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WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMNER, SOCIAL DARWINIST

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IN the years that followed the Civil War, one of the major problems facing American intellectuals was the assimilation of the new science into their patterns of thought. Especially important was the rise of evolutionism in biology. The tide of Darwinism, sweeping upon our shores in the three decades after the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, washed away many familiar landmarks of the intellectual scene, and necessitated a long and painful rebuilding. One of the curious features of the reception of Darwinism, however, was the fact that it was as acceptable to many thinkers in economics and sociology as it was repugnant to theologians. It was popularized at a time when the authority of classical economics was waning, and when social legislation was being rapidly extended. Alarmed conservatives welcomed Darwinism as a fresh substantiation of an old creed. To some of them the Darwinian struggle for existence seemed to provide a new sanction for economic competition, and the survival of the fittest a new argument in opposition to state aid for the weak.[1]

The most vigorous and influential apostle of American social Darwinism was William Graham Sumner. Sumner was born in Paterson, New Jersey, on October 30, 1840. His father, Thomas Sumner, was a hard-working, self-educated English laborer who came to America because his family's trade had been disrupted by the growth of the factory system. He brought up his children with respect for the traditional Protestant economic virtues, and left a deep impress upon his son William, who came in time to acclaim the savings bank

[1] See the discussion at the first meeting of the American Sociological Society, reported in "Social Darwinism," *American Journal of Sociology*, XII (March, 1907), 695–716.

depositor as "a hero of civilization."[2] "His principles and habits of life," Sumner later wrote, "were the best possible. His knowledge was wide and his judgment excellent. He belonged to the class of men of whom Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch* is the type. In early life I accepted, from books and other people, some views and opinions which differed from his. At the present time, in regard to these matters, I hold with him and not with the others."[3]

The economic doctrines of the classical tradition which were current in his early years strengthened Sumner's paternal heritage. He learned to think of pecuniary success as the inevitable product of diligence and thrift, and to see the lively capitalist society that was growing up around him as the fulfillment of the classical ideal of an automatically benevolent, free, competitive order. At fourteen he had read Harriet Martineau's popular little volumes, *Illustrations of Political Economy,* whose purpose was to propagandize for *laissez faire* through a series of parables. There he became acquainted with the wages fund doctrine, and its corollaries: "Nothing can permanently affect the rate of wages which does not affect the proportion of population to capital"; and "combinations of laborers against capitalists . . . cannot secure a permanent rise of wages unless the supply of labour falls short of the demand —in which case, strikes are usually unnecessary." There also he found fictional proof that "a self-balancing power being . . . inherent in the entire system of commercial exchange, all apprehensions about the results of its unimpeded operation are absurd," and that "a sin is committed when Capital is diverted from its normal course to be employed in producing at home that which is expensive and inferior, instead of preparing that which will purchase the same article cheaper and superior abroad." Charities, whether public or private, Miss Martineau had shown, would never reduce the

2 *Essays of William Graham Sumner,* edited by A. G. Keller and Maurice R. Davie (New Haven, 1934), II, 22.

3 *Earth Hunger and Other Essays* (New Haven, 1913), 3.

number of the indigent, but would only encourage improvidence and nourish "peculation, tyranny, and fraud." [4] Later Sumner declared that his conceptions of "capital, labor, money and trade were all formed by those books which I read in my boyhood." [5] Wayland's standard text in Political Economy, which he recited in college, seems to have impressed him but little, perhaps because it only confirmed well-fixed beliefs.

In 1859, when he matriculated at Yale, young Sumner devoted himself to theology. During his undergraduate years, Yale was a pillar of orthodoxy, dominated by its versatile president, Theodore Dwight Woolsey, who had just turned from classical scholarship to write his *Introduction to the Study of International Law,* and by the Reverend Noah Porter, Professor of Moral Philosophy and Metaphysics, who as Woolsey's successor would some day cross swords with Sumner over the new science in education. Sumner, a somewhat frigid youth who could seriously question, "Is the reading of fiction justifiable?", repelled many of his schoolmates, but his friends made up in munificence what they lacked in numbers. William C. Whitney persuaded his elder brother, Henry, to supply funds for Sumner's further education abroad; and Sumner liberalized his theology at Geneva, Göttingen, and Oxford while a substitute procured with Whitney's money filled his place in the Union Army.[6] In 1866 Sumner was elected to a tutorship at Yale, where he opened a lifelong association, broken only by a few years spent as editor of a religious newspaper and rector of the Episcopal Church in Morristown, New Jersey. In 1872 he was elevated to the post of Professor of Political and Social Science in Yale College.

Despite personal coldness, and a crisp, dogmatic classroom manner, Sumner had a wider following than any other teacher

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[4] *Illustrations of Political Economy* (London, 1834), III, Part 1, 134–135, and Part 2, 130–131; VI, Part 1, 140, and Part 2, 143–144.

[5] *The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays* (New Haven, 1914), 5.

[6] Harris E. Starr, *William Graham Sumner* (New York, 1925), 47–48.

in Yale's history.[7] Upper classmen found unique satisfaction in his courses; lower classmen looked forward to promotion chiefly as a means of becoming eligible for them.[8] William Lyon Phelps, who took all Sumner's courses as a matter of principle, without regard for his interest in the subject matter, has left a memorable picture of Sumner's dealings with a student dissenter:[9]

"Professor, don't you believe in any government aid to industries?"

"No! it's root, hog, or die."

"Yes, but hasn't the hog got a right to root?"

"There are no rights. The world owes nobody a living."

"You believe then, Professor, in only one system, the contract-competitive system?"

"That's the only sound economic system. All others are fallacies."

"Well, suppose some professor of political economy came along and took your job away from you. Wouldn't you be sore?"

"Any other professor is welcome to try. If he gets my job, it is my fault. My business is to teach the subject so well that no one can take the job away from me."

II

The religious stamp of his early upbringing marked all Sumner's writings. Although clerical phraseology soon disappeared from his pages, his temper remained that of a proselyter, an espouser of causes with little patience for distinguishing between error and iniquity in his opponents. "The type of mind which he exhibited," writes his biographer, "was the Hebraic rather than the Greek. He was intuitive,

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[7] *Cf.* Albert Galloway Keller's discussion of Sumner's influence in "The Discoverer of the Forgotten Man," *American Mercury*, XXVII (November, 1932), 257–270.

[8] William Lyon Phelps, "When Yale Was Given to Sumnerology," *The Literary Digest International Book Review*, III (September, 1925), 661–663.

[9] "When Yale Was Given to Sumnerology," 661.

rugged, emphatic, fervently and relentlessly ethical, denunciatory, prophetic." [10] He might insist that political economy was a descriptive science divorced from ethics,[11] but his strictures on protectionists and socialists resounded with moral overtones. His faith in the superiority of the industrious, prudent, economical citizen, his background in Ricardian economics, and his distrust of the shibboleths of an uncritical democracy[12] prepared Sumner for the acceptance of social Darwinism; his crusading zeal and talent for popularization made him an ideal standard-bearer.

Sumner's life was not entirely given to crusading. His intellectual activity passed through two overlapping phases, distinguished less by a change in his thought than a change in the direction of his work. During the seventies, eighties, and early nineties, in the columns of popular journals and from the lecture platform, he waged a holy war against the rising tide of reformism, protectionism, socialism, and government interventionism. In this period he published *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883), "The Forgotten Man" (1883), and "The Absurd Attempt to Make the World Over" (1894). By the early nineties, however, Sumner showed an increasing interest in academic sociology. It was during this period that the manuscript of "Earth Hunger" was written and the monumental *Science of Society* projected. When Sumner, always a prodigious worker, found himself with a 200,000-word chapter on human customs, he decided to publish it as a separate volume. Thus, almost as an afterthought, *Folkways* was published in 1906.[13] Although Sumner's tone

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10 Starr, *William Graham Sumner*, 336–337.

11 *Cf. What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York, 1883), 155–156.

12 For Sumner's early skepticism about the merits of democracy, see the college composition quoted in Starr, 44.

13 *Cf.* the preface to *The Science of Society*, I, xxxiii. Sumner died before the completion of this work, and it was finished by Albert Galloway Keller and published in four volumes in 1927 by the Yale University Press. The fidelity of the work to Sumner's major conceptions is such that I have not hesitated to use it as a source.

changed from the deep ethical feelings of his youth to the sophisticated moral relativism of his social science period, his underlying philosophy always remained the same.

The major premises of this philosophy Sumner derived from Herbert Spencer. For years, since his graduate residence at Oxford, Sumner had had "vague notions floating in my head" about the possibility of creating a systematic science of society. In 1870, when Spencer's *Study of Sociology* was running serially in the *Contemporary Review,* Sumner seized upon his ideas, and the evolutionary viewpoint in social science took root in his mind. It seemed that Spencer's proposals were but a flowering of his own germinal ideas. The young man who had been impervious to Spencer's *Social Statics,* because "I did not believe in natural rights or in his 'fundamental principles,' " now found *The Study of Sociology* irresistible. "It solved the old difficulty about the relations of social science to history, rescued social science from the dominion of cranks, and offered a definite and magnificent field to work, from which we might hope at last to derive definite results for the solution of social problems." In a few years Professor O. C. Marsh's researches in the evolution of the horse fully convinced Sumner of the development hypothesis. Plunging into Darwin, Haeckel, Huxley, and Spencer, he saturated himself with evolutionism.[14]

Like Darwin before him, Sumner went back to Malthus for the first principles of his system. In many respects his sociology simply retraced the several steps in biological and social reasoning which ran from Malthus to Darwin and through Herbert Spencer to the modern social Darwinist. The foundation of human society, said Sumner, is the man-land ratio. Ultimately men draw their living from the soil, and the kind of existence they achieve, their mode of getting it, and their mutual relations in the process, are all determined by the

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14 See the autobiographical sketch in *The Challenge of Facts,* 9.

proportion of population to the available soil.[15] Where men are few and soil is abundant, the struggle for existence is less savage and democratic institutions are likely to prevail. When population presses upon the land supply, earth hunger arises, races of men move across the face of the world, militarism and imperialism flourish, conflict rages, and in government aristocracy dominates.

As men struggle to adjust themselves to the land, they enter into rivalry for leadership in the conquest of nature. In Sumner's popular essays, he stressed the idea that the hardships of life are incidents of the struggle against nature, that "we cannot blame our fellow-men for our share of these. My neighbor and I are both struggling to free ourselves from these ills. The fact that my neighbor has succeeded in this struggle better than I constitutes no grievance for me." [16] He continued:[17]

Undoubtedly the man who possesses capital has a great advantage over the man who has no capital at all in the struggle for existence.... This does not mean that one man has an advantage *against* the other, but that, when they are rivals in the effort to get the means of subsistence from Nature, the one who has capital has immeasurable advantages over the other. If it were not so capital would not be formed. Capital is only formed by self-denial, and if the possession of it did not secure advantages and superiorities of a high order men would never submit to what is necessary to get it.

Thus the struggle is like a whippet race; if one hound ap-

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15 *Science of Society,* Chapter I; *cf.* also the essay "Earth Hunger." The main elements of this idea are in the wages fund doctrine and can be traced to Sumner's early acquaintance with Harriet Martineau.

16 *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,* 17; *cf.* also 70. "Nature is entirely neutral; she submits to him who most energetically and resolutely assails her. She grants her rewards to the fittest... without regard to other considerations of any kind. If, then, there be liberty, men get from her just in proportion to their works, and their having and enjoying are just in proportion to their being and their doing." *The Challenge of Facts,* 25.

17 *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,* 76.

proaches the mechanical hare of pecuniary success, he sets up no barrier to a similar movement by the others.

Sumner was perhaps inspired to minimize the human conflicts in the struggle for existence by a desire to dull the resentment of the poor for the rich. He did not at all times, however, shrink from a direct analogy between animal struggle and human competition.[18] While Sumner was forming his sociological system, Walter Bagehot in England and Gustav Ratzenhofer and Ludwig Gumplowicz on the Continent were at work applying the concept of the struggle for existence to human affairs, predicating the survival of certain kinds of human societies or the selection of individual types upon the presence of special survival values.[19] In America

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18 At times Sumner distinguished the struggle for existence, which he looked upon as man's impersonal struggle against nature, from what he called "the competition of life," a strictly social form of conflict, in which groups of men united in the conquest-of-nature struggle among themselves. *Cf. Folkways,* 16–17, and *Essays,* I, 142 ff. But the competition of life was elsewhere described as "the rivalry, antagonism, and mutual displacement in which the *individual* is involved with other organisms by his efforts to carry on the struggle for existence for himself." *Folkways,* 16–17 [my emphasis, R.H.]. Thus the distinction was often obscured, so that Sumner's closest student, editing *The Science of Society,* could pardonably identify "the familiar struggle for existence" with "the competition of life" (I, 4). The terms of the analogy between human existence and the struggle of animals seemed to require that men be regarded as struggling against each other, as members of the same species. While Sumner was trying to utilize the analogy, he resisted this conclusion.

19 Bagehot, *Physics and Politics, Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of Natural Selection and Inheritance to Political Society,* 1874; Ludwig Gumplowicz, *Grundriss der Soziologie,* 1885, translated in 1899 by Frederick W. Moore as *The Outlines of Sociology;* and Gustav Ratzenhofer, *Soziologie,* 1907.

Keller, estimating the major influences on Sumner's sociology, has placed Spencer first, Julius Lippert second, and Ratzenhofer third. ("William Graham Sumner," *American Journal of Sociology,* XV (May, 1910), 832–835.) Lippert was a German cultural historian whose method was much like that employed in *Folkways.* See his *Kulturgeschichte der Menschenheit,* 1886, translated in 1931 by George Murdock as *The Evolution of Culture.*

While the influence of Spencer is primary, the differences between Sumner and Spencer should not be neglected. Sumner does not seem to have followed Spencer's identification of evolution with progress. He was not so severe in his conceptions of the proper limits of government (*Cf.* Starr, 392–393). Less libertarian, he understood the limitations imposed by industrial society upon

the ideas of Spencer were occasionally being used to oppose legislation to ease the condition of the poor, on the grounds that it would limit the selective effect of competition.[20] In this intellectual atmosphere it was natural for conservatives to see the economic contest in a competitive society as a reflection of the struggle in the animal world. It was easy to argue from natural selection of fitter organisms to social selection of fitter men, from organic forms with superior adaptability to citizens with a greater store of economic virtues. The competitive order was now supplied with a cosmic rationale.

Competition was glorious. Just as survival was the result of strength, success was the reward of virtue. Sumner could find no patience for those who would lavish compensations upon the virtueless. Many economists, he declared in 1879, in a lecture on the effect of hard times on economic thinking,[21]

seem to be terrified that distress and misery still remain on earth and promise to remain as long as the vices of human nature remain. Many of them are frightened at liberty, especially under the form of competition, which they elevate into a bugbear. They think it bears harshly on the weak. They do not perceive that here "the strong" and "the weak" are terms which admit of no definition unless they are made equivalent to the industrious and the idle, the frugal and the extravagant. They do not perceive, furthermore, that if we do not like the survival of the fittest,

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individual freedom (see *Essays,* I, 310 ff.). Finally, his approach to ethics contrasted sharply with Spencer's intuitionism.

For his part, Spencer cordially approved Sumner's way of defending *laissez faire* and property rights. He tried to persuade the Liberty and Property Defense League in England to reprint *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (Starr, 503–505).

20 It was this tendency which led to Mr. Justice Holmes's reminder as late as 1905, in the dissenting opinion in Lochner *vs.* New York (198 U.S. 45), that "The Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer's Social Statics."

21 *Essays,* II, 56. Charles Page, *Class and American Sociology* (New York, 1940), 74 and 103, has stressed the importance of the economic ethics of the Protestant tradition as a formative element in Sumner's thinking. See also the treatment of these ideas in *Essays,* II, 223, and *The Challenge of Facts,* 52 and 67.

we have only one possible alternative, and that is the survival of the unfittest. The former is the law of civilization; the latter is the law of anti-civilization. We have our choice between the two, or we can go on, as in the past, vacillating between the two, but a third plan—the socialist desideratum—a plan for nourishing the unfittest and yet advancing in civilization, no man will ever find.

The progress of civilization depends upon the selection process; and that in turn depends upon the workings of unrestricted competition. Competition is a law of nature which "can no more be done away with than gravitation," [22] and which men can ignore only to their sorrow.

III

The fundamentals of Sumner's philosophy had been set forth in his magazine articles before his sociological works were written. The first fact in life is the struggle for existence. The greatest forward step in this struggle is the production of capital, which increases the fruitfulness of labor and provides the necessary means of an advance in civilization. Primitive man, who long ago withdrew from the competitive struggle and ceased to accumulate capital goods, must pay with a backward and unenlightened way of life.[23] Social advance depends primarily upon hereditary wealth. For wealth offers a premium to effort, and assures the enterprising and industrious man that he may preserve in his children the virtues which have enabled him to enrich the community. Any assault upon hereditary wealth must begin with an attack upon the family and end by reducing men to "swine." [24] The operation of social selection depends upon keeping the family intact. Physical inheritance is a crucial part of Darwinian theory; society substitutes for it the instruction of the children in the necessary economic virtues.[25]

22 *The Challenge of Facts*, 68.
23 *The Challenge of Facts*, 40 and 145–150; *Essays*, I, 231.
24 *The Challenge of Facts*, 43–44.
25 *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, 73.

If the fittest are to be allowed to survive, if the benefits of efficient management are to be available to society, the captains of industry must be paid for their unique organizing talent.[26] Their huge fortunes are the legitimate wages of superintendence; in the struggle for existence, money is the token of success. It measures the amount of efficient management that has come into the world and the waste that has been eliminated.[27] Millionaires, then, are the bloom of a competitive civilization:[28]

> The millionaires are a product of natural selection, acting on the whole body of men to pick out those who can meet the requirement of certain work to be done.... It is because they are thus selected that wealth—both their own and that entrusted to them—aggregates under their hands.... They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. There is the intensest competition for their place and occupation. This assures us that all who are competent for this function will be employed in it, so that the cost of it will be reduced to the lowest terms....

In the Darwinian pattern of evolution, animals are unequal; this makes possible the appearance of forms with finer adjustment to the environment, and the transmission of such superiority to succeeding generations brings about progress. Without inequality the law of survival of the fittest could not operate. Accordingly, in Sumner's evolutionary sociology inequality was at a premium.[29] The competitive process "develops all powers that exist according to their measure and degree." If liberty prevails, so that all may exert them-

26 *Essays*, I, 289.

27 *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, 54–56.

28 *The Challenge of Facts*, 90.

29 *The Science of Society*, I, 615; *cf.* also 328, where Sumner opposes a communal economy on the ground that it makes variation impossible—"and variation is the starting-point of new adjustment." Sumner considered the masses to be immobile and unproductive of social improvement. Variation is chiefly characteristic of the upper classes. *Folkways*, 45–47.

selves freely in the struggle, the results will certainly not be everywhere alike: those of "courage, enterprise, good training, intelligence, perseverance" will come out at the top.[30]

Sumner concluded that these principles of social evolution negated the traditional American ideology of equality and natural rights. In the evolutionary perspective equality was ridiculous, and no one knew so well as those who went to school to nature that there are no natural rights in the jungle. "There can be no rights against Nature except to get out of her whatever we can, which is only the fact of the struggle for existence stated over again." [31] In the cold light of evolutionary realism, the eighteenth-century idea that men were equal in a state of nature was wrong side up; masses of men starting under conditions of equality can never be anything but hopeless savages.[32] Rights to Sumner were simply evolving folkways crystallized in laws. Far from being absolute or antecedent to a specific culture—an illusion of philosophers, reformers, agitators, and anarchists—they are properly understood as "rules of the game of social competition which are current now and here." [33] In other times and places other *mores* have prevailed, and still others will emerge in the future:[34]

> Each set of views colors the *mores* of a period. The eighteenth-century notions about equality, natural rights, classes, and the like produced nineteenth-century states and legislation, all strongly humanitarian in faith and temper; at the present time the eighteenth-century notions are disappearing, and the *mores* of the twentieth century will not be tinged by humanitarianism as those of the last hundred years have been.

Sumner's power to resist the catchwords of the American

30 *The Challenge of Facts*, 67.
31 *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, 135.
32 *Folkways*, 48.
33 *Essays*, I, 358–362.
34 *Essays*, I, 86–87.

tradition is also evident in his skepticism about democracy. The democratic ideal, which was so alive in the minds of men diverse as Eugene Debs and Andrew Carnegie, as a thing of great hopes and tears, warm sentiments, and vast friendly illusions, was to him a transient stage in social evolution, determined by a favorable quotient in the man-land ratio and the political necessities of the capitalist class.[35] "Democracy itself, the pet superstition of the age, is only a phase of the all-compelling movement. If you have abundance of land and few men to share it, the men will all be equal." [36] Conceived as a principle of advancement based on merit, democracy met his approval as "socially progressive and profitable." Conceived as equality in acquisition and enjoyment, he thought it unintelligible in theory, and thoroughly impractical.[37] "Industry may be republican; it can never be democratic so long as men differ in productive power and in industrial virtue." [38]

In a brilliant essay which he never published, but which was written some time before the studies of J. Allen Smith and Charles A. Beard, Sumner divined the intentions of the founding fathers in the making of the American Constitution. They feared democracy, Sumner pointed out, and attempted to fix limitations upon it in the federal structure. But since the whole genius of the country has inevitably been democratic, because of its inherited dogmas and its environment, the history of the United States has been one of continual warfare between the democratic temper of the people and their constitutional framework.[39]

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35 *Earth Hunger*, 283–317.

36 *Essays*, I, 185.

37 *Essays*, I, 104.

38 *Essays*, II, 165.

39 See "Advancing Organization in America," in *Essays*, II, 340 ff., especially 349–350. In his references to the effects of the frontier upon the unique historical development of the United States, Sumner seems to have anticipated also the theories of Frederick Jackson Turner. Sumner's views on democracy have been discussed in Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York, 1940), Chapter 19; and in Harry Elmer Barnes, "Two

IV

One idea in the evolutionary philosophy which Sumner borrowed from Spencer and employed with great effect in his fight against reformers was its social determinism. Society, the product of centuries of gradual evolution, cannot be quickly refashioned by legislation:[40]

> The great stream of time and earthly things will sweep on just the same in spite of us. . . . Every one of us is a child of his age and cannot get out of it. He is in the stream and is swept along with it. All his science and philosophy come to him out of it. Therefore the tide will not be changed by us. It will swallow up both us and our experiments. . . . That is why it is the greatest folly of which a man can be capable to sit down with a slate and pencil to plan out a new social world.

To Sumner and Spencer society was a super-organism, changing at geological tempo. Because of the bewildering complexity of the body politic and its naturally slow rate of growth, Spencer had argued, attempts at legislative reform seldom have the desired effect; the causal sequences at work in society are too elaborate to be traced. A scientific sociology, accepting the multiple relations of social life, would discourage state interventionists.[41] Hence Sumner's eager welcome of *The Study of Sociology*. In his view, the social tinkers had been laboring under the delusion that since there are no natural laws of the social order, they might make the world over with artificial ones.[42] But Spencer's new science would dissolve these fantasies.

With the evolutionist's characteristic scorn for all forms of meliorism and voluntarism, Sumner dismissed Upton Sinclair

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Representative Contributions of Sociology to Political Theory: The Doctrines of William Graham Sumner and Lester Frank Ward." *American Journal of Sociology*, XXV (July and September, 1919), 1–23 and 150–170.

40 "The Absurd Attempt to Make the World Over," in *Essays*, I, 105.

41 *The Study of Sociology* (1883 edition, New York), 1–24 and 270.

42 *Essays*, II, 215.

and his fellow socialists as puny meddlers, social quacks, who would break into the age-old process of societal growth at an arbitrary point and remake it in accordance with their petty desires. They started from the premise that "everybody ought to be happy" and assumed that therefore it should be possible to make them so. They never asked: In what direction is society moving? or What are the mechanisms which motivate its progress? Evolution would teach them that it is impossible to tear down overnight a social system with roots centuries deep in the soil of history. History would teach them that revolutions never succeed—witness the experience of France, where the Napoleonic period left essential interests much as they had been before 1789.[43]

Every system has its inevitable evils. "Poverty belongs to the struggle for existence, and we are all born into that struggle." [44] If poverty is ever to be abolished, it will be by a more energetic prosecution of the struggle, and not by social upheaval or paper plans for a new order. Human progress is at bottom moral progress, and moral progress is largely the accumulation of economic virtues. "Let every man be sober, industrious, prudent, and wise, and bring up his children to be so likewise, and poverty will be abolished in a few generations." [45]

Thus the evolutionary philosophy provided a powerful argument against legislative meddling with natural events. Sumner's conception of the proper limits of state action, although not so drastic as Spencer's, was radical in the extreme. "At bottom there are two chief things with which government has to deal. They are the property of men and the honor of women. These it has to defend against crime." [46]

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43 See "Reply to a Socialist," in *The Challenge of Facts,* 58 and 219; on the ineffectiveness of reform legislation, see *War and Other Essays* (New Haven, 1911), 208–310; *Earth Hunger,* 283 ff.; and *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,* 160–161.

44 *The Challenge of Facts,* 57.

45 *Essays,* I, 109.

46 *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,* 101.

Outside of the field of education, where Sumner's influence was always progressive, there were few reforms proposed in America during his active years which he did not attack. In a series of essays written for the *Independent* in 1887 Sumner assailed several current projects as tools of rampant pressure groups. The Bland Silver Bill he called an irrational compromise, set up by a few public men, without substantial promise of aid for debtors, silver miners, or any other part of the population. State laws on convict labor he damned as hasty and pointless legislation in response to partisan clamor. The Interstate Commerce Act lacked philosophy or design. The railroad question "is far wider than the scope of any proposed legislation; the railroads are interwoven with so many complex interests that legislators cannot meddle with them without doing harm to all concerned." [47] The free silver movement he attacked with the arguments of orthodox economics.[48] "All poor laws and all eleemosynary institutions and expenditures" he stigmatized as devices which protect persons at the expense of capital and ultimately lower the general standard of living by making it easier for the poor to live, increasing the number of consumers of capital while lowering incentives to its production.[49] With trade unions he was more indulgent, conceding that a strike, if carried on without violence, might be a means of testing the market conditions for labor. All the justification a strike required was success; failure was ample grounds for its condemnation. Trade unions might also be useful in maintaining the *esprit de corps* of the working class, and of keeping them informed. The conditions of labor—sanitation, ventilation, the hours of women and children—might better be controlled by the spontaneous activity of organized labor than by state enforcement.[50]

47 *Essays*, II, 249–253 and 255.

48 *Essays*, II, 67–76.

49 *The Challenge of Facts*, 27–28.

50 *The Challenge of Facts*, 99; *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, 90–95.

Aside from anti-imperialism, the one great reform of his age which attracted Sumner was free trade. But free trade was not, in his mind, a reform movement; it was an intellectual axiom. Although he wrote a short tract elaborating the classical arguments against protection—*Protectionism, The Ism that Teaches that Waste Makes Wealth* (New York, 1885)—he felt the subject hardly open to dispute by enlightened men—"that it ought to be treated as other quackeries are treated." [51] Sensing that protectionism and other forms of government intervention in economic life might culminate in socialism, he identified the doctrines on principle, defining socialism as "any device whose aim is to save individuals from any of the difficulties or hardships of the struggle for existence and the competition of life by the intervention of 'the state.' " [52] The tariff, he admitted, never ceased to arouse his highest moral indignation. He once wrote angry protests to the newspapers because women employed in sweatshops stitching corsets for fifty cents a day had to pay a tariff on their thread.[53]

V

In arms against abuses of the right or left, Sumner drew bitter cross-fire from both sides. Upton Sinclair, in *The Goose Step,* called him, long after his death, "a prime minister in the empire of plutocratic education";[54] and another socialist accused him of intellectual prostitution.[55] Such critics showed little comprehension of Sumner's character or the governing motives of his mind. He was at times doctrinaire only because his ideas were bred in his bones. He was not a business hireling, nor did he feel himself to be the spokesman of plutocracy, but rather of the lower middle classes. If he attacked

51 *Essays,* II, 366.
52 *Essays,* II, 435.
53 Starr, 285–288; *cf. What Social Classes Owe to Each Other,* 146.
54 Page 123.
55 Starr, 258 and 297.

economic democracy, he had no sympathy for plutocracy as he understood it; he thought it responsible for political corruption and protectionist lobbies.[56] Significantly, he had praise for Jeffersonian democracy, at least in so far as it practised abnegation of state power and decentralization in government.[57] Sumner's unforgettable "Forgotten Man," the hero of most of his popular essays, was simply the lower middle-class citizen, who, like Sumner's father, went quietly about his business, providing for himself and his family without making demands upon the state.[58] The crushing effect of taxation upon such people gave him his most anxious moments and explains in part his opposition to state interventionism.[59] It was his misfortune that this class had moved on to the support of reform while he was still trying to fight its cause with the intellectual weapons of Harriet Martineau and David Ricardo.

On the rare occasions when Sumner's thought ran counter to the established verities, he would stand his ground even though the heavens fall. His famous fight with President Porter over the use of *The Study of Sociology* as a textbook might have cost him his position at Yale. Constantly under criticism from the press for his outspoken stand on the tariff, he never faltered. The New York *Tribune,* in the course of a denunciation of his articles on protection, once likened his manners to those of "the cheap Tombs shyster." [60] The Republican press and the Republican alumni periodically urged his dismissal, and the demand became general when he announced his opposition to the Spanish-American War.[61] Although one old-fashioned benefactor of Yale doubled his donation because Sumner's presence had convinced him "that

56 See the essays on democracy and plutocracy in *Essays,* II, 213 ff.

57 *Essays,* II, 236–237.

58 "The Forgotten Man," in *Essays,* I, 466–496; *cf.* also *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other, passim.*

59 *The Challenge of Facts,* 74.

60 Starr, 275.

61 Phelps, "When Yale Was Given to Sumnerology," 662.

Yale College is a good and safe place for the keeping and use of property and the sustaining of civilization when endangered by ignorance, rascality, demagogues, repudiationists, rebels, copperheads, communists, Butlers, strikers, protectionists, and fanatics of sundry roots and sizes," [62] Sumner was always suspect to a large part of the community of wealth and orthodoxy because of his independence.

Sumner's reputation has come to rest upon his *Folkways,* and in lesser measure upon his historical writings, while his many social Darwinist essays have shrunk into comparative obscurity.[63] Natural selection in the realm of ideas has taken its toll upon his life work. The ideas which have been most esteemed in *Folkways* were never reconciled with the rest of his thought. The great contribution of that work was its treatment of folkways as products of "natural forces," as evolutionary growths, rather than artifacts of human purpose or wit.[64] Critics have often suggested that Sumner's denial of the intuitive character of morals, his insistence upon their historical and institutional foundations, undermined his own stand against socialists and protectionists.[65] By a thoroughly consistent evolutionist, prepared to carry out the amoral and narrowly empirical approach to social change laid down in *Folkways,* the decline of *laissez faire,* which was so disturbing to Sumner's mature years, might have been accepted in a mellow and complaisant spirit as a new trend in the development of the *mores.* But on the subject of *laissez faire* and property rights Sumner was an uncompromising absolutist. There is no complaisance in *Protectionism, the Ism that Teaches That Waste Makes Wealth,* no mellowness in "The

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62 Quoted in Starr, 300–301.

63 For evidence that this aspect of Sumner's thought is by no means dead, however, see some of the comments in *Sumner Today,* edited by Maurice R. Davie (New Haven, 1940).

64 *Folkways,* 4 and 29.

65 *Cf.* the review of *Folkways* by George Vincent in *American Journal of Sociology,* XIII (November, 1907), 414–419; also John Chamberlain, "Sumner's Folkways," *The New Republic,* IC (May 31, 1939), 95.

Absurd Attempt to Make the World Over." As a recruit from the theological life who had always been absorbed in his own Yankee-puritan culture, Sumner found the effort of a completely consistent relativism too great. It was easier for an unacclimated alien like Thorstein Veblen to treat American society with the loftiness of a cultural anthropologist. For Sumner, the marriage customs of the Wawanga and the property relations of the Dyaks were always in a separate universe of discourse from the like institutions of his own culture.

As a defender of the *status quo* Sumner was an effective figure in American life. In the few independent efforts which earned for him the reputation of a radical, he was frustrate. It was not merely that he chose lost causes; his philosophy and the qualities of his mind were ill adapted to the ends of reform. His attacks upon the tariff were too dogmatic to be convincing. His stand against imperialism was nullified by his pessimism about the future of international relations. In 1898 he joined other New England intellectuals in the Anti-imperialist League and spoke in a forthright way against the Spanish war and imperialist ambitions,[66] but his allegiance must have been accepted with mixed feelings when it became clear that his own analysis of the roots of war implied the futility of resistance. What could one say of a man who four years later calmly remarked, "It is the competition of life . . . which makes war, and that is why war has always existed and always will," who stressed the human virtues nourished in battle, and concluded: "There is only one thing rationally to be expected, and that is a frightful effusion of blood in revolution and war in the century now opening"?[67]

This prophecy, with its somber realism, characterizes Sumner's prevailing mood and his role in the history of American thought. Since the Revolution, the dogmas of the Enlightenment had been traditional ingredients of the American faith.

66 "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," *Essays*, II, 266–303.
67 "War," in *War and Other Essays*.

American social thought had been optimistic, confident of the special destiny of the country, humanitarian, democratic. Its reformers still relied upon the sanctions of natural rights. It was Sumner's function to take the leadership in a critical examination of these ideological fixtures, using as his instrument the early nineteenth-century pessimism of Ricardo and Malthus, now fortified with the tremendous prestige of Darwinism. He set himself the task of deflating the philosophical speculation of the eighteenth century with the science of the nineteenth. He tried to show his contemporaries that their optimism was a hollow defiance of the realities of social struggle, that their "natural rights" were nowhere to be found in nature, and that their humanitarianism, democracy, and equality were not eternal verities, but the passing *mores* of a stage of social evolution. In an age of helter-skelter reforms, he tried to convince men that their confidence in their ability to will and plan their destinies was unwarranted by history or biology or any of the facts of experience; that the best they could do was to bow to natural forces. Like some latter-day Calvin, he came to preach the predestination of the social order and the salvation of the economically elect through the survival of the fittest.

Sumner's cold criticism of ossified beliefs and his broad evolutionary perspective on the tempo of social change must be counted among the critical contributions of the Gilded Age. The old ideals were, if not obsolete, certainly in need of more solid foundation. But adept as Sumner was in attacking the sometimes sweeping assumptions of reformers and idealists, he was less successful than he thought in eliminating metaphysics and dogma from his own philosophy. For "the heavenly city of the eighteenth century philosophers" he substituted the crude analogies of a Darwinized *laissez faire,* which, while equally blinding, were also sterile. If he dispelled the sentimentality of old-fashioned reformers, he also strengthened the most facile illusions of an acquisitive society.