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# A Critical Analysis of Herbert Spencer's Theory of Evolution

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## Abstract

*This article focuses on Herbert Spencer's theory of evolution of society. At first, the article provides with a thorough portrayal of Spencer's Theory of Evolution. After that, the shortcomings of this theory are highlighted basing on the available literature. Thus, this article does not make any unique contribution to the literature of its kind. It is simply a general reading on the missing links of Spencer's theory of evolution.*

## Keywords:

*Analysis, Herbert Spencer, theory of evolution*

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## 1.0. Introduction

Though during his lifetime Herbert Spencer used to be considered as one of the founding fathers who *'shaped the emergence of sociology as a distinctive scientific discipline'* (Munch, 1994; 35), his fame was almost gone after a few years of his death as the sociologists found some significant drawbacks in the logics and explanations of his theories. His theory of evolution of societies was prominent. His analogy related to organisms and human societies seemed to be fascinating and that is why at one point of time it grabbed the attentions of people. Later, the momentous shortcomings of this theory made Herbert Spencer almost 'unworthy of reading' to many scholars in the community of sociologists. Especially when an influential sociologist like Talcott Parsons (1937; 3) declared that 'Spencer is dead', sociologist all over had to think twice. Coser (1971; 89) commented: "...critics now seem to be of the opinion that deep down Spencer was a rather shallow philosopher." Szacki (1979; 217) observes:

"Rarely do we witness such deep contrast between the successes achieved by a thinker during his lifetime and the oblivion, if not infamy, into which he fell after his death....True, the sociologists acknowledge him as one of the founders of their discipline, but all they find in his works (if they ever read them) is a warning about how not to pursue it."

However, this avoidance of Spencer's theories from the part of the sociologists was a little bit unexpected as there is no doubt about the fact that his works were very much significant in the early American sociology and British social anthropology (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 62). Szacki (1979; 217) stated: "*Spencer's role was at least equal to Comte's in the history of sociology*". During his lifetime, Spencer used to be a venerated intellectual and an acclaimed educator. Szacki (1979; 217) acknowledged:

"He fascinated his contemporaries by unfolding before them a picture of a world arranged in a perfect order without the arrangement of any traditional authorities, a world understood by people who believed only in science."

Herbert Spencer is regarded as an 'evolutionist' in sociological theory. In evolutionism, social scientists were either employing Darwinism (means, applied the idea of biological evolution in social sciences) in their thoughts or they were showing their major interest with the problems of social development (Szacki, 1979; 206). Famous scholars

like Tylor, Morgan, Bastain, Rrazer along with Spencer and Darwin are regarded as evolutionists. Spencer employed evolutionary theory to the social world and discarded religious explanations about its origins and structure (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 61). Munch (1994; 35) commented:

“He combined the philosophical utilitarianism of his British compatriots Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill with the organicism and evolutionism blossoming in his own days because of striking success of Darwin's evolutionary theory in biology”.

This article concentrates on his theory of evolution. In the next section of this article, a detailed description of Spencer's Theory of Evolution is presented. Then the drawbacks of this theory are discussed basing on the available literature. Thus, this article does not have any original contribution to the literature of its kind. It is simply a general reading on the missing links of Spencer's theory of evolution.

## **2.0. Spencer's Theory of Evolution:**

Spencer's theories were substantially connected with the evolutionary change in the social structures and the social institutions (Abraham and Morgan, 1985; 59). He mentioned that a society is ordered on the same system as an individual (Spencer, 1896; 17). He argues that though it is considerably distinctive from other evolutionary phenomena, the evolution of the societies is also a case of the consistent universally natural law.

### **2.1. Analogy of Society and Biological Organisms:**

His visualization of the social systems was at all times conditioned by the general notion of evolution (Turner, 1993; 18). Spencer mentions (taken from Coser, 1971; 90):

“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”.

Biological analogy has always remained a crucial concern in the sociological reasoning of Spencer. According to him, evolution is (taken from Coser, 1971; 90): “...*a change from a relatively indefinite, incoherent, homogeneity to a state of relatively definite, coherent, heterogeneity*”. The living organisms and the societies are analogous in the sense that both progress

in terms of size. At the beginning, like other living organisms, society remains extremely minuscule and later it increases in size and thus the complexity of its structure increases as well. Just like other living bodies, from homogeneity, it moves towards the heterogeneity:

“Animals that are low on the evolutionary scale, just like embryos of those higher on that scale have a few distinguishable parts; they are relatively homogenous. So it is with society. At first 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. (Coser, 1971; 91)” .

The enhancement in the size of the society can either be a result of the increase in population or a result of the existing unrelated groups getting joined to each other.

At the primitive stage of a society, the division of labor is not that conspicuous. Societies are almost like altogether warriors, entirely hunters or completely tool-makers and each part of the society is fulfilling all its necessities itself. So, there exists homogeneity. As the society grows, the parts become dissimilar. These dissimilar parts at once perform different activities and these heterogeneous parts become more dependent on each other. It is very much similar to the growth of the body parts of the living organisms. As the body parts grow, each part become conscious of its independent function and the interdependence of these parts also grows:

“In simple hunting tribes, specialization of functions is still only crudely developed. The same men are typically both hunters and warriors. But as settled agricultural societies arise, the roles of cultivator and warrior become more distinct. Similarly, small tribal groupings have but rudimentary political institutions, but as larger political units arise, increasing political complexity and differentiation appear with the emergence of chiefs, rulers, and kings”. (Coser, 1971; 92).

Spencer identified four chief parallelisms between a society and an individual organism (Murray, 1929; 38). *Firstly*, they both start as small aggregates and then grow in size. *Secondly*, as they grow, they lose their simplicity and become complex in structure. *Thirdly*, as a result of the increasing differentiation, there grows a mutual dependence among the component parts until the life and normal functioning of each becomes dependent on the life of the whole. *Lastly*, the life of the whole becomes

independent with a far more prolonged nature than the life of the component parts.

Further, he was also aware of some differences between these two (Munch, 1994; 46 and Murray, 1929; 38). That is why he indicated four dissimilarities between a society and an individual organism. *Firstly*, societies have no specific form. *Secondly*, the living tissues of organisms form a continuous mass but the units of the society are dispersed persons. *Thirdly*, the living elements of organisms are fixed in their places and it is not the same in societies. The units of a society are capable of moving from place to place. *Finally*, in the body of an animal only a special tissue is endowed with feelings but in society, every member has feelings.

According to Munch (1994; 47), Spencer's principles of sociology studies the following things:

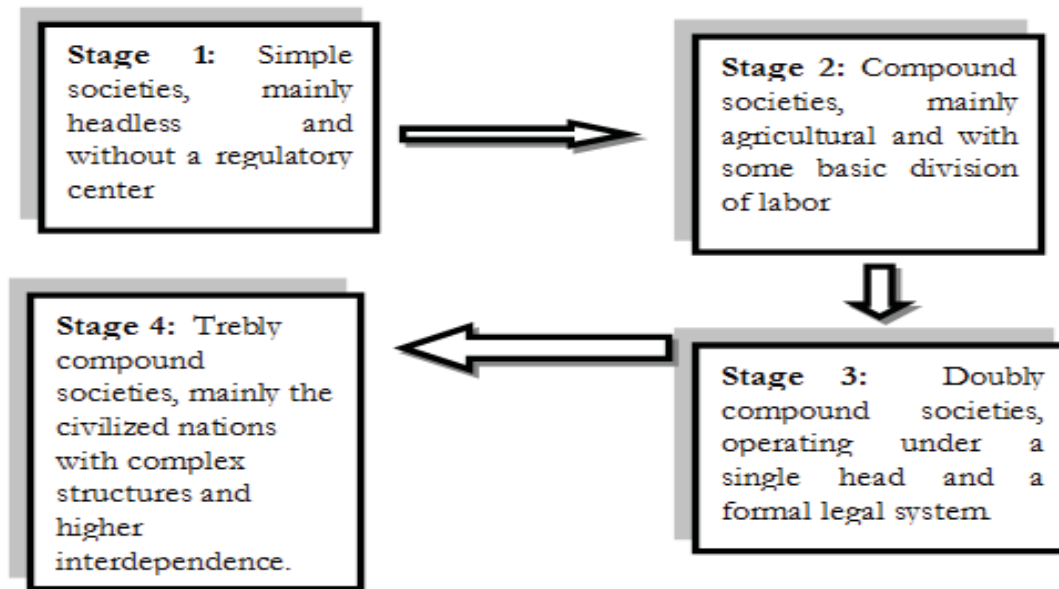
- The progressive modifications to their general environment effected by the action of societies;
- The growing size and density of social aggregates;
- The increasing interdependence between the whole of society and its constituent parts, and
- The growing interdependence between societies.

## 2.2. Evolutionary Phases of Societies:

Spencer attempts to categorize the societies according to their evolutionary phases and determines that the societies become complex in a series. At first, there happens to be *simple* societies which remain in the form of a single working whole 'unsubjected' to any other and the parts work together without a regulatory center for certain public ends (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 71). These societies are 'headless' in the sense that their leadership style is mainly occasional leadership or unstable leadership. Then, because of the unification of two or more simple societies (may be in a peaceful way or a result of wars), *compound* societies come into existence. These societies are mainly agricultural in nature and have some basic division of labor and permanent residences (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 71). The next form is called *doubly compound societies* where political organizations become more intricate (rigid and complex) under a single head and a formal legal system. The last kind, according to Spencer, is the *trebly compound societies* that are actually the great civilized

nations where the complication of structures and the increased shared dependence become more evident (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 72). According to Spencer, all the societies have to go through this compound evolution process (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Stages of Structural Complexity of Societies



### 2.3. Industrial and Militant Societies:

Though this evolution of structural complexity is similar for all societies, their organizational purposes vary (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 72). According to organizational purposes, Spencer divided the societies into two distinct categories:

- Industrial Societies,
- and Militant Societies.

This classification emphasizes on the type of internal regulation within the society and on the relation of a society to other societies in its significant environment (Coser, 1971; 93). The militant societies have only one commanding center that *‘exercises control over all its members and over all spheres of their activity, not only prohibiting certain actions, but also deciding what should be done’* (Szacki, 1979; 226). These societies are characterized by ‘compulsion’ which is referred to as *compulsory cooperation*. Here, *‘the will of the citizen in all transactions, private and public, overruled by that of government’* (Coser, 1971; 93). All the organizations in this kind of society are public



and the state has a centralized structure. Economic autonomy and protectionism (with little external trade) are encouraged (Coser, 1971; 95). Here it is believed that the individuals live for the benefits of the state and '*each member of a society is assigned a position in rank, in occupation and in locality*' (Szacki, 1979; 226). The psychological traits distinctive to the individuals in a militant society are: conformism, obedience, loyalty, acceptance of routine, lack of initiative, dependency on authority (Szacki, 1979; 226). They believe that prevailing conditions are usual and the only possible conditions.

Industrial society is a literal opposite to the militant society and it is based on '*voluntary cooperation*' rather than 'compulsory cooperation'. Here it is believed that '*the social whole exists for the benefit of its member parts*' and '*the will of the citizens is supreme and the governing agent exists merely to carry out their will*' (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 72). In these economies, private organizations exist and the structure of the state remains decentralized. Rather than economic autonomy of the state, free trade is encouraged. There exists a plasticity and openness of rank and occupation (Coser, 1971; 95).

#### **2.4. The Ultimate Man and the Ultimate Form of Society:**

Though Spencer anticipated that in general, there shall be a common trend of development of industrial state, he also stated that a reversion to the militant state may also occur (Adams and Sydie, 2001; 73).

Spencer tried to persuade the sociologists with the notion that a society must be liberated from the interference of the governments and the reformers as, by doing so, they will interfere with the order of nature. He endorses that these interventions might result in consequences that cannot be predicted (Coser, 1971; 100). The government intervention creates obstacles for the society in adjusting within its environment. The state should only have the power to look after the rights of its people and guard against outer enemies. Coser (1971; 100) comments:

“A good society, in Spencer's view, is based on contracts between individuals pursuing their respective interests. Whenever the state intervenes in these contractual arrangements, whether for reasons for social welfare or any other, it either distorts the social order or leads

to retrogression from the benefits of industrial society to early forms of tyrannical and militant social order”.

Spencer (1899, 3; 331) mentioned:

“...ultimate man will be one whose private requirements coincide with public ones. He will be that manner of man who, in spontaneously fulfilling his own nature, identically performs the functions of the social unit.”

These men will be considered as the ‘fittest’ and they will be able to create an equilibrium in the society without the help of the intervention of government. Spencer believed that the nature has a normal tendency to dispose of the unfit and at last, the fittest survives. Abraham and Morgan (1985; 64) commented:

“He deduced from his system of the conviction that the rapid elimination of the unfit individuals from society through natural selection (not violent executions) would benefit the race biologically and that the state therefore should do nothing to relieve the conditions of the poor, whom he assumed to be less fit”.<sup>3</sup>

Spencer mentions that the economy will perform superior if the individuals are allowed to work for their own interests and that is why the state should not interfere the economy (Abraham and Morgan, 1985; 64). He was a determined campaigner of individualism and laissez-faire politics. According to him (Abraham and Morgan, 1985; 65):

- The state should not go for any kind of interference with private activities;
- State should not involve itself in the sectors like: education, health, sanitation, postal service, money and banking, housing conditions and poverty elimination.

As mentioned earlier, the roles of the state should be restricted within the guarding of the individual rights and defending against outside hostility. The evolution will ultimately craft a social order with absolute harmony in the society.

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham and Morgan (1985; 64) commented: “Although he opposed governmental assistance to the less fit, he did not oppose to individual philanthropy. Individuals, he allowed, must combine philanthropic energy and philosophical calm when treating such matter.”

### 3.0. The Missing Links:

As mentioned previously, though the theories of Herbert Spencer were admired in his lifetime, through the passage of time they started facing massive disapproval from the intellectuals. Many scholars stopped studying Spencer's thoughts as, according to them, Spencer appeared to be a naïve sociologist. This section of the article strives to draw attention to the criticisms related to Spencer's thoughts. Murray (1929; 45) comments: "...the Spencerian system was planned, in the magnificence of its author's hopes, on a scale too vast for real completion".

#### 3.1. Criticisms of the analogy of the biological organisms and the society:

His analogy of the biological organisms and the society also attracted ample criticisms. Munch (1994; 54 & 55) comments:

"Spencer's evolutionary theory suffers from its too narrow economic and naturalistic conception. Evolution is seen as automatic, natural process in which society is economically upgraded via the division of labor, which then brings about all the amenities of greater liberty and higher morality. .... What Spencer is able to explain is only a small part of the progressing division of labor and nothing beyond that".

Murray (1929; 38) argued that: "Society is indeed an organism, but it is an organism which exists in the thoughts and feelings of its members to a degree which Spencer was not prepared to allow". Murray (1929; 44) also comments: "There is the chasm between conscious life and unconscious, and there is the chasm between the organic and the inorganic".

According to Abraham and Morgan (1985; 70) Spencer's thoughts have some major misleading notions:

"His fallacies included (1) his belief that organisms form concrete wholes, whereas today sociology emphasizes their free character, (2) that organisms are consciously concentrated, whereas today we speak of societal dispersal, and (3) his belief that social parts exist for the social whole, but today we are well aware of society's focus upon the benefits of individuals."

Murray (1929; 44) comments: "Spencer picked up facts here and there, and fitted them into what looked like a coherent whole. The

coherence was only in appearance. In spite of his powers of generalization the facts remained a medley”.

It is said that the greatest weakness of Spencer’s theory is that it tried to provide an identical explanation to all phenomena (Szacki, 1979; 217). Coser (1971; 97) presented the following comments of a businessman who said by criticizing Spencer: “*Some businesses grow diverse and complicated, others get simpler and more uniform, others go into the Bankruptcy Court. In the long run and over the whole field there is no more reason for expecting one process rather than the other*”. Munch (1994; 53) argues: “*We cannot explain the growth of markets in societies all over the world by their evolutionary superiority.....More causes are needed to explain the growing division of labor and corresponding markets*”.

### **3.2. Criticisms of the idea of ‘the Ultimate Industrial Society and Social Order’:**

Whether an industrial society ultimately can generate social order and harmony is a matter of doubt. Marx has shown that the expansion of industrial capitalistic society cannot create that harmonized social state rather it creates power gap and class conflict. Munch (1994; 54) argues: “*Durkheim emphasized, contrary to Spencer, that the progressing division of labor by no means increases happiness. It intensifies competition for scarce resources, breaks up traditional bonds....These effects of the growing division of labor bring with them a lot of unhappiness.*”

High level of industrialization can create some social problems also. In highly industrialized capitalistic societies, jobs become competitive. People also become very materialistic. Their views towards life become worldly and money-oriented. Lifestyles become expensive and self-centered. People want to be high achievers and thus suffer from anxiety. Creating a balance between family life and work life becomes difficult. So, problems like addiction to alcohol and drugs, broken families, increased number of suicides etc. become common phenomena. Too much industrialization in the capitalistic societies has created problems to the natural environment also. Because of unwise utilization of natural resources and uncontrolled industrial pollutions world’s climate is changing adversely. So, the idea of the ultimate ‘order’ and solidarity in an industrial society remains debatable.

### **3.3. Criticisms of the concepts of 'survival of the fittest' and 'no government intervention':**

For obvious reasons, the theories of Spencer are incapable to draw any attention to many modern-day humanistic sociologists. His notion of the survival of the fittest and the elimination of the unfits, especially poor people, appears as a questionable idea in the modern society. Though he supported individual philanthropy, he denied the importance of government intervention in poverty reduction. Leaving the poor people in their condition and allowing them to become eliminated is genuinely an inhuman approach. Civilized societies, in most cases, cannot apply this approach.

Again, Spencer's argument of 'no interference of the government in the poverty reduction' is controversial. It is tough to reduce poverty just by depending only on the individual's contribution and without the interventions and initiatives from the part of the government. In many countries, the government initiatives in poverty reduction proved fruitful. Thus the 'unfit' people of these societies were made 'fit' to live in the society with the help of government interventions. In most developing and underdeveloped countries of the world, government is taking initiatives to reduce the poverty level.

Leaving the services like education and health in the hand of the private sector may result in commercialization of these essential needs. Thus, there is a chance that there will grow unhealthy and unethical competition (sometimes coalition also) among the competing service providers. As a result, either cost of these essential services will rise or quality of these services may fall.

After more than a hundred years of Spencer's death, by analyzing the current state of the society, it can be said that, lack of government intervention may create problems for the society and an industrial society may fail to create the 'ultimate man' described by him.

### **3.4. Criticisms of 'Laissez-fair':**

A laissez-fair, free-trade, unprotected economy, in many cases, is not expected to lead to economic success. In many cases, free trade comes as a risk for the local industries. That is why we can see that in most of the countries of the world, they have built a 'mixed economy' where at least some trade protections exist in order to safeguard the local

industries. If local industries are destroyed, because of the increase in the unemployment level, poverty level increases and it creates chaos in the society.

#### 4.0. Conclusion:

The purpose of this article has been twofold: (a) to describe the theory of evolution given by Herbert Spencer and (b) to highlight the criticisms of this theory. Here it was seen that Spencer's theories had several drawbacks and because of these shortcomings, Spencer became relatively unpopular among the sociologists after his times. In many cases, sociologists were not even inclined to read his works. But there is no doubt that in his time he was recognized as a celebrated sociologist and his efforts helped sociology to grow as a discipline.

The contents of this article are mostly based on the published literature. Thus, this article does not claim for making any unique contribution to the literature of its kind. It is simply a general reading on the missing links of Spencer's theory of evolution.

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