William Graham Sumner
“Sociology” and “Socialism” (1881)

One of the most influential American students of Spencer and Darwin was the historian and political theorist William Graham Sumner (1840-1910). In the following essays, Sumner developed the “survival of the fittest” idea to argue against socialism and any other kind of interference with the competition of the market.

“Sociology”

[Many economists] 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, we have only one possible alternative, and that is the survival of the un-fittest. 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 … a plan for nourishing the un-fittest and yet advancing in civilization, no man will ever find.

…

Of course the sentimental observer, terrified at the disease, is in haste for a remedy. The first step is to make a diagnosis, which is done by fastening the blame on some things or some persons. … One of the commonest and most baseless popular notions is that all men could be or ought to be today on that same status and that there is blame to be dispensed if they are not. A little reflection will show that it is quite impossible for all to have the best there is. …

Such a line of thought as this, however, is never pursued by the sentimentalist. Seeking a diagnosis of the social evils which he perceives, he notes the preponderant importance of capital in modern society, and he notes the struggle of interests which is involved in the whole structure of our modern industrial system. I have tried elsewhere to show how it is that capital is the backbone of all civilization, and that higher and ever higher organization is essential, as the number of men increases, for the human race to keep up its advancing fight with nature. Consequently the struggle to get capital, to keep it, and to use it, is and must be one of the leading phenomena of society. The moralists and philosophers sneer at the struggle for wealth and criticize it, and still it goes on. The moralists and philosophers might do a great deal to make the struggle for capital more intelligent, but to try to preach it down is like telling men not to live; and to try to set limits or bounds of any kind to the accumulation of capital is simply telling men not to live as well as they can. We always come back to the same point: restraint or diminution of capital is a reduction of civilization.

The case is no better if we try to regulate in any way the struggle of interests under liberty. The sentimentalists are always greatly outraged by the notion of the survival of the fittest which is produced by liberty. If we do not like the survival of the fittest, we have only one alternative and that is the survival of the un-fittest. If A, the un-fittest, is about to perish and somebody interferes to make B, the fittest, carry and preserve A, it is plain that the un-fittest is made to survive and that he is maintained at the expense of B, who is curtailed and restrained by just so much. This process, therefore, is a lowering of social development and is working backwards, not forwards.

These points of criticism show us what we have to think about the attempts of the socialists and sentimentalists to attribute the dark phenomena of our society to capital or to liberty of organization, and of their proposals, by way of remedy, to assail property and liberty. It is only a commonplace to say that all human institutions and arrangements are liable to abuse and that we must keep up a constant
warfare with selfishness and greed whenever they show themselves. That necessity will never be done away with while the world stands. Selfishness and greed will change their forms and lines of operation as changes occur in the industrial system and in the organization of society. To check the development of society in order to prevent selfishness and greed would certainly be preposterous.

“Socialism”

These facts challenge us. It is folly to try to shut our eyes to them. We have first to notice what they are, and then to face them squarely. Man is born under the necessity of sustaining the existence he has received by an onerous struggle against nature, both to win what is essential to his life and to ward off what is prejudicial to it. He is born under a burden and a necessity. Nature holds what is essential to him, but she offers nothing gratuitously. He may win for his use what she holds, if he can. Only the most meager and inadequate supply for human needs can be obtained directly from nature. There are trees which may be used for fuel and for dwellings, but labor is required to fit them for this use. There are ores in the ground, but labor is necessary to get out the metals and make tools or weapons. For any real satisfaction, labor is necessary to fit the products of nature for human use. In this struggle every individual is under the pressure of the necessities for food, clothing, shelter, fuel, and every individual brings with him more or less energy for the conflict necessary to supply his needs. The relation, therefore, between each man’s needs and each man’s energy, or “individualism,” is the first fact of human life. …

So far as I have yet spoken, we have before us the struggle of man with nature, but the social problems, strictly speaking, arise at the next step. Each man carries on the struggle to win support for himself, but there are others by his side engaged in the same struggle. If the stores of nature were unlimited, or if the last unit of the supply she offers could be won as easily as the first, there would be no social problem. If a square mile of land could support an indefinite number of human beings, or if it cost only twice as much labor to get forty bushels of wheat from an acre as to get twenty, we should have no social problem. If a square mile of land could support millions, no one would ever emigrate and there would be no trade or commerce. If it cost only twice as much labor to get forty bushels as twenty, there would be no advance in the arts. The fact is far otherwise. So long as the population is low in proportion to the amount of land … life is easy and the competition man with man is weak. When more persons are trying to live on a square mile than it can support … life is hard and the competition of man with man is intense. In the former case, industry, and prudence may be on a low grade; the penalties are not severe, or certain or speedy. In the latter case, each individual needs to exert on his own behalf every force, original or acquired, which he can command. In the former case, the average condition will be one of comfort and the population will be all nearly on the average. In the latter case, the average condition will not be one of comfort, but the population will cover wide extremes of comfort and misery. Each will find his place according to his ability and his effort. The former society will be democratic; the latter will be aristocratic.

The constant tendency of population to outstrip the means of subsistence is the force which has distributed population over the world, and produced all advance in civilization. …

The condition for the complete and regular action of the force of competition is liberty. Liberty means the security given to each man that, if he employs his energies to sustain the struggle on behalf of himself and those he cares for, he shall dispose of the produce exclusively as he chooses. …
Existence produces inequalities between men. The struggle for existence is aimed against nature. It is from her niggardly hand that we have to wrest the satisfaction for our needs, but our fellow men are our competitors for the meager supply. Competition, therefore, is a law of nature. Nature is entirely neutral; she submits to him who most energetically and resolutely assails her. She grants her rewards to the fittest, therefore, 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. Such is the system of nature. If we do not like it, and if we try to amend it, there is only one way in which we can do it. We can take from the better and give to the worse. We can deflect the penalties of those who have done ill and throw them on those who have done better. We can take the rewards from those who have done better and give them to those who have done worse. We shall thus lessen the inequalities. We shall favor the survival of the unfittest, and we shall accomplish this by destroying liberty. Let it be understood that we cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, and survival of the fittest; or not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst members. …

Liberty, therefore, does not by any means do away with the struggle for existence. We might as well try to do away with the need of eating, for that would, in effect, be the same thing. What civil liberty does is to turn the competition of man with man from violence and brute force into an industrial competition under which men vie with one another for the acquisition of material goods by industry, energy, skill, frugality, prudence, temperance, and other industrial virtues. Under this changed order of things the inequalities are not done away with. Nature still grants her rewards of having and enjoying, according to our being and doing, but it is now the man of the highest training and not the man of the heaviest fist who gains the highest reward.

It is impossible that the man with capital and the man without capital should be equal. To affirm that they are equal would be to say that a man who has no tool can get as much food out of the ground as the man who has a spade or a plough; or that the man who has no weapon can defend himself as well against hostile beasts or hostile men as the man who has a weapon. If that were so, none of us would work any more. …

It follows from what we have observed that it is the utmost folly to denounce capital. To do so is to undermine civilization, for capital is the first requisite of every social gain, educational, ecclesiastical, political, aesthetic, or other.

It must also be noticed that the popular antithesis between persons and capital is very fallacious. Every law or institution which protects persons at the expense of capital makes it easier for persons to live and to increase the number of consumers of capital while lowering all the motives to prudence and frugality by which capital is created. Hence every such law or institution tends to produce a large population, sunk in misery. All poor laws … have this tendency. …

The truth is that the social order is fixed by laws of nature precisely analogous to those of the physical order. The most that man can do is by ignorance and self-conceit to mar the operation of social laws. The evils of society are to a great extent the result of the dogmatism and self-interest of statesmen, philosophers, and ecclesiastics who in past time have done just what the socialists now want to do. Instead of studying the natural laws of the social order, they assumed that they could organize society as they chose, they, made up their minds what kind of a society they wanted to make, and they planned their little measures for the ends they had resolved upon. It will take centuries of scientific study of the facts of nature to eliminate from human society the mischievous institutions and traditions which said statesmen, philosophers, and ecclesiastics have introduced into it.