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EVOLUTIONARY THEORY BY HERBERT SPENCER

The most important contribution of Herbert Spencer to Sociology is the theory of evolution. He utilized the principles of physical and biological evolution in order to elaborate and explain his theory of Social evolution. In physical evolution, a movement is from indefinite incoherent situation to definite and coherent situation. Besides, the underlying principles of physical evolution are a movement from simple to complex and homogeneity to heterogeneity. In biological evolution only those creatures survive in the struggle for existence who are able to make effective adjustment with changing circumstances. Herbert Spencer utilized these two principles, physical and biological evolution in order to explain social evolution.

Physical Evolution:

Spencer writes, "Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion, during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation."

According to Lewis A. Coser, "The very- foundation of Spencerism is the evolutionary doctrine or the law of evolution. In his "First Principles" he traced everything in the world back through causal chains to two fundamental factors. These are matter and motion—two aspects of force.

According to Spencer, the law of evolution is the supreme law of every becoming.

For Spencer, evolution pervaded the inorganic as well as organic realm. His voluminous work also treated "Super organic evolution" (Which today we would term social evolution), and evolution of super organic products (what we call cultural evolution). Within the Framework of Universal evolution, Spencer developed his basic three laws and four secondary propositions—each building upon each and all upon the doctrine of evolution.

The Three Basic Laws:

(i) The Law of persistence of force. (Some ultimate cause that transcends knowledge)

(ii) The Law of the indestructibility of matter.

(iii) The law of Continuity of motion.

#Force Tends to Persist:

The First law is energy or force tends to persists. In the course of evolutionary change there is no increase in energy or force.

Energy or Force is persistence. It undergoes no change. Energy or Force is the cause of evolution but it is unaffected by the evolutionary process.

#Matter is Indestructible:

The Second law is "matter is indestructible". Matter as one form or aspect of energy is never destroyed. It may undergo formal changes. The changes in the form of matter are responsible for the evolutionary process. But the fundamental nature of matter never changes. The basic elements of matter and energy in the world are neither created, nor destroyed but conserved.

#Continuity of motion:

The third law is, "motion is continuous and it is never wholly dissipated". There are of course, changes in the form of motion. On account of these changes, there are stages in the evolutionary process. There is perpetual continuity of motion in the world. All things continue in motion.

Four Secondary Propositions:

(i) Persistence of the relationship between the forces. (Harmony of all laws)
(ii) Principle of formal changes and uniformity.
(iii) Principle of least resistance and greatest attraction.
(iv) Principle of gradual motion.

Spencer has enumerated four secondary laws of evolution

(i) Harmony of all laws:

According to Spencer there must be harmony among the various laws of evolution. No two laws should contradict each other. There exists a uniformity or regularity of relationships among defined phenomena in the world. The world is an order of elements.

(ii) Principle of formal changes and uniformity:

Matter and motion is not completely destroyed. These undergo changes in form only. Of course during formal change the quantum of matter and motion remains static. The force, the elements of matter, the motion are never lost in the process of change. They are merely transformed into the manifestation of some other event.

(iii) Principle of least resistance or great attraction:

The direction of evolution is always towards the line of least resistance or greatest attraction. All forces and elements move along the line of least resistance and greatest attraction.

(iv) Principle of gradual motion:

For evolution, motion is essential, but it is not required that motion should be at one level all the time. It may speed up or slow down. All phenomena in nature have their own particular rate and rhythm of movement of duration and development.

Spencer argued that the evolution of human societies, far from being different from other evolutionary phenomena. It is a special case of a universally applicable natural law. It is axiomatic to Spencer that ultimately all aspects of the universe, whether organic or inorganic, social or non-social is subject to the laws of evolution.

All universal phenomena-inorganic, organic, super organic—are subject to the natural law of evolution. According to Spencer, all the phenomena of nature—the stars and planetary systems, the earth and all terrestrial phenomena, biological organisms and the development of species, all the psychological and sociological processes of human experience and behavior-follow the definite pattern of change.

Given the persistence of force, the indestructibility of the basic elements of material substance, the continuity of motion and the like, Spencer says, "Why were the changes of phenomena from homogeneous to the heterogeneous? From the relatively incoherent to the relatively coherent?

From simple to complex? From the in differentiated to the differentiation of specialized structure and functions?”

There are the more important factors which he emphasized:

1. The instability of the homogeneous.
2. The multi-fication of effects.
3. Segregation
4. Equilibrium
5. Dissolution.

1. The instability of the homogeneous:

Spencer argued that the condition of homogeneity is in-fact a condition of unstable equilibrium.

2. The multi-fication of effects:

According to Spencer, once differentiation and diversity begins, a cumulative rapidity of increasing diversity and differentiation is set in motion. Diversity feeds upon itself. It makes for increasing complexity.

3. Segregation:

Once differentiation occurs within the units of an aggregate, a tendency towards the specialization of parts will develop. Units which are alike will respond in a similar fashion, whereas units which are different will respond differently. A process of internal “selection” or “segregation” of specialized parts will be set afoot.

4. Equilibrium:

All phenomena according to Spencer are in a process of adjustment and accommodation until a moving equilibrium is reached.

5. Dissolution:

Dissolution is the reverse process. It is the undoing of evolved forms. Every phenomenon must submit to the process of dissolution. The crux of Spencer's theory of physical evolution is that according to Spencer, in the process of evolution latent becomes manifest and indefinite passes towards definiteness and lastly homogeneous mass of matter becomes more and more differentiated.

Biological Evolution:

Spencer adopted his principle of evolution from naturalist Charles Darwin. Darwin developed the concept of evolution in his "Origin of Species" in 1859. Spencer, the sociological giant of the second half of the 19th Century was enamoured by "Social Darwinism".

Spencer believed in the doctrine of the "Survival of the fittest" as expounded by Darwin. According to him animal has to struggle to preserve its existence. The struggle for existence is not confined to any one aspects of life but pervades whole of life. Spencer says, only strong creatures survive and evolve; only strong makes progress. The weak is gradually eliminated. A strong creature is one who has the ability to adjust himself with the ever changing conditions of environment.

Social Evolution:

From the analysis of physical evolution Spencer convinced that the underlying principles of all evolution are two:

(i) Movement from- simple to complex.

(ii) Movement from homogeneous to heterogeneous.

From the analysis of biological evolution spencer utilized the principle, that those creatures survive in the struggle for existence who are able to make effective adjustment with changing circumstances. So Spencer utilized both physical and biological evolution for his theory of social evolution. Like physical evolution also in social evolution there is a movement from simple to complex. The society is moving from homogeneous to heterogeneous structure. Society is also moving from indefinite to definite stage.

Spencer has borrowed the idea from biological evolution that those cultures survive which are able to adjust themselves with the changing circumstances. If a civilization is unable to make adjustment with the changing circumstances it caves in and gradually becomes extinct.

Spencer's theory of social evolution points out to two stages:

1. The movement from simple to compound societies.

2. Change from militant society to industrial society.

The movement from simple to compound societies—This is seen in four types of societies in terms of evolutionary levels.

1. Simple Society:

Spencer defined the simple society as "one which forms a single working whole un-subjected to any other and of which the parts co-operate with or without a regulating center for certain public ends." These societies were predominantly small, nomadic, and lacking in stable relationship structure. They had low degrees of differentiation, specialization, and integration. Examples are the Eskimos, the Fuegians, Guiana tribes, the new Caledonians and the Pueblo Indians.

2. Compound Societies:

Compound societies were presented as having generally come about through either a peaceful or a violent merger of two or more simple societies. They tended to be predominantly settled agricultural societies, although a majority are mainly pastoral, and tended to be characterized by a division of four or five social strata and an organized priestly group. They are also characterized by Industrial structures that show in advancing division of labor, general and local. Examples are the Teutonic peoples in the fifth century, Homeric Greeks, Zew Zealanders, Hottentots Dahomans and Ashantees.

3. Doubly Compound Societies:

Doubly compound societies were completely settled, were more integrated and a larger and more definite political structure, a religious hierarchy, a more or less rigid caste system and more complex division of labour. Furthermore, in such societies to a greater and lesser extent, custom has

passed into positive law and religious observances have grown definite, rigid and complex. Towns and roads have become general, and considerable progress in knowledge and the arts has taken place." Examples are thirteen-Century France, Eleventh Century England, the Spartan Confederacy, the ancient Peruvians and the Guatemalans.

4. Trebly Compound Societies:

It includes "the great civilized nations" such as the Assyrian Empire, the modern Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia. Spencer does not outline their traits in detail but points to their increased overall size, complexity, division of labor, popular density, integration and general cultural complexity.

Criticisms:

1. According to some social thinkers Herbert Spencer's theory lacks practicability. It is not practical and realistic. Even today there are several tribes and aboriginals that do not show any sign of evolution.

2. It also lacks uniformity. It is not possible to have a uniform pattern of social evolution in all societies. Because the factors and circumstances responsible for evolution differ from one another.

3. Mere survival for existence is not enough for man. In human society qualities like sympathy, sacrifice, kindness, love etc. are also present. These are quite different from struggle for existence.

In spite of the above criticisms made by some of the social thinkers, Spencer's theory of social evolution is a master key to the riddles of the universe.

As **Abraham** and **Morgan** have pointed out *"Spencer's Theory of Evolution"* involves two essential but interrelated trends or strains of thought:

(i) *Change from simplicity to complexity or movement from simple society to various levels of compound societies; and*

(ii) *Change from military society to industrial society.*

(i) Change from Simplicity to Complexity, or Movement from Simple Society to Various Levels of Compound Society

As Spencer repeatedly argued all phenomena in all fields proceed from simplicity to complexity. Societies also undergo evolutionary stages of development. Spencer identified four types of societies in terms of stages of their evolutionary development - *simple, compound, doubly compound* and *trebly compound.*

(a) ***Simple Society***: This is *the most primitive society* without any complexities and consisting of several families.

(b) ***Compound Society***: A large number of above mentioned simple societies make a compound society. This is *clan society.*

(c) ***Doubly Compound Society***: These consist of several clans compounded into tribes or *tribal society*.

(d) ***Trebly Compound Society***: Here the tribes are organised into *nation states.* This is the present form of the world.

The master trend in this process of universal evolution is the *increased differentiation of social structures* which leads inevitably to better integration and adaptation to environment.

(ii) Change From Military [Militant] Society to Industrial Society

According to **Spencer,** evolution proceeds from military society to industrial society. The type of social structure depends on the relation of a society to other societies in its significant characteristics.

(i) Thus while the military society is characterised by compulsory co-operation, industrial society is based on voluntary co-operation.

(ii) While the military society has a centralised government, the industrial society has a decentralised government.

(iii) Military society has economic autonomy whereas it is not found in industrial society.

(iv) There is the domination of the state over all other social organisations in the military society whereas in the industriai society the functions of the states are very much limited.;

Concluding Remarks

It must be noted that "Spencer did not believe that societies actually existed in the world with the sharp clarity of distinction that he described in drawing these *"models."* **[Ronald Fletcher - 286].**

Spencer was aware that he was presenting those *two "models" to help comparison of societies.* Spencer was of the opinion that this mode of classification would help to interpret and understand some of the crucially important trends of social evolution. These trends, according to him were of great importance as the traditional societies get radically transformed by the process of industrialisation.

This mode of classifying societies helped Spencer in undertaking a very detailed comparative study of each major social institution within each *"type"* of society. *"This gave him a picture of what, in the whole field of social institutions had actually occurred in the past, and what was happening in the present."*[1]

Characteristics	***Militant Society***	***Industrial Society***
Dominant Function or activity	Corporate defensive & offensive activity for preservation and aggrandizement	Peaceful, mutual rendering of individual services
Principle of social coordination	Compulsory cooperation; regimentation by enforcement of orders; both positive and negative regulation of activity.	Voluntary cooperation; regulation by contract and principles of justice; only negative regulation of activity.
Relations between state and individual	Individuals exist for the benefit of state; restraints on liberty property, and mobility.	State exists for benefit of individuals; freedom; few restraints on property and mobility.
Relations between state and other organizations	All organizations public; private organizations excluded.	Private organizations encouraged.
Structure of state	Centralized	Decentralized
Structure of social stratification	Fixity of rank, occupation, and locality; inheritance of positions	Plasticity and openness of rank, occupation, and locality; movement between positions
Type of economic activity	Economic autonomy and self-sufficiency; little external trade; protectionism trade.	Loss of economic autonomy; interdependence via peaceful trade; free trade
Valued social and personal characteristics	Patriotism; courage; reverence; loyalty; obedience; faith in authority; discipline	Independence; respect for others; resistance to coercion; individual initiative; truthfulness; kindness.