

# Encyclopedia of Social Theory

## Sumner, William Graham

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William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) is credited with teaching the first sociology course in the United States. He [p. 815 ↓ ] was one of the founders of the American Sociological Society movement and its second president. Sumner was greatly influenced by Herbert Spencer and became an American proponent of social Darwinism and laissez-faire.

Sumner was born in Paterson, New Jersey, and spent his childhood in Hartford, Connecticut. His parents had emigrated from England and raised William in a strict religious environment. After spending four years at Yale (1859–1863), Sumner attended the Universities of Geneva, Goettingen, and Oxford (1863–1866) in preparation for the ministry. While in Europe he changed his religion from the Congregational to the Protestant Episcopal faith, becoming ordained a deacon in 1867. Sumner began doubting mystical theory and shifted his focus to the concrete facts and theories of social science. In 1872, he solidified his decision by accepting a position as professor of political and social science at Yale. He taught Spencer's *Study of Sociology* and almost lost his position in 1881 because of it. Sumner had become a complete advocate for social evolutionism and the expansion of industrial and capitalist society in the United States.

Sumner's most significant contribution to sociological theory rests with his best-known work, *Folkways* (1906), a book that describes the origins of *folkways* found in society and their consequential influence on manners, customs, mores, and morals. Folkways are a societal force produced by frequent repetition of petty acts, often by great numbers acting collectively or, at least, when acting in the same way when faced with the same need. As Sumner explained in *Folkways*,

Folkways are habits of the individual and customs of the society which arise from efforts to satisfy needs, they are intertwined with goblinism and demonism and primitive notions of luck and so they win traditional authority.... they become regulated for future generations and take on the character of a social force. (p. iv)

Folkways are made unconsciously, they are the product of recurrent habits, guided by recurrent needs of the individual and of the group. As Sumner had learned from

Spencer, “guidance by custom” is the most common thread among diverse groups of people. *Custom* is the product of concurrent action, over time, by mass actions driven by mass needs and wants. Mass action is stimulated by the desire of people to act collectively with one another. Sumner stated that there are four great motives of human action: hunger, sex passion, vanity, and fear (of ghosts and spirits). Associated with each of these motives are interests. Human life revolves around satisfying these interests. Society dictates which courses of action (folk-ways) are proper in the attempt to satisfy basic needs and desires.

When certain folkways become associated with philosophical and ethical issues of proper behavior, they are elevated to another plane. These coercive and constraining norms are called *mores*. Mores come down to us from the past and take on the authority of facts. Each individual is born into them and are subjected to their “legitimacy.” Mores serve as regulators of the political, social, and religious behaviors of individuals, and they are not affected by “scientific facts.” Mores often consist of *taboos*, which indicate the things that must not be done. Taboos are linked to past behaviors that have been proven to cause unwelcome results and therefore contain reference to a reason as to why specific acts should not be allowed. Sumner acknowledged that folkways, mores, and taboos vary from society to society and therefore promotes the field of *ethology*. *Ethology* is the term he used for the study of manners, customs, usages, and mores, including the study of the way in which they are formed; how they grow or decay; and how they affect the interests of those who are affected by them. The sociologist in particular must pay attention to the folk-ways and mores of a society, for they have a great impact on human behavior.

Sumner applied Spencer's survival-of-the-fittest approach to the social world. Those who work hard—the fittest—will find a way to survive in society. He believed that poverty could be eliminated in a few generations if people simply worked hard; were industrious, prudent, and wise; and raised their children to do likewise. Sumner felt that it was the duty of everyone to be self-reliant, to look to oneself for help and certainly not to look for aid from others. One either survives or perishes. The “survival of the fittest” concept is viewed as a *natural* law and not a social creation. From this approach, society is viewed as constantly improving, or evolving—the strong, or fit, survive, while the weak, or unfit, die off. Consequently, any interference, especially by the government, could cause a negative disruption in the social order. Sumner opposed

governmental sponsorship, believing that each member of society must bear his or her own burdens. Sumner embraced the idea of *laissez-faire*, which he described as the unrestrained action of nature without any intelligent interference by man. Sumner stated that *laissez-faire* means, “Do not meddle; wait and observe; be teachable. Do not enter upon any rash experiments; be patient until you see how it will work out” (Keller and Davie 1934b:472). Sumner was against all forms of paternalism—state assistance to the poor and needy—especially when applied through legislative methods. Sumner's worry over the role of government is reflected in his concern for individual rights and liberties.

The concept of *liberty* is of great appeal to Sumner; he used it over and over to justify his views on many issues. He associated liberty primarily as a justification for the right of competition and *laissez-faire*, even to the extent to justify [p. 816 ↓ ] industrial warfare. Sumner contended that individuals are guaranteed the use of all their powers and means to secure their own welfare. Consistent with the *laissez-faire* school of thought, Sumner viewed property rights as a primary concern and supported the human rights of traditional democracy that does allow for governmental interference with an individual's pursuit of personal welfare. The American ideal of such things as “natural” rights is due to the fact that such rights originate in the mores of society. Sumner stated, “the notion of ‘natural’ rights is the notion that rights have independent authority in absolute right, so that they are not relative or contingent, but absolute” (Keller and Davie 1934a:358). Inevitably, interests of individuals come into conflict with the interests of others. Determining rights arise from within the in-group. Sumner believed that rights come with responsibilities. Rights and liberties are to be protected by civil law. Law should not restrict liberty, but it should provide proper discipline and punishment to protect the rights of citizens. In addition, Sumner recognized the right of individuals to protect themselves collectively.

As many sociological thinkers believe, Sumner felt that conflict is a natural response to competition over scarce resources. In the struggle for survival, life conditions often create conflict situations between members of the same society. Ironically, individual members of society also depend on one another for their daily survival needs. Sumner (1906) coined the term *antagonistic cooperation* to draw attention to this paradoxical feature of human life. He pointed out that individuals are brought into association and held there by the compulsion of self-interest. He believed that human cooperation exists

simultaneously with suppressed antagonisms. Thus, conflict and cooperation are often intertwined and built-in realities of intragroup behavior.

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*See also*

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