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Summary Article: **Sumner, William Graham (1840–1910)**

From *Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*

William Graham Sumner was an economist, a sociologist, and a leading defender of individualism and the free market. He opposed most of the reforms that coalesced in the progressivist program after 1900, and he also denounced American imperialism. His *Folkways* (1907) is one of the most important works in early American sociology.

Sumner was born in Paterson, New Jersey, the son of an English-born artisan, from whom he inherited a lifelong dislike of social causes. After the death of his mother in 1848, his experience in an emotionally starved household under the care of a penurious stepmother reinforced a keen sense of the gap that separates emotion and fact, a major theme in his work. Sumner came to social science by way of religion. After graduating from Yale in 1863, he studied languages and theology in Europe before returning to New Haven as a classics tutor and Episcopalian minister (1866–1869). After 2 years at a church in Morristown, New Jersey, he returned to Yale as a professor of political economy in the fall of 1872, where he remained throughout his career.

In more than 100 articles and almost a dozen books, Sumner supported sound currency, attacked labor unions as unjustified monopolies, and championed free trade. In *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883), he reduced “most schemes of philanthropy” to the formula: “A and B put their heads together to decide what C shall be made to do for D.” “C” he called the “forgotten man.” Writing in the *Independent* in the late 1880s, he argued that “civil liberty” does not derive from abstract “rights,” but consists of “the chance to fight the struggle for existence [against nature] for one’s self,” as guaranteed by “institutions” and “laws.” Although references to the “struggle for existence” earned him a reputation as a ruthless “social Darwinist,” some scholars have argued that this label misrepresents both the sources and substance of his views, which drew heavily on the work of Thomas Malthus and other classical British economists.

In “The Conquest of the United States by Spain” (1899), a speech delivered in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, Sumner denounced American expansionism. The war began in political struggles in Washington and was fueled by reports of Cuba “we now know to be false.” In annexing the Philippines, the United States was adopting the values for which it criticized Spain.

In *Folkways* (1907), Sumner defined *folkways* as the methods that were discovered through trial and error to best satisfy basic human needs. Mores are folkways grown moral, reflective, and coercive. They have the “authority of fact,” in that there are no appeals to right or wrong beyond them. Legislation not rooted in these mores can do little to effect social change. His conclusions respecting the role of custom and tradition in shaping laws and institutions evoked the institutional conservatism of such predecessors as Edmund Burke and adumbrated the notion of spontaneous order put forward by F. A. Hayek.

In his discussion of minimalist government, especially in economic matters, Sumner provided a link between classical liberalism and present-day libertarianism. However, Sumner’s thought was complex, and he qualified the anarchist implications of his libertarian conclusions with a strong emphasis on well-disciplined civil liberty.

See also

Imperialism; Progressive Era; Sociology; War

Further Readings

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