

## Working Notes on Herbert Spencer (sociology's "forgotten giant")

Review briefly Spencer's biography, popularity, and influence.

- Charles Darwin on Spencer (see pp. 184-185 in *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*, by Janet Browne):

- Andrew Carnegie on Spencer:

Of all the writers that Carnegie read and studied throughout his life, he said that the English philosopher Herbert Spencer was the one who influenced him most. Spencer's writings provided the philosophical justification for Carnegie's unabashed pursuit of personal riches in the world of business, freeing him from the moral reservations about financial acquisition that he had inherited from his egalitarian Scottish relatives.

In his "Autobiography," Carnegie wrote about the dramatic effect of reading both the naturalist Charles Darwin and Spencer.

"I remember that light came as in a flood and all was clear," Carnegie wrote. "Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution. 'All is well since all grows better' became my motto, my true source of comfort."

Contrast with August Comte

- Spencer's statement of his differences with Comte:

What is Comte's professed aim? To give a coherent account of the progress of *human conceptions*. What is my aim? To give a coherent account of the progress of the *external world*. Comte proposes to describe the necessary, and the actual, filiation of *ideas*. I propose to describe the necessary, and the actual, filiation of *things*. Comte professes to interpret the genesis of our *knowledge of nature*. My aim is to interpret . . . the genesis of the *phenomena which constitute nature*. The one is subjective. The other is objective.

- liberal (left) vs conservative (right)
- amelioration vs laissez faire

In spite of the fact that Talcott Parsons dismisses Spencer in his first and monumental work *The Structure of Social Action* (published in 1937), it turns out that Parsons' work reflects a great deal of Spencer's sociology....

Spencer introduces and articulates ideas of functionalism, the organic analogy, and systemic sociology.

Although almost entirely self-educated, Spencer was quite knowledgeable about the biology of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and his theory reflects the influence of biology as well as a less-informed physics.

His notion was to articulate a “theory of everything” or at least to lay down a set of principles which held up across all the sciences, physical, natural, and social or, in Spencer’s terms at the mechanical, organic, and super-organic levels.

Spencer’s most Basic Statement of the Universal Process or Evolutionary Tendency:  
"The change from a state of relatively indefinite, incoherent, homogeneity to a state of relatively definite, coherent, heterogeneity."

Basic Point #1: The fundamental underlying phenomena of matter, force, and motion, when translated into the human arena, take this form: populations (=matter) as they grow or migrate (= motion) cause change (=force).

Basic Point #2: A basic dynamic of the universe is competition over limited resources, so that as expanding populations come into contact with one another those that are most successful (i.e., most adapted to the environment) are most likely to survive (Spencer is the original author of the phrase “survival of the fittest” later to be borrowed by and associated with Darwin’s theory of evolution).

Basic Point #3: Homogeneous entities are basically unstable and provide poor prospects for survival because they have a limited repertoire of responses to a (changing) environment.

Basic Point #4: Those entities which contain the most variability due to internal differentiation thereby possess the widest and therefore the most adaptive repertoire of responses to a (changing) environment and therefore are the most likely to succeed.

Basic Point #5: There is therefore a powerful tendency to go from the simple to the complex, or in Spencer’s classic phrase: “to change from a state of relatively indefinite, incoherent, homogeneity to a state of relatively definite, coherent, heterogeneity." This is Spencer’s principle of evolution, which occurs at all levels.

Basic Point #6: As any unit becomes more heterogeneous it develops the characteristics of an internally interdependent system. A result is the emergence of a set of requisite needs, expressed at the (societal/cultural) super-organic level as a set of institutions which satisfy those needs and between which institutions there must be negotiation and coordination. When these needs are appropriately integrated and satisfied the system tends toward a state of equilibrium, i.e., the various elements are in balance with one another.

Basic Point #7: As each system becomes more complex, interdependent, and successful, it develops this common set of requisite needs and accompanying functions:

- regulatory – maintaining and controlling boundaries, internal & external
- operative – meeting internal cultural and material needs
- distributive – moving information and substances (transport & communication)

Basic Point #8: At the super-organic level, the one that we are concerned with in the social sciences (society and culture) this evolutionary heterogeneity of necessity first occurs in at the integrative/regulatory level, and subsequently at the operative and distributive levels.

So the first stages are: simple w/o head  
simple with head  
compound  
doubly compound  
trebly compound

An increasingly sophisticated structure thus emerges – show general sociology system overhead (with Berger re-visited and Merton anticipated):

norms  
roles (norm-sets)  
statuses (role-sets)  
groups (small/informal—large/formal)  
institutions  
communities  
societies

Basic Point #9: “The evolution of society is, therefore, the story of increasing structural complexity and survivability” (Allan, p. 35). As structures become more complex, they differentiate—and as they differentiate they become more segmented and specialized. There results a multiplication of effects, each specialized segment replicating functions of the others. This produces problems of coordination and control which are increasingly resolved through a tendency toward centralization.

Basic Point #10: Again, historically, this tendency toward centralization first finds expression in militaristic (authoritarian) regulation and subsequently (evolutionarily) to industrial (voluntaristic, even libertarian) regulation (i.e., that system regulates best which regulates least!). Here is his Law of Equal Freedom: "Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man."

Historically, for Spencer, this evolution results in the system of English capitalism and industrialization. It is Marx, in fact, who (in *The Communist Manifesto*) summarizes this development so powerfully:

Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages.

The bourgeoisie has disclosed how it came to pass that the brutal display of vigor in the Middle Ages, which reactionaries so much admire, found its fitting

complement in the most slothful indolence. It has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former exoduses of nations and crusades.

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground -- what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?

Basic Point #11: This differentiation and specialization finds expression in the form of social institutions, which have the following characteristics:

- they are collective solutions to survival needs that spell out meanings, legitimations, and scripts for individual behavior;
- they are not reducible or alterable by individual actions or agency;
- they are not subjectively available, i.e., they are historically embedded;
- they are wrapped in morality, providing a conviction of rightness and moral energy.

Basic Point #12: There are four major types of institutions:

- Domestic (family, marriage, kinship)
- Ceremonial
- Political
- Ecclesiastical

Spencer is concerned with the evolution of each of these types of institutions.

- the theory of the evolution of marriage, from promiscuity to plural marriage, to monogamy;
- the theory of the evolution of ceremonies, from simple emotion to partially symbolic to intentionally and arbitrarily/manipulatively symbolic;
- the theory of the evolution of political authority, based on strength and age (and implicitly on sex), from despotism to oligarchy to democracy;
- the theory of the evolution of religion, from ghost-propitiation to ancestor worship to multiple gods to monotheism.

Some finer points worth considering:

The emergence of “Social Darwinism” and its influence during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries:

- capitalism, the “robber barons,” survival of the physically and financially fittest (operating as a legitimation of the status quo)
- appropriation by eugenics, the concepts of master/super races (especially by totalitarian regimes, e.g., Nazism under Hitler, fascism under Mussolini)