

**SUMNER ON RACE RELATIONS: SHORT CIRCUIT QUEST FOR CERTITUDE**

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**BACKGROUND**

Sumner's brand of sociology is appropriated directly into the work of Park and Frazier, but in different ways. A similar approach has been incorporated into the thought of social scientists such as Myrdal (1944) and Parsons (1966; Lyman 1973). Sumner operates with what might be viewed as an essentially Pauline understanding of human nature. This appears as an instance of bourgeois *possessive individualism*, but this view tends to forget that behind Calvin was the soteriology of Paul and Augustine, predicated on the *fall of man* (McPherson 1962). McPherson agrees with Hobbes about the natural unsociability of man, and rejects the solution to the problem of order offered by the man "born a twin to fear" which necessitated recourse to the Leviathan.

Sumner tries to circumvent the fickleness of human nature by introducing a device which provides for order and change without resort to human will or consciousness.

The folkways therefore are not creations of human purpose and wit. They are products of natural forces which men unconsciously set in operation ... without rational reflection or purpose. (Sumner 1940 4)

Sumner can justly be compared to Durkheim, and can be similarly criticized for hypostatizing society. The charge against Durkheim of "sociologism" could as well have been leveled at Sumner (Benoit Smullyan 1967 205). Sumner's statement (1940 173) that the most important fact about the mores is their domination over the individual sounds strikingly similar to Durkheim whose social facts likewise entail constraints and compulsions imposed on individuals. And Sumner is akin to Durkheim in his emphasis on beliefs and ideas, and in his tendency to confuse behavior with beliefs and ideas.

**RACE**

While social origins are lost in mystery, race is seen as constituting a salient factor in the prehistory and early history of mankind, located at the interstices of biological and social forces. Unconcerned with individuals who could be deemed *marginal men* in Park's terminology, Sumner contends (1940 43):

The concept of race as the term is now used is that of a group clustered around a mean with respect to some characteristic, and great profusion in the use of the term "race" arises from the attempt to define races by their boundaries, when we really think of them by the mean or mode ... as to skin color. The coherence, unity, and solidarity of the genetic group is a very striking fact.

Group formation in what Sumner calls "antagonistic cooperation" derived principally by propinquity in the earliest periods of human history, functions to maintain and reproduce the lives of its members. A result of group formation is the development of a consciousness of difference between the "we-group" and the "others-group" combined with differential modes of relatedness. The we-group exists in a situation of internal peace and outward hostility. Sumner (1940 13) defines this fundamental notion as follows: "Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." He notes that the concept is similar to Giddings' "consciousness of kind" while he proceeds to argue that throughout societal evolution, such differentiations have persisted (1927 356).

**EVOLUTION**

Sumner uses evolution as a central conceptual tool to explain the shifting nature of race relations in the modern world. It is a device which avoids the contingencies of history and the unpredictability of human actors. Sumner notes (1940 118) that "... evolution, although it has the character of a natural process, always must issue by and through men whose passions, follies and wills are part of it, but are also always dominated by it." To distinguish himself from meliorists, Sumner says that evolution is not to be construed as being equivalent to progress. It only means adaptation. Man's relation to man is secondary to man's relation to land. The man/land ratio is considered the ultimate determinant of the potentiality of any society. Sumner is not so much an economic determinist as he is an ecological determinist.

Sumner is not consistent in the attempt to

distinguish evolution from progress, because adaptation to environmental circumstances would seem to preclude evolutionary sequences or stages. Yet he states that it is useful to construct a series of stages of culture without actually presenting a clear depiction of the sequential patterns (1927 219).

### RACE RELATIONS

Unlike Park (1964 150) Sumner says there is no specific theory applying uniquely to the topic of race. His variant of evolutionary social theory clearly subsumes race within a larger evolutionary process. Although ambivalently posed, the fate of race relations tends to be characterized by the progressive reduction in saliency as a critical factor in group definitions and relations. Processually, linguistic and religious differences are prerequisites of the elimination of the blood barrier through intermarriage — a process which is often long-delayed through caste-exclusiveness (Sumner 1927 583).

Grounded in the Malthusian man/land ratio problem, Sumner was convinced that the laws of the unfettered competitive market provided the appropriate mechanism for grounding societal well-being in the present epoch. Embracing Spencer's militant/industrial distinction, Sumner says (1963 50):

A peaceful society must be industrial because it must produce instead of plundering; it is for this reason that the industrial type of society is the opposite of the militant type. In any state on the continent of Europe today these two types of societal organizations may be seen interwoven with each other and fighting each other. Industrialism builds up; militancy wastes.

Sumner agrees that in industrial civilization homogeneity gives way to heterogeneity. The transition to industrial civilization entails the progressive incorporation of larger and larger units. The evolutionary series evidences a progressive enlargement of the peace group. Beginning with the family and moving through kin, clan and tribal organizations, the territorial nation-state emerges as the largest in-group known in human history (Sumner 1927 396). He concludes that the trend of evolution is toward the extension of the peace group. In this scenario, race relations gradually decline in saliency, subsumed by the process of universalization called a transition from tribal brotherhood to universal "otherhood." (Nelson

1949)

Sumner's evolutionism links to a version of functionalism. The Darwinian doctrine of "survival of the fittest" seems to offer an explanatory short cut ... Any state of affairs ... can be explained by the operation of natural selection ... it can be made to fit any situation (Burrow 1966 115). Sumner seemed to appreciate the limited utility of this device. The conceptual significance of folkways and mores lies in their ability to be implemented in differential comparative analyses. Sociology's purpose is to uncover these, *sui generis* products of societies. This brings Sumner close to Durkheim's call for a science of morality. Sociology cannot create folkways or mores, but it can move from description to prescription. By distinguishing the normal from the pathological, sociology is a potential instrument in directing societal decision-making processes. Sumner advances his case for a knowledge elite who are justified in claiming a role in directing societal praxis.

### HISTORY

According to Sumner (1940 77) the races in the United States lived in a state of harmony due to the efficacious folkways and mores of southern society. The subsequent abolition of slavery constituted not simply the legal prohibition of slavery, but signaled the destruction of a way of life. A world of institutional integration was rent asunder due to external interference with a natural, internally-generated process. The emancipation of the slaves was accomplished by the North's willingness to attempt to impose its folkways and mores in an area hitherto functioning under the influence of quite different societal forces. Since folkways and mores cannot be enacted or promulgated, the South was forced to exist in a limbo world between past and future. Since modification of societal processes is possible only through slow incremental adjustments, a violent upheaval caused by exogenous factors succeeds not in substituting new folkways and mores, but in merely destroying the efficacy of the old. Sumner concludes: "The consequence has been 40 years of economic, social, and political discord." (1940 90) In such a milieu individuals become victims of enthusiasm or melancholy.

Thus the plight of the post-Civil War South is explained by recourse to the Aristotelian doctrine of accidents, or, in Sumner's terminology, "interferences." For Sumner the Civil War was an unmitigated catastrophe which prevented the gradual natural modification of the South's folkways and mores to unfold, and thereby disrupted racial harmony. Sumner agreed that the South's folkways and mores were in need of modification if the region was to become an industrial society, but his understanding of cultural lag entailed internally-generated adjustments, which, when permitted to operate without external interference, provided for the emergence of society's new functional requisites.

### CONCLUSION

Sumner's antipathy to external interferences is clearly linked with his ultimate resolution of the race relations problem, to be accomplished through evolution. The concept is forced to perform an onerous intellectual task since it alone provides Sumner with the conviction to conclude (1940 90):

New mores will be developed which will cover the situation with customs, habits, mutual concessions, and cooperation of interests, and these will produce a social philosophy consistent with the facts. The process is long, painful, and discouraging, but it contains its own guarantees.

The history of black/white relations from the battlefields of the Civil War to the war zones of the contemporary urban ghetto testifies to the scope of the burden placed on evolution. It becomes clear that science has become convoluted with faith, which entails a sacrifice of the intellect. The result is faith in science.

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