Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

1. Comparison of Spencer and Ward by Barnes (1919)

"They start from the assumption that a collective rather than a purely individualistic struggle for existence has from the beginning of human history been indispensable for the survival and progress of society."

NOTE ON SOURCE: *These passages are from two articles published in 1919 by Harry Elmer Barnes. The articles were entitled, "Two Representative Contributions of Sociology to Political Theory: The Doctrines of William Graham Sumner and Lester Frank Ward" and were published in the American Journal of Sociology(volume 24, number 1) in July 1919.*

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Passages from the lengthy articles are included here as an introduction to the contrasting founders of American sociology. The writer, Barnes, was a professor of history at Columbia University, and, in his later years, lost credibility for his denial of the Holocaust. These passages will serve as an introduction to the reception of Sumner's work, and its contrast to Ward. American sociology, and American social thought generally, was torn between a laissez-faire evolutionary approach (typified by Sumner) and a progressive social reform approach (typified by Ward). Although Ward's approach (perhaps) won out historically, it is important to recognize just how much influence and respect Sumner's approach had at the time.

Introduction: The Sociological View of the State

In this period of rapid social change, cataclysmic transformations of governments, and multiplicity of proposals for new and improved forms of political organization, it is particularly desirable that one should be able to secure orientation by getting back of superficial externals to the fundamental basis of the origin, nature, functions, and justification of political institutions. The complete futility of a purely metaphysical or legalistic interpretation of political institutions is generally agreed upon by all progressive students. Realizing that man in political life, as in other phases of human activity, is guided primarily by his mental mechanism, emotional and rational, enterprising writers and students have made promising beginnings in a psychological

reconstruction of political theory. Others, holding that man's material interests have greatly influenced his emotional and intellectual reactions and activities, have endeavored with no little success to show the relation of economic life to the nature and functioning of the state.

Then there is a school of writers, calling themselves, since the time of Comte, sociologists, who believe that the most significant fact about our life and conduct is that we do not act in isolation but in association with our fellows, in other words that in every phase of human activity our group life is the most fundamental element to be considered. They start from the assumption that a collective rather than a purely individualistic struggle for existence has from the beginning of human history been indispensable for the survival and progress of society, and they further assume the necessity and existence of the state as a most powerful and vital organ in this process of social development. From this point of view the state appears not as some metaphysical "ethical being" or as a purely legalistic entity emitting "commands of a determinate superior," but as a purely natural product of social evolution, more or less distinctly correlated in its development with the stages of group progress with which its growth is associated. Viewed in this sense it must be agreed that political institutions cannot be properly understood or profitably studied except in their relation to their broader foundations in the social or group life of mankind, and the only sound criterion for estimating the value and relative excellence of the state is its adaptability to the function of promoting the progress and basic interests of the group at any given time. To mention but a few of the more notable examples, Spencer, Giddings, Durkheim, Cooley, Ellwood, Giddings, Sumner, and Ward.

The late Professor Sumner stands out as the great American exponent of the *laissez-faire* doctrine so inseparably associated with the name of Herbert Spencer. Professor Ward represents, on the other hand, the most advanced views yet taken by an avowed sociologist in the advocacy of a comprehensive program of social reform through the medium of legislation.

Part 1. Sumner; General Characteristics of His Sociological Thought

Among the sociologists of America there is little doubt that the late Professor William Graham Sumner, of Yale, was the most vigorous and striking personally. Probably the most inspiring and popular teacher that Yale University or American social science has produced, Sumner's direct contact with thousands of students was, without doubt, more important for the development of sociology in the United States than his own published works upon the subject, or the published works of many another American sociologists. Consequently, in even a brief introduction to his contributions to sociology, an attempt to interpret his personality and methods, as revealed in his writings and in written and oral estimates from former students at Yale, is more essential than it would be in the case of any other American sociologist.

In spite of the fact that Sumner frequently emphasizes the necessity for an objective point of view in social science and decries any attempt upon the part of a sociologist to moralize, it is impossible for a reader to emerge from a protracted examination of Sumner's economic, political, and sociological writings without becoming convinced that Sumner was primarily a preacher in the true sense of that term. Trained originally for the ministry and serving for a short time as an ordained curate of the Episcopal Church, Sumner tells his readers that he left the ministry because he wanted to be able to turn his attention to political, economic, and social questions rather than to the preparation of sermons on theological subjects. It is hard to escape the

conviction that he employed his professorial career in these more fertile fields in developing an intellectual ministry which has been unexcelled for its success, influence, and inspiration by that of any other American teacher. Sumner was as subtle in his preaching as Jefferson was in his political epistolography, for he continually disclaimed any attempt to do more than set forth concrete facts in a candid manner. Yet his Social Classes is, above all, an exhortation to independent thought and action, self-reliance, and individual initiative, and the element of the preacher is not entirely absent even in *Folkways*. If one adds to this initial zeal the influence of a commanding personality, a wide learning, a splendid, of not entirely accurate dogmatism, and a mastery of incisive English which makes his essays models of terse 19th century critical prose, it is not difficult to understand Sumner's reputation as a teacher or his dominating influence at Yale.

Sumner's writings are intensely dogmatic, and he was an uncompromising foe of all the unscientific sentimentality which has permeated so many of the pseudosociological writings and movements of the last quarter of a century. His basic message to his students and readers in this respect has been concisely epitomized by one of his students as "Don't be a damn fool!"[4] Sumner's dogmatism, however, was not entirely logical or consistent. For example, he stated that he did not believe in either metaphysics or psychology and that he had always tried to prevent sociology from being infected by them. Nevertheless, he continually indulged in a rather crude type of metaphysics of his own, and his *Folkways* is unquestionably the most important objective treatment of a very essential portion of social psychology which has ever been written.

While it may be true that Sumner was always primarily a sociologist in method and point of view, there can be no doubt that he built up his academic and literary reputation in the fields of economics and political science as an exceedingly vigorous advocate of "hard money," free trade, and *laissez-faire*. Again, while Sumner may claim a priority of practically a decade over any other American teacher in introducing a serious course in sociology into the university curriculum, he never published a systematic exposition of sociology, and his great monograph, *Folkways*, did not appear until three years before his death.

On the whole it was probably fortunate that Sumner specialized in the descriptive and ethnographic, rather than the theoretical, phase of sociology, as his power of that sustained and logical abstract thinking, such as has characterized Professor Giddings' work, was very modest.

It seems that, tentatively at least, Sumner's position in American sociology may be summarized as follows: He was the first teacher of sociology in the country from the standpoint both of time and ability; his *Folkways* is one of the richest treatments of a special branch of sociology that has yet appeared; his sociological writings were primarily concrete and descriptive rather than abstract and theoretical; his views regarding social initiative or "collective telesis" to adopt Ward's terminology, were exceedingly biased and archaic, being almost a *reductio ad absurdum* of the *laissez-faire* individualistic position.

A primary conception in Sumner's sociological theory was the assumption that social as well as organic evolution is almost entirely an automatic spontaneous process which cannot be extensively altered by social effort.

Part 2. Ward; General Characteristics of His Sociological System

Among all American writers there can be no doubt that Lester F. Ward has produced the most pretentious and comprehensive system of sociology. Mr. Ward was also the earliest important American sociologist. His *Dynamic Sociology*, which many critics consider his magnum opus, appeared in 1883, about midway between the publication of the first and last volumes of Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*. In addition to many articles in periodicals, Ward's sociological system was embodied in six considerable volumes. Whatever may be the estimate of the future regarding the place of Ward in the history of sociology, it is certain that no other writer has approached the subject with a body of scientific knowledge which at all approximated that possessed by Ward. Herbert Spencer's *Synthetic Philosophy* undoubtedly displays more profound reasoning powers and a greater talent for the logical marshaling of evidence, but his scientific knowledge was not at all comparable to that possessed by Ward. Ward's formal scientific career was passed as a government expert in paleobotany, to which he made contributions only second in importance to his work in sociology. Ward's predilection for introducing his botanical terminology into his sociology often gives the latter as strange, technical, and repulsive a tone as is to be found in the writings of the extreme "Organicists." Some of his scientific terms, however, such as "sympodial development," "synergy," "creative synthesis," "gynaecocracy," and "social telesis," are rather felicitous and have been quite generally absorbed into conventional sociological thought and expression.

As to the subject-matter of sociology, Ward says: "My thesis is that the subject-matter of sociology is human achievement. It is not what men are but what they do. It is not the structure but the function." As nearly all of the earlier sociologists had been concerned almost wholly with an analysis of social structure, Ward's point of approach was novel and epoch-making in its significance. The divisions of sociology are two-pure and applied. Pure sociology is theoretical and seeks to establish the principles of the science. Applied sociology is practical and points out the applications of the science. Specifically, it "deals with the artificial means of accelerating the spontaneous processes of nature."

Ward divides the body of his sociological system accordingly into genesis and telesis. The former treats of the origin and spontaneous development of social structures and functions and the latter of the conscious improvement of society,

In conclusion, one may safely say that Ward's outstanding contributions to sociology were his grasp of the relations between cosmic and social evolution, and his doctrine of the superiority of the conscious over the unconscious control of the social process. In neither of these respects has he been approached by any other sociologist. Of these two cardinal contributions the latter is by far the more important, for the obvious reason that the former is at best but picturesque and eloquent guesswork, and must always be so until the range of human knowledge is greatly extended. The latter, however, is perhaps the most important single contribution of sociology to human thought, and Ward's significance must rest chiefly upon the fact that his presentation of this conception has been the most powerful that sociology has yet produced.

Professor Giddings has summed up this aspect of Ward's system with characteristic clarity:

> Throughout all Ward's work there runs one dominating and organizing thought. Human society, as we who live now know it, is not the passive product of unconscious forces. It lies within the domain of cosmic law, but so does the mind of man: and this mind of man has knowingly, artfully, adapted

> and re-adapted its social environment, and with reflective intelligence has begun to shape it into an instrument wherewith to fulfill man's will. With forecasting wisdom man will perfect it, until it shall be at once adequate and adaptable to all its uses. This he will do not by creative impulse evolving in a void, but by constructive intelligence shaping the substantial stuff of verified scientific knowledge. Wherefore, scientific knowledge must be made the possession of mankind. Education must not merely train the mind. It must also equip and store, with knowledge.

This great thought Dr. Ward apprehended, expressed, explained, illuminated, drove home to the mind of all who read his pages, as no other writer, ancient or modern, has ever done. It is his enduring and cogent contribution to sociology.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. What is the primary divergence between the sociological and public policy approaches of Sumner and Ward? How would you characterize the other American sociologists (e.g., Addams, Giddings, Cooley)? What about Weber and Durkheim (who were developing their ideas at the same time)?
2. What does Barnes mean when he says it was "probably fortunate" that Sumner stuck to description and ethnography?
3. What does it mean to say that evolution is "spontaneous"? What would Sumner have thought of Addams' position on the activity of the labor movement?
4. Which brand of sociology is most attractive to you? Why?