

Sociological thoughts: chapter- 3 (course content- Herbert Spencer-The theory of social Evolution, Organic Analogy) paper- 2, Sociology (lecture-2)

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Biographical Sketch (Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)):

Herbert Spencer, an Englishman and a contemporary of Auguste Comte, contributed several key ideas to the field of sociology. Like Comte, he too was trying to establish sociology as the science of society. Spencer had come into contact with Comte's ideas but he did not accept them. Instead, he brought about a shift in the study of society. His sociology is based on the evolutionary doctrine and the organic analogy. Spencer (1820-1903) was born in a middle-class family in Derby, England, on 27th April. His father, George Spencer, was a school master. He and his whole family were staunch nonconformists and were individualists in outlook. Spencer was the eldest of nine children and the only one to survive into adulthood. This was perhaps one of the reasons why he advocated the idea of the "survival of the fittest" in his theory of evolution.

Spencer never went to a conventional school but was taught at home by his father and uncle. He went to some small private schools but only for short periods, according to his autobiography, his training in mathematics was the best. In spite of not receiving a systematic training in other subjects like natural sciences, literature, history, he wrote outstanding treatises on biology and psychology.

At a young age Spencer started working as an Engineer in the railroad engineering field. After this work he changed his job and became a journalist. He started working as an Editor of the *Economist*, a well-known English publication. After a few years he resigned his position and became an independent writer. He became a close friend of the poet, George Eliot. Their relationship did not materialise into marriage and Spencer never married anyone. He never suffered from poverty but he also did not become rich. In 1850 he published his first book,

Social Statics, which was well received in the intellectual world. In this book he presented the core ideas of his sociological theory. The terms social statics made some thinkers accuse Spencer of plagiarising Comte's ideas. But Spencer pointed out that the terms were his own as he had merely heard the name of Comte and not his ideas. Also, he stated that originally the title of his book was 'Demostatics'. Besides others, Spencer was influenced by Charles Darwin's book, *The Origin of Species*, (1859). He desired a lot of his ideas regarding evolution from Darwin. However, Spencer stated that he was the first one to discover the basic ideas of 'natural selection' and 'survival of the fittest'.

Organic Analogy

Herbert Spencer proceeded to apply in his investigation of all fields of knowledge his idea of social evolution. In comparing human society with an organism, which is essentially what organic analogy means, Herbert Spencer, however, noted the differences between the biological organism and society. He maintained that 'a society', as an entity, is something more than, and other than, an 'organism', even though human 'organisms' (individuals) are members of it. It is a total system of elements of social organisation and their interdependent functions. It is a super-organic entity; an organisational entity over and above the level of the organism. Following this, Spencer accepted the ideas that a society was more than a collective name for a number of individuals. That is, it is not just a collection of several individuals but is a distinct entity. The whole is more than its parts. Thus, a house is more than a mere collection of bricks, wood and stone. It involves a certain ordering of parts. However, being an individualist Spencer believed that unlike biological organisms, where the parts exist for the benefit of the whole, in society it is the whole which exists for the benefit of the parts i.e., the individuals in society