

Lectures on Spencer

- A Spencer developed a functionalist theory from utilitarian roots
1. He conceived of society as a social organism
 2. Yet he argued for methodological individualism: the social organism is composed of the sum of its parts, namely human individuals
- B His theory build directly on the utilitarianism of Bentham, and it parallels evolutionism of Darwin
1. He believed that human happiness is divine will, and people will inevitably pursue happiness and they should
 2. Humans and human societies tend toward ever greater happiness, as they evolve to attain a better state of fitness for the environmental conditions of their lives
 - a. Evils are a condition of nonadaptation to the environment
 - b. People exercise their faculties in pursuing happiness and adapting to their environment
 - c. This process of adaptation constitutes evolution
- C The Character of Social Evolution
1. Society tends gradually to evolve toward a state in which all individuals have the liberty to exercise their faculties to the fullest degree without interfering in each other's liberty
 2. Authority, domination, and war act to educate or weed out those individuals, groups, or societies that are not well adapted
 - a. Spencer invented the phrase, "survival of the fittest," and Darwin acknowledged this in the preface to his book, Origins of Species. It paralleled Darwin's own concept of "natural selection."
 3. The higher the stage of evolution, the greater will be individual liberties: rights to own property, free trade, free press, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, universal suffrage

- a. As these liberties are developed, the state will first be reduced to the role of a guardian of liberties and then will eventually disappear

D The Process of Social Evolution

1. Thomas Malthus had posited that population will increase geometrically and the food supply only arithmetically, and therefore population will outstrip the food supply, and there will be starvation
2. However, Spencer said that the same conditions - excess fertility over resources - will lead to efforts to improve faculties and cooperation to redress this imbalance
 - a. The result is selection of individuals and families that are better adapted to survive in these more complex conditions
 - b. Thus, population growth and density pushes social evolution toward improvement
3. Social evolution starts from incoherent homogeneity and proceeds toward coherent heterogeneity, that is, toward progressive differentiation, interdependence, and integration of the parts in a whole
4. Every initial act of specialization causes an endless chain of further specializations and a corresponding division of labor
 - a. More generally, every active force produces more than one result; every cause produces more than one effect. Thus, social evolution tends toward differentiation
5. The more the division of labor proceeds, the greater will be the interdependence and exchange between the parts, and hence, the parts will be integrated with each other
 - a. Note that this is a generalization of Adam Smith's description of the division of labor in a market society
6. Thus, population crowding leads to specialization and cooperative exchange relations, that is, to differentiation and integration, to greater complexity and heterogeneity

- a. This anticipates Durkheim's theory of the division of labor, but Spencer bases it more clearly on individualism

E Society as an Organism

1. There are several similarities
 - a. They start life as small aggregations and grow immensely in mass
 - b. They start with simple structures and become increasingly complex
 - c. They start with little interdependence among their constituent parts, and develop great interdependence
2. And there are several differences
 - a. Society has no specific external form, unlike an organism
 - b. The living tissues of organisms form a continuous mass, unlike societies
 - c. The living elements of organisms are fixed in their place, those of societies are not
 - d. In society, every member has feeling; in organisms, only particular parts have feelings

F The direction of Social Evolution

1. Social evolution also involves the modification of the environment by the evolving society; and evolving societies influence and become interdependent on each other
2. Social evolution brings specialized institutions into existence that perform certain functions
 - a. The family prepares people for cooperation
 - b. Ceremonial institutions exert primitive social control
 - c. Political institutions direct collective action toward common ends

- d. Ecclesiastical institutions establish social bonds, and religion gives people a sense of God's plan of evolution
 - e. Economic institutions increase technology, expand production, accumulate capital, and increase the division of labor
3. Social evolution proceeds in several stages
- a. Primitive societies with an incoherent homogeneity
 - b. Military societies with centralized authority, constrain, and status relationships
 - c. Industrial societies with decentralized decision-making, liberty, and contract-based relationships

G Problems and Shortcomings of Spencer's Theory

1. It is strongest as a description of economic development; other forms of development or change are rather vague
2. However, it does not explain where markets come from or how they expand into new areas
 - a. Sometimes military societies may be stronger than industrial societies, yet markets expand to the more "primitive" military societies
3. Durkheim explains moral development more adequately
4. Durkheim also noted that greater division of labor does not necessarily lead to greater human happiness. It may lead to anomie, compulsion, higher rates of suicide and criminality.
5. Weber gives a better explanation of the influence of religion on economic development
6. Marx argues, in contrast to Spencer, that the expansion of the capitalist market does not lead to liberty, but rather alienation, domination, and class conflict