meant to secure peace through a scheme of collective security. This caused something of stir because several of the members saw this as a military alliance and feared that it might expedite future conflicts, not deter them. As the originator of the idea, Wilson saw the new international organization as something different. Wilson explained his idea as followed:

Armed force is in the background in this program, but it is in the background, and if the moral force of the world will not suffice, the physical force shall. But that is the last resort, because this is intended as a constitution of peace, not as league of war. (Cooper 2009, 475)

Wilson saw the Covenant as a constitution for a new organization and like any constitution, including that of the United States, it was an embodiment of the spirit of the people. In this case, it was an embodiment of world-spirit. Moral force was the result of the successful embodying of spirit. It was the transformation of the unconscious ideas of the masses into a political reality. If it was done correct, then people would feel compelled to agree with it in the same way that the masses would agree to reforms proposed by their political leaders on the national level. This was the progressive
element in Wilson’s internationalism which was based on his definition of progressive
that he had already applied to domestic politics.

Wilson continued with his explanation of the Draft Covenant by inserting is idea
of the organic society.

It is not a straitjacket (the Draft Covenant), but a vehicle of life. A living thing is
born, and we must see to it that the clothes we put upon it do not hamper it– a
vehicle of power, but a vehicle of power in which power may be varied at the
discretion of those who exercise it and in accordance with the changing
circumstances of the time. (Cooper 2009, 475)

The argument for organicism could be applied to the international arena. The Draft
Covenant was not a mechanical, Newtonian or Whiggish, conception. The Draft was
only a beginning of this larger international organization. It was only a shat shot of the
spirit of the age. It could not freeze the League of Nation into an institutional rigidness.
This is Wilson’s fear that the document might be interpreted as the final institutional plan
for the organization create straightjacket that Wilson alluded to. This remark could be
based on the resistance to reform that Wilson had encountered with his domestic agenda
by individuals who equated the institutional design of the Federal Constitution to a
straightjacket. Applying Wilson’s criticisms of the American Federal Constitution it
seems likely that he excepted that the Draft Covenant would change sufficiently over
time as spirit became more evident to the members of the organization.

It is possible to Wilson applying his organicism to this newly forming
international community. The Draft Covenant was a vehicle of life for this budding
international entity. This raises questions as to how this argument worked on the national
and the international levels. States might be organic beings, but that would mean that
each nation was an autonomous entity, yet the parts would create a new whole. It is from this that arguments about an international community arise. Wilson claimed the common humanity could act as a bond between individuals. There is something of Kant’s argument for cosmopolitanism in this. Wilson started to develop this; however, the collapse of his health would limit his ability to elaborate on this argument.

Wilson, like progressives in general, saw the world as ‘becoming.’ Wilson saw the corrupt politics of Gilded Age America and saw that with the proper institutional changes the system could become truly economically and politically democratic. In the same way he saw the carnage of World War One and saw with the proper institutional changes a new world order based on cooperation and collective security not violence and self-interest. In both cases Wilson had a “just around the corner” attitude. I believe that Wilson reasoned that spirit was making itself known and the closer a society, or international community, come to realizing it, the strong the resistance by those less the noble elements of society would become in hopes of delaying the changes as long as possible. Wilson placed a great amount of faith in belief that spirit, with the force of history behind it, would be victorious dispute the opposition of the standpatters.

After almost a century, Wilson and his international perspective are still a center of controversy. This study has tried to explicate Wilson’s political thought to a great degree by digging deeply into the intellectual origins of those ideas. By tying Wilson to these larger concepts and to individuals like Darwin, Hegel, and Burke the hope was to gain a greater understanding of what Wilson was trying to accomplish. The efforts that I have put forth only scratch the surface of Wilson’s political thought. There are many
avenues of Wilson’s many ideas that have not been given a proper amount of illumination. In the future, I hope to continue this research. Wilson’s debate with the prominent social Darwinist of his day Herbert Spencer is an area of interest. Also, a more detailed study of Wilson concept of race and progress is another possible area. There as much more to do before this area of study is adequately accounted for in the scholarly literature. The work that I have undertaken on Wilson has been of great profit to me intellectually, and, as author, I hope that it has profited the reader as well.
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