William Graham Sumner
*What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1884)

I now propose to try to find out whether there is any class in society which lies under the duty and burden of fighting the battles of life for any other class, or of solving social problems for the satisfaction of any other class; also, whether there is any class which has the right to formulate demands on “society” – that is, on other classes; also, whether there is anything but a fallacy and superstition in the notion that “the State” owes anything to anybody except peace, order, and the guarantees of rights….

…(P)ublic speaking and writing consists, in a large measure, of the discussion of general plans for meeting the wishes of classes of people who have not been able to satisfy their own desires. These classes are sometimes discontented, and sometimes not. Sometimes they are discontented and envious. They do not take their achievements as a fair measure of their rights. They do not blame themselves or their parents for their lot, as compared with that of other people. Sometimes they claim that they have a right to everything of which they feel the need for their happiness on earth. To make such a claim against God and Nature would, of course, be only to say that we claim a right to live on earth if we can. But God and Nature have ordained the chances and conditions of life on earth once and for all. The case cannot be reopened. We cannot get a revision of the laws of human life. We are absolutely shut up to the need and duty, if we would learn how to live happily, of investigating the laws of Nature, and deducing the rules of right living in the world as it is. These are very wearisome and commonplace tasks. They consist in labor and self-denial repeated over and over again in learning and doing. When the people whose claims we are considering are told to apply themselves to these tasks they feel irritated and almost insulted. They formulate their claims as rights against society – that is, against some other men. In their view they have a right, not only to pursue happiness, but to get it; and if they fail to get, they feel they have a claim to the aid of other men – to get it for them. They find orators and poets who tell them that they have grievances, so long as they have unsatisfied desires….

No doubt one chief reason for the unclear and contradictory theories of class relations lies in the fact that our society, largely controlled in all its organizations by one set of doctrines, still contains survivals of old social theories which are totally inconsistent with the former. In the Middle Ages men were united by custom and prescription into associations, ranks, guilds, and communities of various kinds. These ties endured as long as life lasted. Consequently society was dependent, in all its details, on status, and the tie, or bond, was sentimental. In our modern state, and in the United States more than anywhere else, the social structure is based on contract, and status is of the least importance. Contract, however, is rational – even rationalistic. It is also realistic, cold and matter of fact. A contract relation is based on a sufficient reason, not on custom or prescription. It is not permanent. It endures only so long as the reason for it endures.
In a state based on contract, sentiment is out of place in any public or common affairs. It is relegated to the sphere of private and personal relations, where it depends not at all on class types, but on personal acquaintance and personal estimates. The sentimentalists among us always seize upon the survivals of the old order. They want to save them and restore them. Much of the loose thinking also which troubles us in our social discussions arises from the fact that men do not distinguish the elements of status and of contract which may be found in our society.…. 

(I)t is out of the question to go back to status …. That we have lost some grace and elegance is undeniable. That life once held more poetry and romance is true enough. But … we have gained immeasurably, and our farther gains lie in going forward, not going backward. The feudal ties can never be restored…. A society based on contract is a society of free and independent men, who form ties without favor or obligation, and co-operate without cringing or intrigue. A society based on contract, therefore, gives the utmost room and chance for individual development, and for all the reliance and dignity of a free man…. 

History is only a tiresome repetition of one story. Persons and classes have sought to win possession of the power of the State in order to live luxuriously out of the earnings of others…. It is the extreme of political error to say that if political power is only taken away from generals, nobles, priests, millionaires, and scholars, and given to artisans and peasants, these latter may be trusted to do only right and justice, and never to abuse the power…. They will commit abuse, if they can and dare, just as others have done.

The reason for the excesses of the old governing classes lies in the vices and passions of human nature – cupidty, lust, vindictiveness, ambition, and vanity. These vices are confined to no nation, class, or age. They appear in the church, the academy, the workshop, and the hovel, as well as in the army or the palace…. The only thing which has restrained these vices of human nature in those who had political power is law sustained by impersonal institutions. If political power be given to the masses who have not hitherto had it, nothing will stop them from abusing it but laws and institutions…. 

A free man in a free democracy has no duty whatever toward other men of the same rank and standing, except respect, courtesy, and goodwill…. In a free state every man in held and expected to take care of himself and his family, to make no trouble for his neighbor, and to contribute his full share to public interests and common necessities. If he fails in this he throws burdens on others. He does not thereby acquire rights against the others. On the contrary, he only accumulates obligations toward them; and if he is allowed to make his deficiencies a ground of new claims, he passes over into the position of a privileged or petted person – emancipated from duties, endowed with claims. This is the inevitable result of combining democratic political theories with humanitarian social theories…. 

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Sumner, cont’d

We each owe it to the other to guarantee rights. Rights do not pertain to results, but only to chances. They pertain to the conditions of the struggle for existence, not to any of the results of it; to the pursuit of happiness, not to the possession of happiness. It cannot be said that each one has a right to have some property, because if one man had such a right some other man or men would be under a corresponding obligation to provide him with some property. Each has a right to acquire and possess property if he can. It is plain what fallacies develop when we overlook this distinction. Those fallacies run through all socialistic schemes and theories….

Emma Goldman, Anarchism: What It Really Stands For (1907)

… Religion, the dominion of the human mind; Property, the dominion of human needs; and Government, the dominion of human conduct, represent the stronghold of man's enslavement and all the horrors it entails. Religion! How it dominates man's mind, how it humiliates and degrades his soul. God is everything, man is nothing, says religion. But out of that nothing God has created a kingdom so despotic, so tyrannical, so cruel, so terribly exacting that nought but gloom and tears and blood have ruled the world since gods began. Anarchism rouses man to rebellion against this black monster. …

Property, the dominion of man’s needs, the denial of the right to satisfy his needs. Time was when property claimed a divine right, when it came to man with the same refrain, even as religion, “Sacrifice! Abnegate! Submit!” The spirit of Anarchism has lifted man from his prostrate position. He now stands erect, with his face toward the light. He has learned to see the insatiable, devouring, devastating nature of property. “Property is robbery,” said … Proudhon. Yes, but without risk and danger to the robber. Monopolizing the accumulated efforts of man, property has robbed him of his birthright, and has turned him loose a pauper and an outcast…. Man is being robbed not merely of the products of his labor, but of the power of free initiative, of originality, and the interest in, or desire for, the things he is making. Real wealth consists in things of utility and beauty, in things that help to create strong, beautiful bodies and surroundings inspiring to live in. But if man is doomed to wind cotton around a spool, or dig coal, or dig roads for thirty years of his life, there can be no talk of wealth. What he gives to the world is only gray and hideous things, reflecting a dull and hideous existence, -- too weak to live, too cowardly to die.…
Anarchism directs its forces against the third and greatest foe of all social equality; namely, the State, organized authority, or statutory law, -- the dominion of human conduct. Just as religion has fettered the human mind, and as property, or the monopoly of things, has subdued and stifled man’s needs, so has the State enslaved his spirit, dictating every phase of conduct. “All government in essence,” says Emerson, “is tyranny.” It matters not whether it is government by divine right or majority rule. In every instance its aim is the absolute subordination of the individual…. Indeed, the keynote of government is injustice…. (G)overnment, with its unjust, arbitrary, repressive measures, must be done away with….

But what about human nature? Can it be changed? And if not, will it endure under Anarchism? Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! Every fool … presumes to speak authoritatively of human nature. The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weaknesses of human nature. Yet, how can anyone speak of it today, with every soul in a prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed? … With human nature caged in a narrow space, whipped daily into submission, how can we speak of its potentialities? … Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and constraint of government….

Victims of Morality

… (I)t is with the effect of Morality on women that I am mostly concerned. So disastrous, so paralyzing has this effect been, that some even of the most advanced among my sisters never thoroughly outgrow it. It is Morality which condemns woman to the position of a celibate, a prostitute, or a reckless, incessant breeder of hapless children.

First, as to the celibate, the famished and withered human plant. When still a young, beautiful flower, she falls in love with a respectable young man. But Morality decrees that unless he can marry the girl, she must never know the raptures of love, the ecstasy of passion, which reaches its culminating experience in the sex embrace. The respectable young man is willing to marry, but the Property Morality … decree(s) that he must first make his pile, must save up enough to establish a home and be able to provide for a family. The young people must wait, often many long, weary years. Meanwhile, the respectable young man, excited through the daily association and contact with his sweetheart, seeks an outlet for his nature in return for money. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, he will be infected, and when he is materially able to marry, he will infect his wife and possible offspring. And the young flower, with every fiber aglow with the fire of life, with all her being crying out for love and passion? She has no outlet. She develops headaches, insomnia, hysteria; grows embittered, quarrelsome, and soon becomes a faded, withered, joyless being, a nuisance to herself and everyone else….
Goldman, cont’d

There is nothing more pathetic, nothing more terrible, than this gray-grown victim of a gray-grown Morality. This applies even with greater force to the masses of professional middle-class girls, than to those of the people. Through economic necessity the latter are thrust into life’s jungle at an early age; they grow up with their male companions in the factory or shop, or at play and dance. The result is a more normal expression of their physical instincts…. But the overwrought and oversexed middle-class girl, hedged in her narrow confines with family and social traditions, guarded by a thousand eyes, afraid of her own shadow – the yearning of her inmost being for the man or the child, must turn to cats, dogs, canary birds, or the Bible Class. Such is the cruel dictum of Morality, which is daily shutting out love, light, and joy from the lives of innumerable victims.

Now, as to the prostitute. In spite of laws, laws, ordinances, persecution, and prisons, in spite of segregation, registration, vice crusades, and other similar devices, the prostitute is the real specter of our age…. After all, she is paying back, in a very small measure, the curses and horrors society has strewn in her path. She … is the Nemesis of modern times, the avenging angel, ruthlessly wielding the sword of fire. For has she not the man in her power? And, through him, the home, the child, the race….

What has made her? Whence does she come? Morality, the Morality which is merciless in its attitude to women. Once she dared to be herself, to be true to her nature, to life, there is no return …. But the prostitute is victimized by still other forces, foremost among them the Property Morality, which compels woman to sell herself as a sex commodity for a dollar per, out of wedlock, or fifteen dollars a week, in the sacred fold of matrimony. The latter is no doubt safer, more respected, more recognized, but of the two forms of prostitution, the girl of the street is the least hypocritical, the least debased, because her trade lacks the pious mask of hypocrisy ….

Morality and its victim, the mother – what a terrible picture! Is there indeed anything more terrible than, more criminal, than our glorified sacred function of motherhood? The woman, physically and mentally unfit to be a mother, yet condemned to breed; the woman, economically taxed to the last spark of energy, yet forced to breed; the woman, tied to a man she loathes, … yet made to breed; the woman, worn and used-up from the process of procreation, yet coerced to breed, more, ever more. What a hideous thing, this much-lauded motherhood! No wonder thousands of women risk mutilation, and prefer even death to this curse …. Five thousand are yearly sacrificed upon the altar of this monster, that will not stand for prevention but would cure by abortion … and as many thousand more who are crippled and mutilated ….
Is it because the modern woman wants to shirk responsibility, or that she lacks love for her offspring, that she is driven to the most drastic and dangerous means to avoid bearing children? Only shallow, bigoted minds can bring such an accusation. Else they would know that the modern woman has become race-conscious, sensitive to the rights and needs of the child, as the unit of the race, and that therefore the modern woman has a sense of responsibility and humanity, which was quite foreign to her grandmother.

With the economic war raging all around her, with strife, misery, crime, disease, and insanity staring her in the face, with numberless little children ground into gold dust, how can the self- and race-conscious woman become a mother? Morality cannot answer this question. It can only dictate, coerce, or condemn – and how many women are strong enough to face this condemnation, to defy the moral dicta? Few, indeed. Hence, they fill the factories, the reformatories, the homes for feeble minded, the prisons, the insane asylums, or they die in the attempt to prevent child-birth. Oh Motherhood, what crimes are committed in thy name! What hosts are laid at your feet, Morality, destroyer of life!

Fortunately, the Dawn is emerging from the chaos and darkness. Woman is awakening, she is throwing off the nightmare of Morality. She will no longer be bound. In her love for the man, she is not concerned in the contents of his pocketbook, but in the wealth of his nature, which alone is the fountain of life and joy. Nor does she need the sanction of the State. Her love is sanction enough for her. Thus she can abandon herself to the man of her choice, as the flowers abandon themselves to dew and light, in freedom, beauty and ecstasy.

Through her re-born consciousness as a unit, a personality, a race-builder, she will become a mother only if she desires the child, and if she can give to the child, even before its birth, all that her nature and intellect can yield: harmony, health, comfort, beauty, and above all, understanding, reverence, and love, which is the only fertile soil for new life, a new being.

Morality has no terrors for her who has risen beyond good and evil. And though Morality may continue to devour its victims, it is utterly powerless in the face of the modern spirit, that shines in all its glory upon the brow of man and woman, liberated and unafraid.