

William Sumner (Social Darwinism). What Social Classes Owe to Each Other – From Chapter 1

Now, if there are groups of people who have a claim to other people's labor and self-denial, and if there are other people whose labor and self-denial are liable to be claimed by the first groups, then there certainly are "classes," and classes of the oldest and most vicious type. For a man who can command another man's labor and self-denial for the support of his own existence is a privileged person of the highest species conceivable on earth. Princes and paupers meet on this plane, and no other men are on it all. On the other hand, a man whose labor and self-denial may be diverted from his maintenance to that of some other man is not a free man, and approaches more or less toward the position of a slave. Therefore we shall find that, in all the notions which we are to discuss, this elementary contradiction, that there are classes and that there are not classes, will produce repeated confusion and absurdity. We shall find that, in our efforts to eliminate the old vices of class government, we are impeded and defeated by new products of the worst class theory. We shall find that all the schemes for producing equality and obliterating the organization of society produce a new differentiation based on the worst possible distinction—the right to claim and the duty to give one man's effort for another man's satisfaction. We shall find that every effort to realize equality necessitates a sacrifice of liberty.

It is very popular to pose as a "friend of humanity," or a "friend of the working classes." The character, however, is quite exotic in the United States. It is borrowed from England, where some men, otherwise of small account, have assumed it with great success and advantage. Anything which has a charitable sound and a kind-hearted tone generally passes without investigation, because it is disagreeable to assail it. Sermons, essays, and orations assume a conventional standpoint with regard to the poor, the weak, etc.; and it is allowed to pass as an unquestioned doctrine in regard to social classes that "the rich" ought to "care for the poor"; that Churches especially ought to collect capital from the rich and spend it for the poor; that parishes ought to be clusters of institutions by means of which one social class should perform its duties to another; and that clergymen, economists, and social philosophers have a technical and professional duty to devise schemes for "helping the poor." The preaching in England used all to be done to the poor—that they ought to be contented with their lot and respectful to their betters. Now, the greatest part of the preaching in America consists in injunctions to those who have taken care of themselves to perform their assumed duty to take care of others. Whatever may be one's private sentiments, the fear of appearing cold and hard-hearted causes these conventional theories of social duty and these assumptions of social fact to pass unchallenged.

Define Each Word

divert: _____

impede: _____

obliterate: _____

assail: _____

injunction: _____

Write the Correct Word from the Vocabulary

1. The senatorial candidate _____ the incumbent senator for his ostensibly weak record on educational reform.
2. Jessica’s impertinence _____ her academic progress because she often contradicted her teachers.
3. The bishops issued an _____ against any form of religious bigotry.
4. Canals in South Florida _____ the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to urban areas.
5. If exotic species are released in the wild, they can _____ many native plants and animals.

Comprehension and Discussion: Answer Each Question in Complete Sentences

1. How does Sumner define a “slave”? How does Sumner’s definition of “slave” compare to your definition of “slave”?

2. Sumner writes that “every effort to realize equality necessitates a sacrifice of liberty”? What does this statement mean? Give at least one example.

