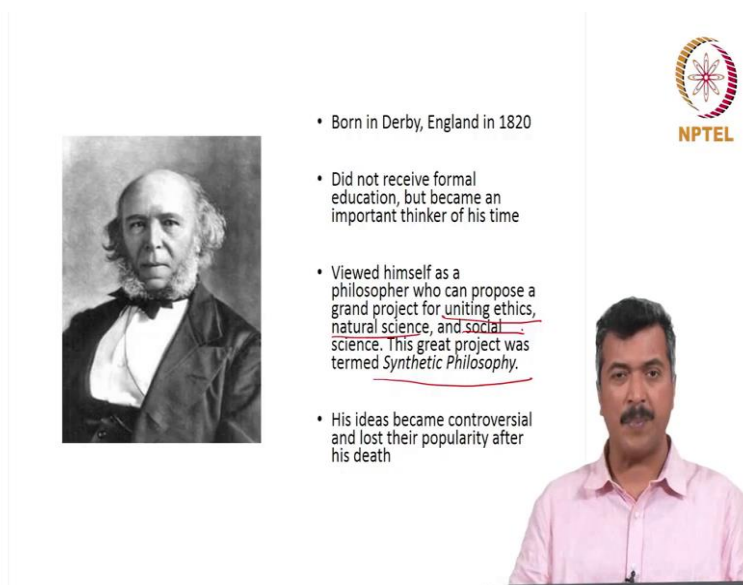


Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture No. 13
Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)

Welcome back to the class. In this session we will be discussing about Herbert Spencer, a very important British philosopher who has tremendously contributed for the formation sociology as a discipline. Hope you remember in the previous class we discussed the contribution of Auguste Comte who is widely considered as the father of sociology. Auguste Comte had a very significant impact in Spencer's thinking and works.

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- Born in Derby, England in 1820
- Did not receive formal education, but became an important thinker of his time
- Viewed himself as a philosopher who can propose a grand project for uniting ethics, natural science, and social science. This great project was termed Synthetic Philosophy.
- His ideas became controversial and lost their popularity after his death

Herbert Spencer was born in Derby in England in 1820 and it is a very interesting thing to note that he did not receive any formal education. He was educated by his father and his uncle but he turned out to be one of the very influential and widely popular philosophers of his time. He has written extensively and his academic interest spread across different areas so it is a surprising fact that a person who did not receive any formal education or who did not attend any college or university became so influential and became a very prolific author and thinker.


Spencer viewed himself as a philosopher who can propose a grand project for uniting ethics, natural science and social science. This great project was termed as Synthetic Philosophy. As we have seen in the previous classes as well, thinkers like Montesquieu or thinkers like Saint Simon or even to a large extent Auguste Comte, were all pre-occupied with the possibility of providing a much larger social law that can be applicable across societies, across the time.

Because they were heavily influenced by the way in which natural science such as physics, chemistry and biology were taking shape.


Here Spencer was not different as he proposed to formulate a theory which unites ethics, natural science and social sciences. You must be by now knowing that this was too much an ambitious project, which is too grandiose in its nature and he termed it as kind of synthetic philosophy. It is a very broad and overarching kind of a philosophy that includes almost every aspects of human as well as natural society.

His ideas became controversial later and lost their popularity after his death. We will come back to this particular point later because many of his arguments that were made towards the end of his life, especially related to the whole idea of social Darwinism invited so much criticism. He was thoroughly criticized by a lot of people for some of his very controversial and very conservative arguments.

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- Biological theories of Malthus, Von Baer and Charles Darwin influenced him extensively
- Spencer came to emphasize that evolution is a process of development from an incoherent, undifferentiated, and homogeneous mass to a differentiated and coherent pattern in which the functions of structures are well coordinated
- **Social Statics**: Human happiness can be achieved only when individuals can satisfy their needs and desires without infringing on the rights of others to do the same.
- Presented this as the law of ethics and morality



Spencer was very heavily influenced by theorists like Malthus, Von Baer and Charles Darwin. These theories especially for example, Malthusians theory about Population Growth and Charles Darwin's theory about this Natural Selection and Evolution, heavily influenced Herbert Spencer's thinking because he always wanted to find a parallel between the human society and the organic society.

This theme actually runs through his entire scholarship or his entire academic career. Spencer came to emphasize that evolution is a process of development from an incoherent, undifferentiated and homogenous mass to a differentiated and coherent pattern in which the

functions of structure are well coordinated. This is a very important and very interesting definition of evolution and you will be able to see that this particular characterization of evolution can be applicable to both a natural society as well as human society and exactly Herbert Spencer argued like that.

He provided a definition that evolution is a process of development from an incoherent undifferentiated and homogeneous mass to a differentiated and coherent pattern in which the functions of structures are well coordinated. So, here you come across these two terms 'functions' as well as 'structures' and these two terms are extremely important because they laid foundation for the later development of structural functionalism as a very important theoretical school.

I have made this remark several times in the previous classes but this is an extremely important point that the whole preoccupation with the question of the structure of a society and the kind of a corresponding function. How it is imperative that certain structures are so important, so significant for performance of certain kind of function, the kind of a connection between function and structure. This became one of the most important point of theoretical reflection among the scholars of this particular time.

Herbert Spencer was heavily influenced by this theme of structure and function and he found that the natural evolution of the species as articulated by Charles Darwin as very fascinating where he can adopt and borrow these ideas into that of human society.


'Social Statics' is one of his book that is considered to be very important contribution of Herbert Spencer, where he argues that human happiness can be achieved only when individuals can satisfy their needs and desires without infringing on the rights of others to do the same.

He has a utilitarian understanding of human needs and how human needs to have certain kind of boundaries or how everybody has these similar kind of needs and how all of them have to have certain kind of understanding and restriction so that as a collectivity they will be able to peruse their needs. This is presented as law of ethics and morality. Later, he has been being criticized heavily for taking up a very laissez-faire kind of position where he argued that people has to be completely free.


This forms the basis of a law where he wanted to combine both ethics and morality. And also I mentioned in the previous class that this terms, 'a law of ethics' or 'a law of morality' now

looks quite problematic because no social scientist at present would use the term law to describe anything that are related to the social sphere. You do not have a social law as a law similar to a law that is there in physics or chemistry but during Spencer's time, this was the norm or most of the philosophers during his time envisaged formulating a set of laws that would be applicable to society, in the same way natural laws are applicable to the natural world.

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- First, he sought to discover invariant laws and principles of social organization. Second, he began to engage in organismic analogizing, drawing comparisons between the structure of individual organisms and that of societies.
- Social Statics also reveals the beginnings of Spencer's functionalism. He viewed societies, like individuals, as having survival needs with specialized organs emerging and persisting to meet these needs.
- Principles of Sociology: Employing the organismic analogy—that is, comparing organic (bodily) and superorganic (societal) organization—Spencer developed a perspective for analyzing the structure, function, and transformation of societal phenomena.
- Similarities and differences



So, in this book Social Statics, he sought to discover invariant laws and principles of social organization. They believed in that, there are invariant laws, there are very very imputable laws and principles that govern social organization and secondly, he began to engage in organismic analogizing, drawing comparison between the structure of individual organism and that of society. And this is again a very important term that we came across in when we discussed Auguste Comte and a term which was given so much of attention and so much theorization by Herbert Spencer.

He has a very detailed analysis of organismic analogy where he makes a comparison between the structure and function of a living individual organism and that of a society. So, he believed that there are parallels, similarities as well as there are differences between the way an individual organism function, as well as a society function. And we will just touch up on some of these observations later but I am not going into the details.

Those who are interested can read material on that. He makes a list of similarities as well as differences between a living organism and that of society. But these arguments have kind of lost its significance, so I am not really spending much time on that, but this particular line of

thinking that compares human society with that of a living organism, known as Organismic analogy was very important foundational concept that laid the foundation for the emergence of structural functionalism.

Structural functionalism, as we have seen that emerged in the writings of Auguste Comte developed through Herbert Spencer and later developed in a more sophisticated manner by Emile Durkheim. It had its growth and development in social Anthropology and, later in American sociology championed by Talcott Parsons and others. By 1960s, this particular theoretical foundation or theoretical orientation loses its significance.

In his book titled 'Social Statics', reveals the beginning of Spencer's functionalism as we just mentioned. He viewed societies like individuals as having survival needs with specialised organs emerging and persisting to meet these needs. So, the basic question that people like Spencer argued during that particular time was 'how do society survive?' or 'What are the basic needs of a society?'

For example, how is a particular society finding the economic resources for its survival? How is a society devising a specific mechanism to govern itself? How is a society evolving very specific set of morals and ethics so that there is some kind of acceptance among each and every member of that particular society?

He identified each of these things as certain kind of survival and functional needs and when you come to Durkheim and later functionalist, this becomes more complicated set of questions about functional needs about prerequisites. But Spencer was one of the most important and influential thinker who began elaborating and theorising these things and also connecting with these survival needs or functional needs with specialised organs emerging and persisting to meet these needs.

What are the kind of a mechanisms that are at the disposal of a society to meet these kind of a needs? So, what are the kind of specific organs? What are the kind of specialised social forms of organisation or parts of social structure that are capable of meeting these needs which are very important for every society.


In his book 'Principles of Sociology', employing the organismic analogy which is a comparison of organic bodily and superorganic societal organisation, Spencer developed a perspective for analysing the structure, function and transformation of societal phenomena. This is the same point that we have discussed so far.

He talks about the comparison between the organic and the superorganic. He calls the society as the super organic entity and there are similarities and parallels and he developed a perspective for analysing the structure, function and transformation of social phenomenon. So, when you talk about the structure and function, emphasize is on its existence as social statics as well as social dynamics, which is an important distinction.

On the one hand, you are concerned about how each and every society is structured and how does it take care of its own needs and necessities and the second major concern is that how do these societies transform? How do these societies undergo significant changes?

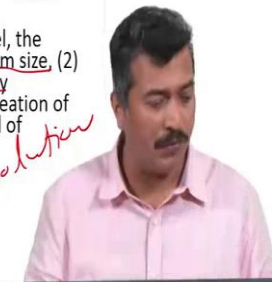
So, he wanted to develop a perspective that is capable of addressing both these dimensions simultaneously. And he has a list of similarities and differences and as I mentioned earlier, I am not going into the details. They look at how there are similarities between individual organism and the society and as well as differences.

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- The Study of Sociology: the goal of sociology must be to uncover the principles of morphology (structure) and physiology (process) of all organic forms, including the superorganic (society) with due care to the historic specificity.
- Employing the organismic analogy—that is, comparing organic (bodily) and superorganic (societal) organization—Spencer developed a perspective for analyzing the structure, function, and transformation of societal phenomena.
- A model of structuring in social systems. In this model, the basic processes are (1) forces causing growth in system size, (2) the differentiation of units, (3) the processes whereby differentiated units become integrated, and (4) the creation of a coherent heterogeneity, which increases the level of adaptation to the environment.

Evolution



In his another book, ‘The Study of Sociology’, he elaborates his focused thinking about developing sociology as a distinct social science. He accepted Comte’s argument that this new discipline must be named as sociology, not as social physics and it has to be recognised or acknowledged as a science of the modern society. The goal of the sociology must be to uncover the principles of morphology and physiology of all organic forms including the superorganic society with due care to its historic specificity.

Spencer envisaged sociology as a discipline that wants to uncover the principles of morphology and its physiology of all organic forms including that of superorganic forms. It is evident how these medical or biological terms influenced Spencer's thinking.

The only important caveat he added was that they have to be located within its larger historical specificity because human societies have a history and you need to have that kind of a historical perspective to make sense of these physiology as well as morphology of society.

But the thinking was heavily influenced by his preoccupation with this medical and biological terms. Through employing organismic analogy that is, comparing organic bodily and superorganic societal organisation, Spencer developed a perspective for analysing the structure, function and transformation of societal phenomena.

He wanted to analyse the structure, the function of a society or in other words, how a society is situated and what are its constituent parts? How a particular society is distinct and different from other society? How different parts of a society are brought together? What is the kind of a structure and what are the kind of a corresponding function?

It was very specifically argued that you cannot get a function performed on a sustainable manner without having a particular structure in place. How do we understand the term structure? Structure is usually defined in sociology as an ordered arrangement of parts. It consists of different parts but these parts are not put together in a casual manner. These parts are organised and arranged in a systematic manner. This idea of ordered arrangement of parts is one of the usual definitions of the term structure.

Spencer and most of the philosophers of his time, as well as later scholars including British anthropologist, pursued this question of understanding how a society is structured. They thought about what are the specific ways in which a society is constituted, how its economic, social and political and moral and religious elements put together and how this particular structure gives rise to certain kind of function and how there is a kind of a correspondence between structures and functions, along with looking at the nature of transformation of social phenomena.

So, he develops a model of restructuring social systems. In this model, the basic processes are; forces causing growth in a system size, the differentiation of units, the processes whereby

differentiated units become integrated and the creation of a coherent heterogeneity which increases the level of adaptation to the environment.

You can see that this is clearly what he means by the term evolution as explained by Charles Darwin. So, if you go back to the definition that Herbert Spencer provided some time back, 'from a very incoherent, undifferentiated, simple entity, the society moves into a more coherent and differentiated one.'

Here he says that in order for this process to happen, there must be growth in system size. If he is talking about population, the population must increase in its size, it should grow in its size and then there must be differentiation of units. What does it mean to say 'the differentiation of units'? This means that the constituent units will have more division of labour, we will come back to this point when we discuss Durkheim. Durkheim's argument about division of labour is a very insightful argument about how societies become more and more developed.


You need to have the differentiation of units. In a society you need to have specialised people or specialised institutions to take care of different things. For example, a traditional tribal society is the most undifferentiated society. You do not have too many differentiated things.

In undifferentiated society, there is no formal education system, there may not be any formal religious system, there is no formal law enforcement agency, and no formal agency for producing things. So, each and everything is handled by the same community.


Whereas, in an industrial society like ours, you have so much of differentiated functions, so much of differentiated agencies that deals with entertainment, transportation, about law enforcement, about justice delivery, about governance, about political systems and so on. We know that how complicated the world that we are living in and the process of creation of a coherent heterogeneity. So, the most important point is that this heterogeneity is not order less, or not a very ambiguous one.

This heterogeneity has a very specific coherence. It is ordered, it is systematic, and is a very complicated process. It is a very complicated heterogeneity, but this heterogeneity has a coherence, and has an underlying unity which increases the level of adaptation to the environment. So, when the society become more and more complicated with a kind of a coherence, it develops its ability to adapt to the environment better. So, that is the argument that Spencer is putting forward when he talks about the evolution of society.

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- Adaptation into social change: the terms *primary*, *secondary*, and *tertiary compounding*, by which he meant that a society had undergone a qualitative shift in the level of differentiation from a simpler to a more complex form.
- Spencer contrasted "militant" with "industrial" structures. Militant structures are geared for aggression, with strong central and coercive control of the individuals in a society. Industrial structures, however, are geared for peace, so "industrial societies" (societies in which industrial structures predominate), have been described as having a "spontaneously generated and loosely coupled mode of societal organization".



Now, what do we mean by this adaptation? He specifically argues that this adaptation into social change and he talks about the 3 types of society, such as primary, secondary, and tertiary compounding, by which he meant that a society has undergone a qualitative shift in the level of differentiation from a simple to a more complex form. Again, a typical uni-linear evolutionary model from a primary and the secondary and tertiary society is assumed here. What is happening is that from primary to secondary and to tertiary, the compounding or the complexity is increasing in unilinear fashion.


We understand complexity in terms of levels of differentiation. A primary society could be equated with a tribal society. A hunting-gathering society that has not developed or progressed in the conventional understanding of the term is therefore a primary society. A hunting and gathering society that is a least differentiated society. And from there you have secondary compound society and the tertiary compound society.

A tertiary compound society for Spencer could be the society in which he lived where the differentiation have become too much. And he also contrasted between militant and industrial structures. Militant structures are geared for aggression, with strong central and coercive control of the individuals in a society. Industrial structures, however, are geared for peace, so industrial societies, societies in which industrial structures predominate have been described as having a spontaneously generated and loosely coupled mode of societal organisation.


As per his classification, the militant societies are more characterized by aggression whereas industrial societies are characterized by peace. Industrial societies are having a spontaneously generated and loosely coupled mode of societal organisation. These societal organisation are

more organic, more differentiated, more complex but something actually holds these societies together.

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- Spencer's coining of the phrase "survival of the fittest" and the use of this idea in much twentieth-century conservative philosophy.
- Social Darwinism, a social theory that applies the law of the survival of the fittest to society and is integrally related to the nineteenth century rise in scientific racism.
- When the evolutionary paradigm collapsed and fell into obscurity in the 1930s, so did Spencer's sociology.



Now, coming back to a kind of a critical evaluation of Spencer, he is the one who coined the term "survival of the fittest" which became heavily influential in the discussions on evolution. We are all familiar with the terms such as 'struggle for existence' and 'survival of the fittest'. This presents you with a very brutal character of the nature where different species fight for each other, they struggle for their existence and through a process of natural selection, only the fittest remain, all the unfit species disappear.

This is how one of the interpretations of this organic evolution, evolution of species is being elaborated. Here it is very interesting to see that Spencer adopts the similar argument regarding society. It can be seen as a very cruel or insensitive argument that human beings are like different animals or species who are struggling for their existence and only the fittest will survive. And Spencer is the one who coined the term.

This idea that he developed is that certain societies are fitter and thereby they deserve to live in the society, deserve to flourish whereas, the less fit societies, less capable societies are fit to disappear. This idea was very much used by many of these conservative philosophers during his time. You also must remember the context in which he is making these statements. These statements are made when Europe was at the peak of its colonial expansion.

Colonialism is one of the most violent episodes in human history. You know that the colonialists, who were from four or five major European military powers travelled across the

globe and they identified people who were less capable than them in terms of weapons and in terms of military prowess and then dominated, killed them systematically and even wiped out entire population in order to conquer several regions. This colonial expansion or outright form of violent domination was justified on the base of racial and religious superiority

Because for most of these colonial conquerors people who do not believe in Christianity were not even considered as human beings. So, there was nothing sinful and wrong in killing people because you are not killing the true human beings. A true human being is somebody who practices Christianity. So, if you see a 'savage' who follows some other kind of religion, there is nothing morally wrong or religiously wrong in killing them. That was the assumption that justified the brutality of colonialism.

In such a political climate where this form of naked aggression and naked dominance was the practice, Spencer became a very important scholar whose arguments could be used to justify this kind of aggression and dominance because he is talking about a societal law where there is only the fittest survives and the less capable people and their societies must give way for a more fitter, capable and stronger society.

This idea that is known as 'Social Darwinism' became very prominent during his time and 1920s 1930s it became very heated debate. It led to heated debate and became a very controversial term. The social theory on the basis of the law of survival of the fittest was integrally related to the nineteenth century rise in scientific racism. So, you must be knowing that the rise of scientific racism where biology and idea of evolution, physical anthropology was used to categorise people into several races by using all kind of scientific principles.

By arguing that people can be divided into watertight compartments which people can be divided into very distinct forms of racial types by looking at the skin colour, by measuring the texture of the hair, by measuring the skull something called as the cephalic index, by measuring the nose known as nasal index and a number of other indices, they prepared very scientifically looking, convincing and very rigorous classificatory schemes where people across the globe are positioned.

The most important point is that all these scientific racism had a very open and blatant claim that the Caucasian race such as the whites or the European, were the most superior race to anybody else. We have seen its consequence in the rise of Nazism in Germany and Holocaust. Currently you see the coming back of such kind of arguments with the rise of New Nazis and the racist uprising across the globe.

Today, science has convincingly proved that there is no pure race any more. Every population, every individual in this whole world is a product of lot of intermixing of different races. The racial purity is a myth, it no longer has any scientific, biological, historical or sociological backing. But during his time, Spencer played a very important role in propounding this argument that only the fittest need to survive.

When the evolutionary paradigm collapsed and fell into obscurity in the 1930s, so did Spencer's Sociology. So, if you look at the larger transformation of Spencer's theory, there is a consensus among sociologist that his popularity and influence faced serious challenge immediately after 1930s.

Even now, he is considered as a sociologist who gave certain kind of legitimacy to this argument of Social Darwinism and was heavily influenced by the biological influence on social sciences especially the kind of a mechanical adoption of the logic of evolution into that of society. So, we will wind up the class now and we will meet in the next class. Thank you.