



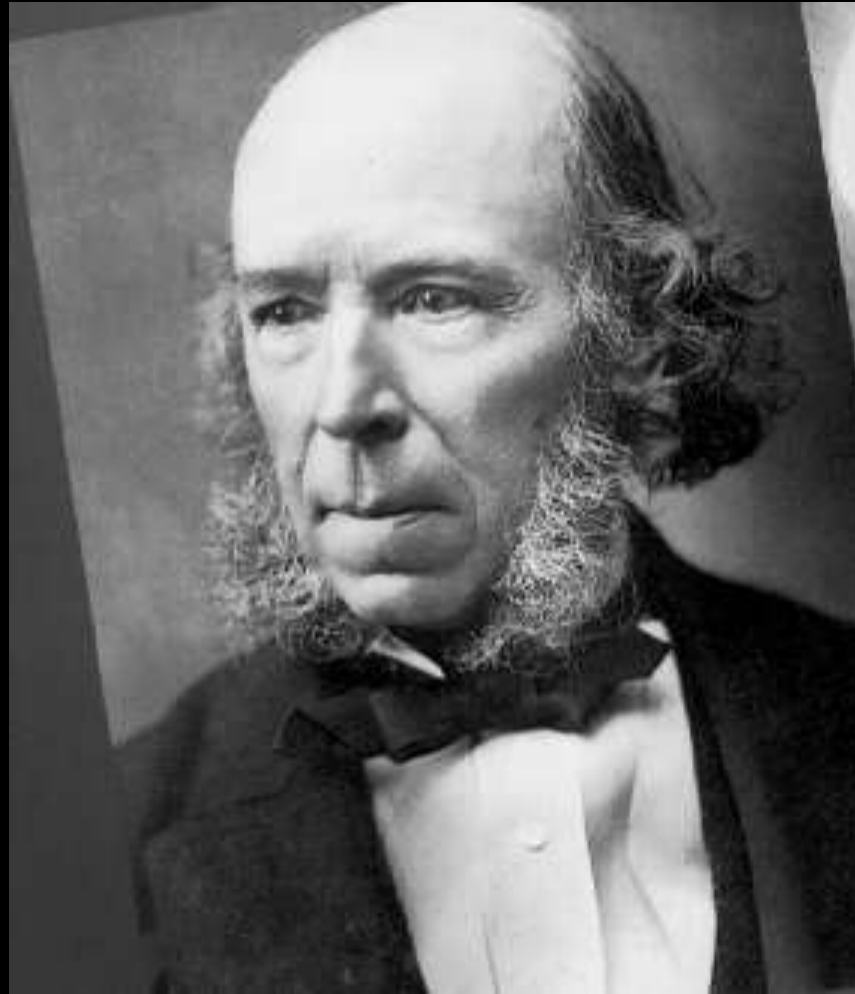
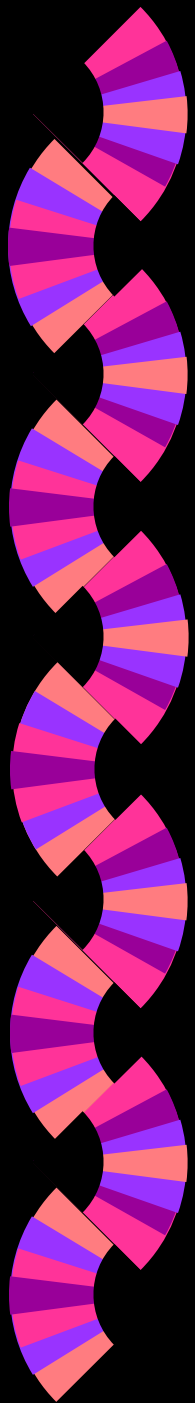
HERBERT SPENCER
(1820 -1903)

By Dr. F. Elwell



Note:

This presentation is based on the theories of Herbert Spencer as presented in his works. A more complete summary of Spencer's theories (as well as the theories of other macro-theorists) can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell.





On Materialism

"The average opinion in every age and country is a function of the social structure in that age and country" (1891, p. 390).



On Materialism

"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. ..



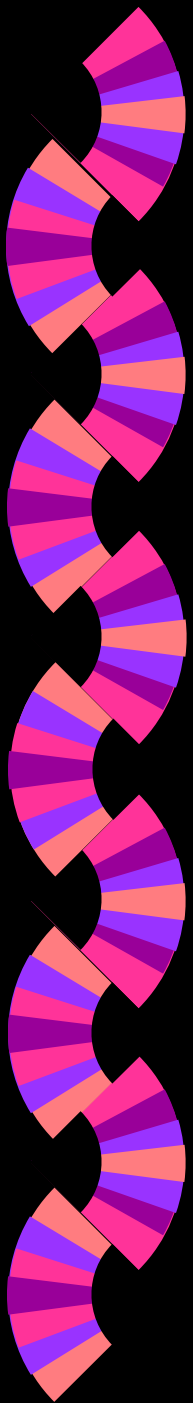
On Materialism

“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” (1904, p.570).



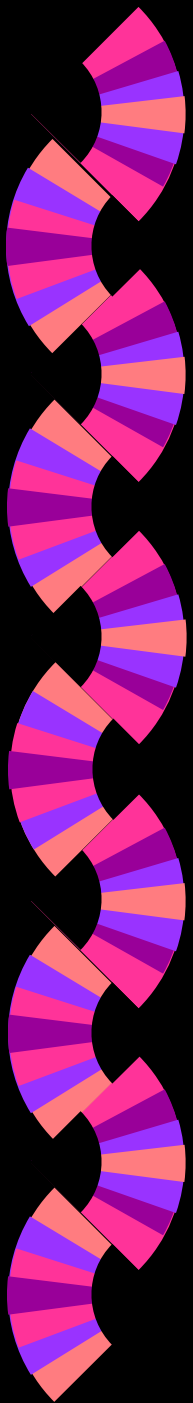
Evolution

Spencer's first and foremost concern was with evolutionary changes in social structures.



Evolution

Evolution was a universal process, which explains both the “earliest changes which the universe at large is supposed to have undergone...and those latest changes which we trace in society and the products of social life.”



Evolution

The evolution of societies is but a special case of a universally applicable natural law.



Evolution

"There can be no complete acceptance of sociology as a science, so long as the belief in a social order not conforming to natural law survives" (1891, p. 394).



Evolution

Note that Spencer does not claim that social evolution “parallels” or has “much in common with” organic evolution. Rather, he claims that social evolution is an extension of organic evolutionary principles.

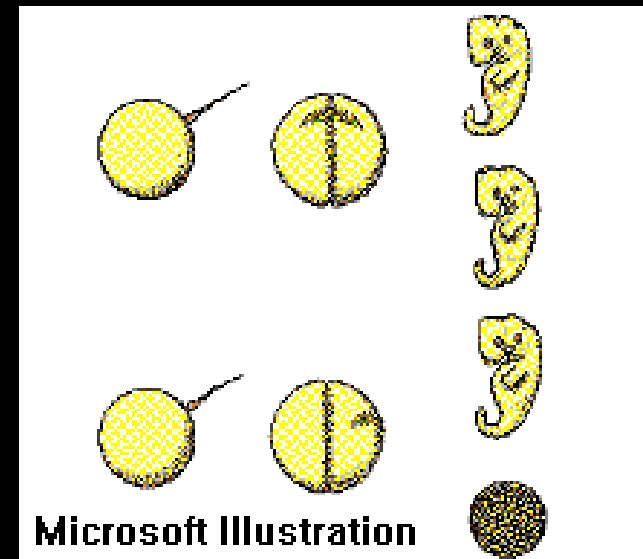


Evolution

"We must recognize the truth that the struggles for existence between societies have been instrumental to their evolution" (1896, vol 2, p. 241).

Evolution

Increases in size, Spencer maintains, bring in their wake differentiation in structure (a greater division of labor).





Evolution

If aardvarks were suddenly to grow to the size of elephants, only major modifications in their body structure would allow them to continue being viable organisms.

Evolution



Tom McHugh, Photo Researcher



Evolution

If hunting and gathering societies were suddenly to grow in population into the thousands, only major modifications in their structure would allow them to continue being viable societies.

Evolution



Jerry Jacka



Differentiation

"Societies, like living bodies, begin as germs—originate from masses which are extremely minute in comparison with the masses some of them eventually reach."



Differentiation

Again, increases in the size of units are invariably accompanied by an increase in the complexity of their structure.



Differentiation

"The change from the homogenous to the heterogeneous is displayed in the progress of civilization as a whole, as well as in the progress of every nation; and it is still going on with increasing rapidity" (1892, vol. I, p. 19).



Differentiation

"While rudimentary, a society is all warrior, all hunter, all hut-builder, all tool-maker: every part fulfills for itself all needs" (1967, pp. 4-5).



Differentiation

"As [society] grows, its parts become unlike: it exhibits increase of structure. The unlike parts simultaneously assume activities of unlike kinds. These activities are not simply different, but the differences are so related as to make one another possible. The reciprocal aid thus given causes mutual dependence of the parts. And the mutually dependent parts, living by and for another, form an aggregate constituted on the same general principle as is an individual organism" (1967, p. 8).



Differentiation

"At first the unlikeness among its groups of units is inconspicuous in number and degree, but as population augments, divisions and subdivisions become more numerous and more decided" (1967, p. 3).



Differentiation

"This division of labor, first dwelt on by political economists as a social phenomenon, and thereupon recognized by biologists as a phenomenon of living bodies, which they called the 'physiological division of labor,' is that which in the society, as in the animal, makes it a living whole" (1967, p. 5).



Differentiation

"The consensus of functions becomes closer as evolution advances. In low aggregates, both individual and social, the actions of the parts are but little dependent on one another, whereas in developed aggregates of both kinds that combination of actions which constitutes the life of the whole makes possible the component actions which constitutes the lives of the parts" (1967, p. 25).



Differentiation

"...where parts are little differentiated they can readily perform one another's functions, but where much differentiated they can perform one another's functions very imperfectly or not at all" (1967, p. 25).



Differentiation

"It inevitably happens that in the body politic, as in the living body, there arises a regulating systemAs compound aggregates are formed . . .there arise supreme regulating centers and subordinate ones and the supreme centers begin to enlarge and complicate" (1967, p. 46).



Social Evolution

Spencer pictures the process of social evolution as almost unrelenting and ever present—but not quite.



Social Evolution

"Though taking the entire assemblage of societies, evolution may be held inevitable . . . yet it cannot be held inevitable in each particular society, or even probable" (1896, vol. I, p. 96).



Social Evolution

"While the current degradation theory is untenable, the theory of progression, in its ordinary form, seems to me untenable also. . . . It is possible and, I believe, probable, that retrogression has been as frequent as progression" (1896, vol. I, p. 95).



Social Evolution

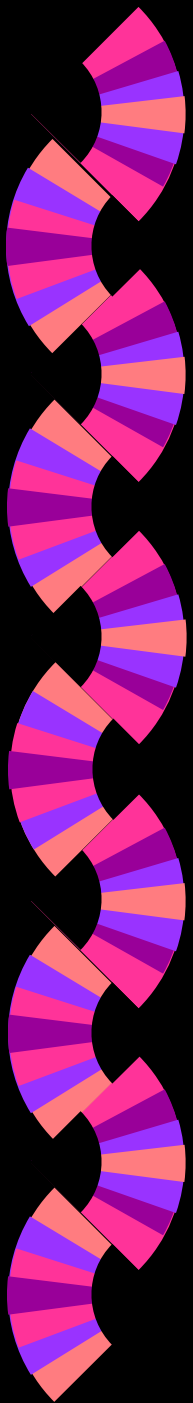
“A social organism, like an individual organism, undergoes modifications until it comes into equilibrium with environing conditions; and thereupon continues without further change of structure” (1896, vol. I, p. 96).



Social Evolution

Once equilibrium has been reached, evolution continues “to show itself only in the progressing integration that ends in rigidity [and] practically ceases.”





Social Evolution

"Like other kinds of progress, social progress is not linear but divergent and re-divergent.

..”



Social Evolution

“While spreading over the earth mankind have found environments of various characters, and in each case the social life fallen into, partly determined by the social life previously led, has been partly determined by the influences of the new environment; so that the multiplying groups have tended ever to acquire differences, now major and now minor: there have arisen genera and species of societies” (1896, vol. III, p. 331).



Militant & Industrial Societies

To distinguish between what he called “militant” and “industrial” societies, Spencer used as the basis a difference in social regulation.



Militant & Industrial Societies

Rather than being based on the physical and biological environment, this classification is rooted in a hypothesis that social structure is also affected by the relations a society has to other societies.



Militant & Industrial Societies

With peaceful relations with neighbors come relatively weak and diffuse systems of government. With hostile relations come coercive and centralized authoritarian regimes.



Militant & Industrial Societies

The characteristic trait of militant societies is compulsion. The industrial type of society, in contrast, is based on voluntary cooperation.



Militant & Industrial Societies

This militant/industrial classification scheme gave him a pessimistic view of the future of mankind.



Militant & Industrial Societies

“If we contrast the period from 1815 to 1850 with the period from 1850 to the present time, we cannot fail to see that all along with increased armaments, more frequent conflicts, and revived military sentiment, there has been a spread of compulsory regulations. . . . The freedom of individuals has been in many ways actually diminished And undeniably this is a return towards the coercive discipline which pervades the whole social life where the militant type is pre-eminent.?”



Functionalism

Much of Spencer's discussion of social institutions and their changes is expressed in functional terms.



Functionalism

"To understand how an organization originated and developed, it is requisite to understand the need subserved at the outset and afterwards" (1896, vol III, p. 3).



Ethnocentrism

He warned against the common error (in his day as well as in ours) of regarding customs that appeared strange and repugnant by contemporary standards of being of no value to particular societies.



Ethnocentrism

"That what, relative to our thoughts and sentiments, were arrangements of extreme badness had fitness to conditions which made better arrangements impracticable" (1891, p. 339).



Ethnocentrism

“Instead of passing over as of no account or else regarding as purely mischievous, the superstitions of primitive man, we must inquire what part they play in social evolution” (1891, p. 339).



Functionalism

As sociologists, Spencer urges us to study the double aspect of an institution's evolutionary stage and of the functions they serve at that stage.



Non-Interventionism

While Comte, you will recall, stressed that we should aim to discover the laws of society so that we could act to change society for the better, Spencer argued with equal conviction that we should not seek social reform.



Non-Interventionism

In contrast to Comte, who wanted to rule society through the power of his sociologist-priests, Spencer argued that sociologists should convince the public that society must be free from the meddling of governments and reformers.



Non-Interventionism

“As I heard remarked by a distinguished professor ‘When once you begin to interfere with the order of Nature there is no knowing where the result will end.’ And if this is true of that sub-human order of Nature to which he referred, still more is it true of that order of Nature existing in the social arrangements of human beings.”



Non-Interventionism

"The well-being of existing humanity and the unfolding of it into this ultimate perfection are both secured by that same beneficent, though severe, discipline to which animate creation at large is subject: a discipline which is pitiless in the working out of good: a felicity-pursuing law which never swerves for the avoidance of partial and temporary suffering. the poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shouldering aside of the weak by the strong, which leaves so many 'in shallows and in miseries,' are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence" (1850/1954, pp. 288-289)



Non-Interventionism

According to Spencer, the state had “the duty not only of shielding each citizen from the trespasses of his neighbors, but of defending him, in common with the community at large, against foreign aggression.”



Non-Interventionism

Whenever the state intervenes, according to Spencer, whether for social welfare, the economic health of an enterprise, or for any other reason, it necessarily restricts freedom and must ultimately lead to tyranny.



Non-Interventionism

"For a government to take from a citizen more property than is needful for the efficient defense of that citizen's rights is to infringe his rights" (1850/1954, p. 333).



The Proper Role of Government

There are two conditions for a healthy society. First, there must “...be few restrictions on men's liberties to make agreements with one another, and there must, in the second place, be an enforcement of the agreements which they do make” (Man Verses the State).



Social Darwinism

Similar to Malthus, Spencer argued that our fertility stimulates greater activity because of the competition for resources. But this is where the resemblance ends.



Social Darwinism

Spencer goes on to posit that this competition would, in the long run, produce smarter people as the more ingenious would survive and the lesser intelligent people would die off. Over time this would lead to a gradual rise in intelligence over time.



Social Darwinism

"Those whom this increasing difficulty of getting a living, which excess of fertility entails, does not stimulate to improvements in production—that is, to greater mental activity—are on the high road to extinction; and must ultimately be supplanted by those whom the pressure does so stimulate."



Social Darwinism

Welfare would, of course, distort this invisible hand of natural selection, allowing the “unfit” to survive. Government’s intervention would seem beneficial—but it would only be so in the short run. It would interfere with society’s adaptation to the environment, more unfit people would survive and reproduce, and greater numbers would suffer in the future.



Social Darwinism

[One flaw in this thinking, of course, is the hypothesis that the more intelligent survive. Social class, luck, grace, physical attractiveness, athleticism and a host of other factors play into survival. Also, unlike wealth, passing on intelligence to your children is problematic. Finally, the time scales needed for such biological evolution are measured in terms of millennia.]



Social Darwinism

Spencer was not a cruel, heartless, reactionary who enjoyed human suffering. Rather, he was a man who saw societies as systems that were in constant adjustment to their natural and social environments. He viewed government action to take the edge off these necessary adjustments as ultimately causing more human suffering.



Systems Theory

The effects of any sizable intervention in a system—whether that be an ecosystem, a physiological system, or a social system—are like ripples spreading out on a pond from a dropped pebble; they go on and on.



Systems Theory

For one that views society as a system, it is clear that if you keep everything in mind, the image of a chain does not suffice. Everything is connected to everything else.



Systems Theory

You must think in terms of a network or web. You must think in three dimensions (or four if you include the dimension of time).



Systems Theory

Finally, various systems—physiological, psychological, social, ecological—interact with one another. While such visualization is certainly more difficult than simple causality, it is probably a much more accurate reflection of complex reality.



Note:

For a more extensive discussion of Spencer's theory, as well as a fuller discussion of its implications for understanding human behavior, refer to *Macrosociology: the Study of Sociocultural Systems*. For an even deeper understanding of Spencer's thought, read from the bibliography that follows.



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