HERBERT SPENCER
(1820-1903)

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"Who now reads Spencer? It is difficult for us to realize how great a stir he made in the world . . . He was the intimate confidant of a strange and rather unsatisfactory God, whom he called the Principle of Evolution. His God has betrayed him. We have evolved beyond Spencer." This quotation from Crane Brinton stands at the beginning of Talcott Parson's massive study, *The Structure of Social Action* -- the book which for more than two decades now has been the *pons asinorum* for students of sociological theory. In this investigation of the intellectual revolution which gave birth to modern modes of sociological analysis, Parsons takes the demise of Spencer as his starting point and sees the crucial question as -- who killed Spencer and how? This is representative of the attitudes which present-day sociologists display towards Spencer. He is recognized as a figure of considerable historical importance. But he would not be regarded as being, like Durkheim or Weber, a thinker of great contemporary relevance and value.

In general, this view is as easy to explain as it is to justify. But it is still possible to feel that the total abandonment of Spencer to the historians of ideas is as yet somewhat premature. For even as he was being led on into ultimate error and confusion by his false God, Spencer was made to grapple, in an often instructive way, with a number of basic sociological issues -- and issues which not a few of his successors have evaded rather than confronted.

Spencer was born at Derby in 1820, the son of a Nonconformist schoolteacher of decided and somewhat eccentric views. Because of his father's mistrust of conventional educational methods, the young Spencer received an irregular and unorthodox schooling, chiefly from an uncle who was an Anglican clergyman with a strong interest in the natural sciences. Under the latter's tuition, he gained a firm grounding in mathematics and elementary physics but his historical and literary education was almost entirely neglected. Plans for Spencer to go up to Cambridge failed to materialize, chiefly because of his own reluctance, and at the age of seventeen he decided to make a career for himself in the quickly expanding profession of railway engineering. He achieved quite rapid success in this field and published papers on the design of bridges and related geometrical problems.

However, during early manhood, Spencer's intellectual interests grew quickly, and engineering soon came to appear limited in the opportunities it offered a versatile and independent mind. In the course of his work, Spencer had acquired a knowledge of geology and through this was led on to the biology of his day, the work of Lamarck, in particular, making a great impression upon him. At the same time, though, he had developed an overriding concern with social, political and economic questions and began to write for vari-

ous periodicals on such subjects as education, church and State, 'the proper sphere of government', and so on.

In 1848 these journalistic efforts were crowned with some success when Spencer was offered the sub-editorship of *The Economist*, at that time one of the leading organs of radicalism. This post enabled Spencer finally to abandon engineering and gave him both the time and a favourable atmosphere in which to advance his own thinking. Three years later he published his first book, *Social Statics*, which was essentially an extended essay in social theory constructed around his fundamental beliefs in individual responsibility and *laissez-faire*.

As soon as he was able, he left *The Economist* and lived as an independent scholar. His work became all that was meaningful in his existence, and he worked unremittingly until the period of chronic illness and nervous disability which preceded his death in 1903. He never married ('I was never in love') and spent most of his later life in genteel boarding houses and hotels. He had scarcely any intimate companions and recognised his own incapacity for feeling any strong attachment to relatives or friends. But this, he believed, was the price he had to pay for his intellectual commitment.

In 1852, in a paper entitled 'A Theory of Population', Spencer put forward some of his early ideas on the development of human society and claimed that of major importance in this process had been 'the struggle for existence' and the principle of 'the survival of the fittest' -- a striking anticipation of the theory of natural selection which Darwin and Wallace were to apply some six years later to the organic world generally. Following on this Spencer than produced a second book, the *Principles of Psychology*, in which he sought to apply an evolutionary approach to mental phenomena.

Finally, as the culmination of this most creative and crucial phase of his work, Spencer took his evolutionism to its ultimate point in a celebrated essay of 1857 -- 'Progress; its Law and Cause'. In this he advanced the thesis that the idea of evolution was of universal applicability; that it was the key to the understanding of phenomena of all kinds, whether inorganic, organic or 'superorganic', that is to say, social. The most general laws of all the separate sciences, Spencer argued, could, in principle, be subsumed, and thus unified, under the one supreme law of 'evolution and dissolution'. This law provided, therefore, a systematic, genetic account of the entire cosmos; or, as Spencer put it, 'an account of the Transformation of Things' and of 'the ultimate uniformities they present'. All secular change within structures of whatever kind went on through a process of increasing differentiation on the one hand and increasing integration on the other. The unevolved structure was internally homogeneous and its parts cohered only loosely; the evolved was heterogeneous yet tightly knit. And this held true in Spencer's theory whether the process being considered was the formation of the earth out of a nebular mass, the evolution of species, the embryological growth of an

individual animal, or the development of human societies. No wonder that Darwin should say of him, 'He is about a dozen times my superior!'

Once he had taken up this uncompromising position, the remainder of Spencer's life was largely devoted to its justification and defence, primarily in the form of his monumental *Synthetic Philosophy*. His *Principles of Sociology*, published in several parts between 1876 and 1896, formed but one element in this greater enterprise, along with the companion volumes on psychology, biology and ethics; and it is an important feature of Spencer's sociology that it constitutes in this way an integral, and quite consistent, part of a wider 'system'.

To begin with the negative side, Spencer's sociology was perhaps most fundamentally flawed because of its highly 'naturalistic' character; because, that is, of Spencer's reluctance to draw sufficiently firm analytical distinctions between the realms of the organic and 'superorganic' and because of his concern to integrate biology and sociology virtually to the point of fusion.

In the first place, Spencer insisted on drawing very close analogies between societies and organisms. The similarities, in his view, were such that in analysing the structure of societies and the functioning of their institutions biological parallels were of primary value. Spencer was in fact generally prepared to take established ideas in the field of biology as ready-made instruments of sociological understanding. However, his arguments in this respect became largely self-defeating through being carried to obviously ridiculous extremes.

For example, at one point Spencer represents the shift within a society from road to rail transport as being an evolutionary advance directly intelligible in terms of the difference between the vascular systems of higher and lower animals -- even down to the detail that the dual track corresponds to the veins and arteries. Similarly, the introduction of the electric telegraph was seen as the analogue of the evolution in the organic sphere of a more developed nervous apparatus. Nerve fibres and telegraph wires were both classified by Spencer as 'internuncial agencies' and were therefore to be treated as generally comparable phenomena.

Secondly, and, of course, in complete consistency with his idea of societies as 'superorganisms', Spencer then sought to gain vital support for his system as a whole by showing that the evolution of societies, considered as entities, was a process essentially akin to that of the evolution of species. His aim here was not only to demonstrate that the pattern of change was the same in the two cases -- increasing differentiation and integration -- but also that this change was brought about through directly analogous mechanisms. Thus, although Spencer recognized that social change could result from a plurality of factors, his theory of social evolution contained two major emphases, both reflecting the biology of his day.

On the one hand, under the influence of Lamarckian ideas, Spencer claimed that within human societies a process of mutual modification was continually going on between the various institutions of social control and the characteristics of individuals. Thus, societies tended to become progressively more integrated, and by consensus rather than by constraint, even while the division of labour (differentiation) was increasing.

On the other hand, though, following his principle of the 'survival of the fittest' and the Darwinian extension of this, Spencer also stressed the part played in the evolution of societies by social conflict and, most notably, by war. Particularly in the earlier stages of social evolution, Spencer argued, warfare and conquest had been of crucial importance in the formation of larger and more complex social systems and at the same time in strengthening their internal cohesion. With the emergence of industrial societies, Spencer was prepared to accept that 'from war has been gained all that it had to give'. But he continued to regard conflict in other forms, and primarily in the economic field, as being a major evolutionary force which should not be impeded.

Here again it is fairly apparent that Spencer's attempt to derive sociology from biology is fraught with error. And, ironically, it is the sounder of Spencer's biological notions -- the more Darwinian rather than the more Lamarckian -- which are the most obviously inapplicable to human society. Even among Spencer's contemporaries, thinkers such as T. H. Huxley were able to expose the inadequacies and misconceptions of what the latter described as 'the gladiatorial theory of existence'. Was not man essentially different from other animals in that to an ever greater extent he created his own environment and, moreover, continually refashioned this so as to provide a changing *milieu* for his own development? Was not man also different in being a moral animal and was not human society a moral community? What meaning then could be given to the idea of the survival of the fittest in a societal context? And were not economic conflict and competition, at least, themselves *dependent upon* some accepted and relatively permanent framework of order?

Many later critics have elaborated these points and there have been major objections raised against various other aspects of Spencer's theory; for example, against the underlying assumption that all societies must necessarily follow the same sequence of evolutionary stages; against Spencer's tendency, in spite of himself, to fuse the idea of evolution with that of progress; and perhaps most serious of all, against the dubious 'social morphology' through which Spencer sought to provide empirical confirmation for his deductive arguments. As Bergson was one of the first to observe, the vast classification of the forms of institutions and societies which Spencer carried out generally supports his evolutionary ideas -- but for the simple reason that the principles of classification that were used were derived from these ideas at the outset. Spencer's method, in other words, was perfectly circular.

But it is still possible to make out a case for regarding a knowledge of Spencer as part of a sociologist's education. This case, one would suggest, rests chiefly upon the relevance of Spencer to important and still current issues in sociological thinking relating to what would now be termed 'structural-functional' analysis.

It was Spencer who first systematically used the terms 'structure' and 'function' in ways approximating to their present sociological usage. His penchant for a biological style of thinking led him to develop earlier 'organic' conceptions of society on more sophisticated lines and, further, to consider what such an orientation implied for the nature of sociological inquiry.

Essentially, Spencer arrived at the idea of society as a kind of self-regulating system which could best be understood through the study of its constituent parts and their pattern of interdependence, and through the analysis of the contributions which each part made towards the maintenance of the whole. In this way he initiated a mode of sociological explanation which was elaborated further by Durkheim and by social anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown, and which has since been applied more widely and with probably a greater degree of success than any other thus far. Spencer's own attempts to put his insights to use in an empirically based sociology proved of little value; but his more programmatic statements are none the less of continuing interest in that they emphasize certain cardinal points in the 'functionalist' position which are perhaps too readily neglected in the current reaction against this.

First, it is important to note that Spencer did not merely suggest that in society different institutions will in some way be interrelated. His major interest was, rather, in the way in which certain institutional forms showed a tendency to co-exist from society to society while others were seemingly incompatible. For example, he observed that in highly 'militant' societies the status of women was generally very low; that in societies with a despotic form of government there was elaborate ritual in social intercourse; that as societies became increasingly industrial, coercive institutions tended to decline -- and so on.

In other words, Spencer not only reformulated the idea of societies as systems but also, and much more importantly, he directed attention to the problems of discovering how far and in what ways variation in the structure of social systems might be patterned and limited. Problems of this order undoubtedly still arise in sociological theory at the present day -- as, for example, in ongoing debates on the 'logic' of industrialism. And, one would suggest, they are ones which still lend relevance to a functionalist approach.

Second, and in consequence of his ideas on the 'patterning' of social systems, Spencer was always anxious to stress the degree of 'resistance' which such systems could offer to attempts to induce changes in them, as, for example, through legislation. The point he repeatedly made in this connexion was

that if in fact there can be a science of society -- if social phenomena do exhibit regularities and conform to 'laws' -- then it must follow that men cannot shape society entirely according to their desire and will. Certain bounds will exist to what can be achieved through purposive action at any given stage in a society's development.

This argument was, of course, extremely valuable in supporting the *laissez-faire* political views to which Spencer was committed, and he delighted in finding instances where governmental intervention in economic and social affairs had misfired and had produced results quite different from those envisaged. Today, it is apparent that Spencer greatly exaggerated his case and seriously underestimated both the ability of government to play a constructive and creative part in social change and also the necessity for this in a highly complex and dynamic form of society. But nevertheless, his awareness that social systems will not be radically changed by mere legislative tinkering and his concern with what have been called 'the unintended consequences of intended social actions' remain much to the point. They could, for example, be profitably shared by many present-day Benthamites and 'piecemeal social engineers' who appear to believe that no sociological theory -- and certainly none of a functionalist kind -- can have any significance for their mission.

Third, and finally, Spencer is of interest in his efforts to avoid being forced by his system into a completely 'necessitarian' position; that is, into a position in which he would have to assert the futility of all attempts at reform or deliberate social change of any kind. In part, he saved himself in that purposive action was incorporated into the 'Lamarckian' aspect of his evolutionism: as institutions changed the character of individuals, they in turn, or their children, would seek to mould institutions into closer conformity with their evolving needs.

But further, Spencer was drawn towards the idea of what he termed 'rational reform'. By this he meant something rather similar to what Mr. Crossman would call 'science-based government', though with the main emphasis on the need for expertise in the sociological field. In other words, Spencer was ultimately prepared to extend his previous argument and to claim that a social science was the one means of making effective social action possible -- even while its existence implied that at any one time hard alternatives would have to be faced and certain limits recognized. Thus, the case of Spencer serves to refute again the old charge that a functionalist is inevitably a conservative. But it illustrates the valid point that in the functionalist view society is not a pipe for anyone to play on.