

In the late 1800s, new ideas surfaced to justify the great wealth accumulated by millionaires. One idea was Social Darwinism, proposed by British philosopher Herbert Spencer and made popular in the United States by William Graham Sumner, an American sociologist. Below are excerpts from Sumner's writings.

The millionaires are a product of natural selection, acting on the whole body of men to pick out those who can meet the requirement of certain work to be done. . . . It is because they are thus selected that wealth—both their own and that entrusted to them—aggregates under their hands. . . . They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. There is the intensest competition for their place and occupation. This assures us that all who are competent for this function will be employed in it, so that the cost of it will be reduced to the lowest terms.

The great stream of time and earthly things will sweep on just the same in spite of us. . . . Every one of us is a child of his age and cannot get out of it. He is in the stream and is swept along with it. All his science and philosophy come to him out of it. Therefore the tide will not be changed by us. It will swallow up both us and our experiments. . . . That is why it is the greatest folly of which a man can be capable to sit down with a slate and pencil to plan out a new social world.

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Comprehension

1. According to Sumner, who becomes a millionaire and by what process?
2. Why is a millionaire's lifestyle a good bargain for society?
3. Is Sumner a supporter of the status quo or an advocate of social change? Give evidence to support your answer.

Critical Thinking

4. Do you think that Sumner would say that *everyone* who is a millionaire deserves to be one? Why or why not?
5. What part do you think Sumner might say that luck, family connections, and cheating play in a millionaire's rise to the top?
6. Do you agree or disagree with Sumner's opinion of the possibility of social change? Explain.