

ued the search for laws. But a most important change had occurred in the conception of natural law. To earlier thinkers, indeed to virtually the whole tradition of Western thought, natural law had been something fixed in the universe. It was that enduring order in the universe as it is known to man. To naturalists, natural law was the law by which changes occurred, the law, or laws, of evolutionary development.

Natural law was active rather than fixed or passive. It was felt through *forces* at work in the universe. Naturalists gave their attention either to discovering and expounding the stages of development or to describing the forces which produced the changes. In short, they were greatly concerned with what was *determining* the course and direction of changes that had been and (presumably) were occurring. Naturalists were determinists, then; they pictured man's actions as products of forces within or without him but, whichever, beyond his control.

These interpretations amounted to a radical transformation of the significance of natural law. Natural law as order-in-the-universe has ever been a liberating concept. It has served as the basis for limiting governments, for freeing economies, as foundation for positive law, as the basis of govern-

ment by law, and as the substructure for peaceful relations among nations and peoples. But natural laws as forces are tyrannical, though not necessarily arbitrarily so. That is, natural laws then become active rather than passive, subject to change rather than enduring, founts of change rather than bases for rational order. Naturalism pervades the thinking of Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Emile Zola, William Graham Sumner, John W. Draper, Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Dreiser, and many other writers and thinkers.

The point that concerns us here is the opposition of such an outlook to reform. If change occurs as a result of forces, if the course and direction of change is determined by processes beyond the power of man to alter, if social changes are the product of such processes, reform is impossible. Human intervention in the process is virtually impossible, and, were it possible to any extent, it would be undesirable, for it would only deter the beneficent course of evolution — or so the more optimistic naturalists thought.

William Graham Sumner

The social view of the significance of evolution that was most congenial to the prevailing American way, and to many Americans, was that of William Graham

Sumner. His views, as I have suggested, are often cited as the epitome of social Darwinism. Sumner was a thoroughgoing Darwinian, naturalistic in emphasis, and his works are replete with references to "forces" at work upon and within society. Yet the views which he set forth appeared to be in keeping with American institutions and basic beliefs. For example, in defending a higher stage of civilization, he said:

It sets free individual energy, and while the social bond gains in scope and variety, it also gains in elasticity, for the solidarity of the group is broken up and the individual may work out his own ends by his own means. . . .²

He defends private property, and praises virtues which are undeniably those admired by many Americans of his day. Thus,

The only two things which really tell on the welfare of man on earth are hard work and self-denial (in technical language, labor and capital), and these tell most when they are brought to bear directly upon the effort to earn an honest living, to accumulate capital, and to bring up a family to be industrious and self-denying in their turn.³

² William G. Sumner, "Sociology," *American Thought: Civil War to World War I*, Perry Miller, ed. (New York: Rinehart, 1954), p. 81.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Moreover, he conceived that sociology would provide facts and theories which would support the American system. It could answer one of the most important questions, he thought. "Shall we, in our general social policy, pursue the effort to realize more completely that constitutional liberty for which we have been struggling throughout modern history . . .?"⁴

Short Shrift for Reformers

Most important for the matter under consideration, Sumner held an uncompromising position to the effect that melioristic reform was practically impossible. Of utopians and socialists, he said: "These persons, vexed with the intricacies of social problems and revolting against the facts of the social order, take upon themselves the task of inventing a new and better world. They brush away all which troubles us men and create a world free from annoying limitations and conditions — in their imagination."⁵ Why can't men simply conceive a world of the sort they want and then set out to build it? Sumner offers many reasons — human nature, the nature of the world, natural law — but the primary one was of a different order. This was the argument from the evolution of society.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.