



William Graham Sumner: A Conservative Critique of Egalitarianism

“Egalitarianism” is a word with many different meanings. There certainly is a sense in which every ideology or system of belief within which *equality* plays a dominant role can be said to be egalitarian. Classical and modern varieties of liberalism, Christianity, socialism, and communism can all, in this respect, be said to be expressions of egalitarianism.

But, usually, the label is reserved for only those ideologies that call for a more equal distribution of material resources. That is, in the popular imagination, as well as that of those who loudly and proudly proclaim their commitment to Equality, the egalitarian is invariably a leftist. For example, when Barack Obama informed “Joe the plumber” that he wanted to “spread the wealth around,” he revealed himself to be a champion of egalitarianism.



Those of us who love liberty, regardless of whether we call ourselves libertarians or conservatives, know all too well the depths of intellectual and moral squalor in which egalitarian ideology is mired. Still, we would be well served to familiarize or perhaps reacquaint ourselves with some theorists of yesteryear who fought the same battles that engage our energies today.

One such theorist is the nineteenth century American conservative sociologist, William Graham Sumner. Sumner subjected the ideology of those who we call “egalitarians” — and he called “the friends of humanity” — to withering criticism, and stated emphatically that “the dogma that all men are equal” is not only a “superstition,” but “the most flagrant falsehood and the most immoral doctrine which men have ever believed.” This becomes evident once we give it a second’s thought.

If all men are equal, then “the man who has not done his duty is as good as the one who has done his duty.” But if this in turn is true, then “the teachings of the moralists” is deprived of “all sense,” for moralists throughout the ages and from a rich variety of traditions “instruct youth that men who pursue one line of action will go down to loss and shame, and those who pursue another course will go up to honor and success.”

In reality, “truth, wisdom, and righteousness” are purchased at the expense of much “study” and “striving.” As such, they are goods that “are so hard” to come by “that it is only the few who attain to them.” And “these few” are those who “carry on human society,” both “now” and “as they always have done.”



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Put another way, it is *inequality* — most certainly *not* equality — that is well “established as a positive fact.” To substantiate his contention, Sumner alludes to a phenomenon with which we are all familiar. He observes that “so soon as the exigencies of life are felt, men are differentiated according to their power to cope with them into ‘better’ or ‘worse,’” a fact of life that renders undeniable the claim that while “men are very unequal in what they get out of life,” still “they are ... more unequal in what they put into it.” To drive home his point, Sumner bluntly states: “The most unequal bargain has always been made by the men who have done the world’s thinking for it.”

Inseparable from the egalitarian fantasy is the idea that “the disadvantaged” have somehow been deprived of the benefits of civilization. A contemporary American egalitarian is likely to relate the matter by saying that some have been “shut out of the American dream,” or some such nonsense. Sumner is having none of it, and says of this fiction that it is the function of “monstrous ignorance.”

“There is not a person in a civilized state,” Sumner asserts, “who does not share in the inheritance of institutions, knowledge, ideas, doctrines, etc., which come down as fruits of civilization.” We tend not to realize this, though, because such fruits are imbibed “by habit and routine.” Instead, we “suppose that they come of themselves, or are innate.”

From the time we are children, we begin availing ourselves of the inventory of “facts, knowledge, skill and the like which it cost the human race thousands of years to accumulate.” And even long after we have become adults, we just “as unconsciously as children” continue to “use the products of civilization.”

The daily goods that we take for granted are the fruits of the “prodigious struggles” of earlier generations. This includes “the rights” that we are disposed to regard as “natural.” It is worth quoting Sumner at length on this score:

Every man in a civilized state inherits a status of rights which form the basis and stay of his civil existence. These rights are often called “natural”; in truth, they are the product of the struggles of thousands of generations.... Our inheritance of established rights is the harvested product of the few successful experiments out of thousands which failed.

Yet egalitarianism isn’t just immoral in being a lie. It is as well invidious in how it deleteriously impacts “the Forgotten Man.”

“The Forgotten Man” is the person whose resources are taken by the “social doctors” — those who are “always under the dominion of the superstition of government” — and redistributed to those classes of which, appealing to “the sympathies and the imagination,” they transform into “social pets.”

“The Forgotten Man” is “the real sufferer” of the “kind of benevolence” for which “the friends of humanity” are noted. Being “worthy, industrious, independent, and self-supporting,” he could benefit and in turn benefit society if the resources that government expends on “‘the poor,’” and “‘the weak’ ” — i.e. “the good-for-nothing,” as Sumner says — would have instead remained in his pocket in the form of an increase in wages.

Sumner refers to the virtually “invincible prejudice that a man who gives a dollar to a beggar is generous and kind-hearted, but that a man who refuses the beggar and puts the dollar in a savings-bank is stingy and mean.” This is not just a prejudice; it is folly.

The man who gives to a beggar “is putting capital where it is very sure to be wasted, and where it will be a kind of seed for a long succession of future dollars” that are just as likely to be wasted. But the man who invests his dollar turns it into capital, specifically capital that will be “given to a laborer who,



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while earning it, would have reproduced it.”

Egalitarians coerce the Forgotten Man to part with his legitimately acquired holdings so that they can then spend the fruits of his labor on “the social pets” of their choice. They get away with doing this, though, because “he passes by and is never noticed, because he has behaved himself, fulfilled his contracts, and asked for nothing.”

The next time we hear egalitarians in either party tell us about how “we” or “society” must help this or that group of people, let’s call to mind the words of William Graham Sumner.



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