

Lester ward's contributions to american sociology

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Lester Frank Ward was a man of science. Sometimes dubbed as the “Father of American Sociology” or the “Social Darwin” Lester Ward was first a botanist and paleontologist. He understood the power of science. Ward wrote *Dynamic Sociology* and a few other works with the hopes to reinstate the importance of experimentation and the scientific method to sociology. He served as president of the American Sociological Society in 1906 and appointed assistant geologist of the U. S. Geological Survey, a position he held for two years.

Born to Justus and Silence on June 18, 1841, young Lester came from very humble beginnings. His parents were very poor and could not afford to send him to school. So, Ward taught himself at home. Even at a young age, Ward displayed exceptional intelligence. He taught himself how to speak different languages, Latin and Greek to name a few. His studies also included mathematics, botany, and geology. Although, he was not at the intellectual level as Comte or Voltaire, he made many contributions to all things social and founded sociology in America.

He went on to join the fight against the Rebels in 1862. He was sent home after the Battle of Chancellorsville after being shot three times. While healing from his wounds, he also saw the reality of war which is legalized murder. He realized that the real enemy was ignorance, superstition, and oppression. In college, he felt that if he was recognized for his work in the natural sciences, then most would listen to him in the field of sociology. He believed that the natural sciences should be the base for social sciences.

Ward's style of writing was known to be brilliant and crystal clear. One might think this stems from his uncanny talent for language. His writings are plain and comprehensible, which is a breath of fresh air for a reader who might not comprehend wordy and difficult styles of writing. *Dynamic Sociology* is one of Ward's well known works. The reception at first was not that grand and Ward almost gave up on sociology to focus his energies on botany and geology. It eventually was praised by one of Ward's toughest critics, Albion W.

Small. When *Dynamic Sociology* was translated into Russian, it caused such a stir in the Russian government that the Czar ordered all copies to be burned in the city square of St. Petersburg in 1891. This is what George Kennan had to say about the book burning: "I have tried in my humble way to serve the cause of liberty in Russia, but I have not been able to do it with ability enough to get my writings burned. You are evidently a very dangerous man" (Chugerman, 66). *Pure Sociology* is Ward's most popular work.

The transition in Ward's views of society from naturalistic to an almost completely cultural view is evident in this work. It got rave reviews overseas but, America was a bit cold towards it. Ward had many minor contributions to sociology, but there are three major contributions that have endure throughout the years. First was the emphasis which Ward placed upon psychic factors in interhuman relations (Chugerman, 3). Ward believed that human intelligence could guide and control wishes, desires, and feelings. Only the human mind can understand a society in which humans live.

A good example would be happiness. In *Dynamic Sociology*, Ward explains that "happiness in the popular restricted sense is the experiencing of the higher emotional pleasures afforded by the gratification of social, esthetic, moral, and intellectual taste" (Gerver, 7). Ward's second contribution for the sociologist of today was his "emphasis upon human achievement as the proper subject matter for sociology" (Chugerman, 3). He did not believe that any species below man was capable of human achievement. This is proof of his different viewpoint previously mentioned.

His view of human society was mainly naturalistic, yet here one sees the change to a cultural view. Ward believed that desires and purposes were the foundation of culture that came about by accident at first, but could be morphed into intelligent social purposes. He also states that sociology is the science of that culture. His third major contribution to sociology is his "passionate affirmation of the possibility of intelligent social progress" (Chugerman, 3). He firmly believed in and pushed for the development of sociology as a science. He believed education was the safest method in which to develop intelligent social progress.

Ward's definition of social progress is the "increase of happiness of mankind" (Chugerman, 4). Even then, some found this definition insufficient, yet it can't be denied that Ward built a strong foundation for sociology with his philosophy. Telesis is the theory that through the power of mind, humans can take control of the situation and direct the evolution of human society. A telic society will develop individuals and therefore society as a whole. The higher the individual is developed, the more developed society will be. Progress depends on the achievements. Like Comte, Ward suggested that sociology

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should use the scientific method of the natural sciences. Ward's constructed his synthetic method from Comte's idea of synthesis and believed that science has no problems that cannot be solved.

The core of the synthetic method " is the law of causality, the magnetic pole which keeps the mind within the bounds of reason" (Chugerman, 100). To ignore this means to go back to metaphysics, where anything is possible and things happen without a cause. Ward's philosophy as the love of wisdom is the ideal behind his sociocracy. Science keeps the philosopher grounded and not to fly off into mistaken the supernatural for reality. Science alone is the base of all philosophy" (Chugerman, 94). Ward also believed that philosophy is a branch of the scientific method. From philosophy as synthesis rises science-philosophy. Science and philosophy go hand in hand and Ward believed that " only a scientist can become a true philosopher" (Chugerman, 95). Ward became an advocate for women's rights. Most sociologists disagreed with his theory that women were superior to men. Ward questioned how the mother of race came to be at such an inferior state and what forces has shaped them.

He stated that " male superiority was a fallacy and a result of tradition and prejudice" (Chugerman, 380). Ward's sex theories were opposed by both sexes and had a small following. One female write, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, dedicated her work, *The Man-Made World*, to Ward. Ward was a champion for the equality of all races and classes. He believed that this could only be achieved through universal education. He fervently opposed eugenics, the study and practice of selective breeding applied to humans, with the aim of improving the species.

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Charlotte Gillman strongly agreed with this movement and Ward harshly criticized her for it. Lester Ward passed away in the year 1913 at age 72. Ward was an eccentric man and had few friends. The few eulogies given by his friends remembered a man who fought relentlessly for human freedom and equality. Sadly, the majority of the public only saw him as an old professor. Only those closest to him put him in the same rank as Comte or Huxley. His love for the common people and hard work secures his place in 20th century America.