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2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the central ideas of two of the founding fathers of sociology. After studying this unit, you should be able to

- outline the biographical details of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer
- describe the social environment to which they belonged
- discuss the central ideas of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer
- compare and contrast the approaches outlined by them
- show the relevance of contributions of these early thinkers to contemporary sociology.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already studied about the growth of sociology in Europe (Unit 1). Here we will introduce you to the pioneers of sociology. In this unit, we will confine our attention to the founders, Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. In the next unit, we shall deal with some other founding fathers of sociology like Georg Simmel, Thorstein Veblen and Vilfredo Pareto.

You will find it interesting to notice how the themes of sociology, discussed in Unit 1, are dealt by each of the sociologist whom you will study in this unit. Section 2.2 explains the early origins of sociology. Section 2.3 discusses the social environment to which Auguste Comte (1798-1857) belonged, his central ideas and the significance of his sociology to the contemporary period. Section 2.4 elaborates upon the social environment to which Herbert Spencer belonged, his central ideas and the significance of his ideas on contemporary sociology. Finally, section 2.5 provides you the summary of this unit.

2.2 EARLY ORIGINS

In the previous unit, Unit 1 of ESO-03, you learnt about the emergence of sociology in Europe. Here we are describing the early origins of sociology to explain the social background of the founding fathers of sociology. As students of sociology we must know the central ideas of the founding fathers since their work reflects the main social concern of sociology and provides the basic foundation for discipline of sociology.

As you know, human beings have always been curious about the sources of their own behaviour. You must have pondered some time or the other on the strange ways of society. Why, you may have asked, must we behave in this way? Why is our society so traditional? Why is the society of other people so different from our own? These questions strike us now, just as they struck our forefathers before us.

Men and women have attempted to answer these questions. But earlier their attempt to understand themselves and society relied on ways of thinking passed down from generation to generation and expressed in religious terms.

The systematic study of human behaviour and human society is a relatively recent development, whose beginnings can be found in the European society of the late eighteenth century. The background to the new approach was the series of sweeping changes associated with the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. The shattering of traditional ways of life prompted those studying human behaviour to develop a new understanding of both the social and the natural worlds.

Just as natural scientists sought to explain the mysteries of life and nature, sociologists sought to explain the complexities of social life. A **science** of society was founded. To begin with the very beginning we shall start with Auguste Comte (1798-1857), commonly regarded as the founder of Sociology. It was he who coined the name 'sociology'. He was a French

man. Next, we will discuss the second founding father of sociology, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who was a Britisher.

Before we start discussing Comte's ideas, you should be warned about the constraints of this unit. The period in which sociology emerged was marked with the rise of writers of distinction. Our treatment of the founding fathers has therefore been highly selective, with the single aim in mind of achieving clarity in seeing the major elements and tendencies which constituted the 'beginnings' of sociology.

2.3 AUGUSTE COMTE (1798-1857)

Auguste Comte was born in 1798 during the ferment of the French Revolution, that vast complex of events which heralded the birth of the modern world. You have already read in Unit 1 about the shattering changes taking place in the European social order in the aftermath of the French Revolution. To understand Auguste Comte's ideas fully, one has to appreciate how passionately he was concerned with the problems which people and society of his time were faced with. In order to gain an insight into Auguste Comte as a person, let us discuss his biographical sketch.

2.3.1 Biographical Sketch

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), a French sociologist, was born at Montpellier France of Catholic royalist parents (see Figure 2.1: Auguste Comte, 1798-1857). In 1814 he was admitted to one of the most prestigious educational institutions of France at that time called the Ecole Polytechnique. Here most of the professors were scholars in mathematics and physics. They had little interest in the study of society. But young Auguste Comte, being sensitive to the kind of social disorder that France was undergoing due to the Revolution, was keenly interested in human affairs and the study of society. Comte was involved in a student protest at the Ecole Polytechnique because of which he was expelled.

At the Ecole Polytechnique, he came under the influence of such traditionalist social philosophers as L.G. Bonald and Joseph de Maistre. It was from them that he borrowed the notion of an order governing the evolution of human society. From Condorcet, another major philosopher of France, who was beheaded later, Comte got the idea that this evolution occurs along with progress in human societies. In 1824, he became a secretary to Saint-Simon, an aristocrat by birth but an utopian socialist in ideas. He became a close friend and disciple of Saint-Simon, who stimulated his interest in economics. It was at this period that Auguste Comte worked out the general conception of a science of society, which he named sociology.

Auguste Comte's ambition was the political reorganisation of human society. According to him, such reorganisation will have to depend upon the spiritual and moral unification of society. Thus, with Saint-Simon, he developed several major ideas. However, their partnership was shortlived and they ended up quarreling with each other. Later Auguste Comte published some of his lecture notes in, *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (6

Vols., Paris 1830-42, 5th ed.). In this work he wrote about the law of three stages and developed his conception of a science of society. While working on this book, he discovered the principle of cerebral hygiene. This meant that in order to keep his mind uncontaminated he stopped reading other people's works.

Between 1851-1854, he wrote a treatise entitled, *System of Positive Politics*, (4 Vols.). In this book he applied the findings of theoretical sociology towards solving the social problems of his society. It was during this period that he met Clotilde de Vaux who became a close friend. Her death in 1846, a year after they met, affected Auguste Comte to such a great degree that his ideas turned towards mysticism and religion. His ideas, which he put down in *Systems of Positive Politics*, shifted partly from positivism to construct a religion of humanity. Due to this change in ideas he lost many of his disciples and intellectual friends such as, J.S. Mill of England. He took his role as the prophet of social regeneration so seriously that he even sent a plan to the Russian King suggesting ideas to reorganise society. However, till his end Auguste Comte's works were not recognised in France. Only after his death, in 1857 (a very important year in Indian history) he became popular first in England and then in France and Germany. The direct imprint of his thinking can be seen in the French scientific movement of the last half of the nineteenth century, represented by such thinkers as, Taine, Renan, Berthelot and such outstanding English figures as J.S. Mill.

2.3.2 His Social Environment

During the early nineteenth century the intellectual climate in France was favourable to the development of new, critical and rational ideas. Achievements in natural sciences and mathematics were a matter of pride and a new confidence had developed in the use and application of methods. You already know about the emphasis that the Enlightenment philosophers placed on the ideas of progress and human reason.

Auguste Comte, being a product of his time, was also affected by the social destruction brought by the French Revolution. He lived in the aftermath of the French Revolution. He was continually distressed and disturbed by the disorder of his time, and by the material and cultural poverty of the people. His fundamental and lifelong preoccupation was how to replace disorder by order; how to bring about a total reconstruction of society.

He saw the French Revolution as a crucial turning-point in the history of human affairs. The ancient regime was gone. Society was unable to cope with the new developments in scientific knowledge and industrialisation. A new order of social institutions in keeping with the changes taking place had not yet taken a firm hold. Amidst this confused state people too were in a state of flux. Their thoughts were disoriented. There were great differences between belief and knowledge. In other words the traditional value system was disturbed during this period. And the cultural values and goals of people lacked coherence, confidence and worthwhile objectives. Erstwhile loyalties had broken. New ones were yet to take root. The people were, therefore, in a state of confusion. A new policy or a new order of feeling, thought and action was necessary for the new, complex, industrial society. But this reconstruction needed a reliable basis of knowledge.

The question posed by Auguste Comte was – what would this body of knowledge be built upon? And the answer given by Comte was that people themselves have to take initiatives and found a science which would provide them with an alternative world view. It was no longer possible to fall back upon Gods, upon religion, upon metaphysical forces, traditional modes of belief and action. People were now responsible for their own destiny. They must make their own society.

You will ask, how? And it is towards answering this that Comte formulated his central ideas about sociology. But before we move on to the study of the central ideas formulated by Comte, let us tell you about the influence of Saint-Simon on Auguste Comte. It is important to know about Saint-Simon (1760-1825) because many of the ideas developed by Comte had their roots in Saint-Simon's works (see Box 2.1). In fact, Auguste Comte worked as a secretary to Saint-Simon and together they formulated the idea of a science of society.

Box 2.1: Saint Simon, a Utopian Socialist

Saint-Simon was a French aristocrat, but in his ideas he was one of the first utopian socialists (i.e. one who believes in an ideal society where everyone gets an equal share of opportunities and resources). He believed that the problems of his society could be best solved by reorganising economic production. This will deprive the class of property owners from their means of production and thus they will lose their economic freedom which was an important value of his time (Timasheff 1967:19). If you recall the main ideas about the French Revolution, you will remember that the feudal French society was divided into three estates, the first being the clergy, second the nobility and the third, the commoners. The first two estates between themselves owned the major portion of the landed property as well as wealth and status. It is this social and economic structure that Saint-Simon wanted to reorganise.

In a joint publication *Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for the Reorganising of Society*, (1822) Saint-Simon and Comte wrote about the law of three stages through which each branch of knowledge must pass. They said that the object of social physics, the positive science of society later renamed as 'sociology', is to discover the natural and immutable laws of progress. These laws are as important to the science of society as the laws of gravity, discovered by Newton, are to the natural sciences. The intellectual alliance between Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte did not last long and in fact ended in a bitter quarrel.

According to Auguste Comte, sociology is the abstract theoretical science of social phenomena. He had initially called it social physics but later he reluctantly changed this name. He changed it because he found that a Belgian scientist, Adolphe Quetelet, had used this term to describe simple statistics. Thus, Auguste Comte was compelled to use the word sociology, a combination of a Latin and a Greek word which denotes "the study of society on a highly generalised or abstract level" (Timasheff 1967: 4).

Now in the next few pages we will discuss the central ideas of Auguste Comte, such as the law of three stages, the hierarchy of sciences and his division of **static** and **dynamic** sociology.

2.3.3 The Central Ideas

You have noticed that Auguste Comte wanted to reorganise society on new lines. He felt that the momentous changes taking place in European society, especially French, will have to be accompanied by new principles. These new principles will have to integrate and balance the different aspects of human life. Thus, for him, the discovery of social laws, which explain these principles of change in society, were very important.

Auguste Comte was not only talking about sociology as a science of society but also believed that it must be used for reorganizing society. He wanted to develop a naturalistic science of society. This science would be able to both, explain the past development of mankind as well as, predict its future course. According to him the society of human beings must be studied in the same scientific manner as the world of nature. The progress in natural sciences in establishing the laws of nature, such as Newton's laws of gravity, Copernicus's discovery that it is the sun which is fixed and the Earth and other planets which revolve around it, and so on; led him to believe that even in society we can discover social laws.

Auguste Comte maintained that the new science of society must rely on reasoning and observation instead of depending on the authority of tradition. Only then can it be considered scientific. But every scientific theory must also be based on observed facts and vice versa.

Thus, Comte's science of society, that is sociology, was to be patterned after the natural sciences. It was to apply the methods of inquiry used by the natural sciences, such as observation, experimentation, and comparison. However, along with the natural science methods given above, he also introduced the historical **method**. This historical method (different from the one used by historians) was a healthy advance in sociology. Historical method compares societies throughout the time in which they have evolved. This method is at the core of sociological inquiry since historical evolution is the very crux of sociology.

Through these methods Comte wanted to discover social laws because only when we know the laws in society can we restructure it. Thus, in his view social action beneficial to human beings became possible once the laws of motion of human evolution are established. It is these laws which, according to Auguste Comte, define the basis for social order.

According to Comte, nothing is absolute. Every knowledge is true in a relative sense and does not enjoy everlasting validity. Thus, science has a self-corrective character and whatever does not hold true is rejected. In this sense this new science, which was also called positive science, replaced the authority of tradition that could not be refuted (Coser 1971: 5).

2.3.3.1 The Law of the Three Stages

In, as early as 1822 when Auguste Comte was still working as Saint-Simon's secretary, he attempted to discover the successive stages through which human race had evolved. In his study he began from the state of human race, not much superior to the great apes, to the state at which he found the civilised society of Europe. In this study he applied scientific methods



Figure 2.1: Auguste Comte (1798-1857)

Auguste Comte believed that the evolution of the human mind had taken place along with the evolution of the individual mind. In other words, he holds that just as each individual develops from the stage of a devout believer in childhood, to a critical metaphysician (one who questions the abstract notions of existence) in adolescence, to a natural philosopher in adulthood, so also the human beings and their system of thought have evolved in three major stages. These three stages of the evolution of human thought are

- i) the **theological** stage;
 - ii) the metaphysical stage; and
 - iii) the **positive** stage.
- i) In the theological stage, the mind explains phenomena by ascribing them to beings or forces comparable to human beings. In this stage, human being attempts to discover the first and the final causes (the origin and purpose) of all effects. Thus, human mind at this level supposes that all phenomena are produced by the immediate action of supernatural beings. For example, some tribes believed that diseases like small pox, cholera were the expressions of God's anger.
 - ii) In the metaphysical stage, the mind explains phenomenon by invoking abstract entities like 'nature'. These abstract entities are personified abstractions. Human beings pursue meaning and explanation of the world in term of 'essences', 'ideals', 'forms', i.e. in short, in a conception of some ultimate reality, such as God.

- iii) In the positive stage human beings cease to look for 'original sources' or final causes because these can be neither checked against facts nor utilised to serve our needs. Human mind at this stage applies itself to the study of their laws, i.e. their invariable relations of succession and resemblance (Cosser 1971: 7). Human beings seek to establish laws which link facts and which govern social life.

Auguste Comte maintained that each stage of the development of human thoughts necessarily grew out of the preceding one. Only when the previous stage exhausts itself does the new stage develop. He also correlated the three stages of human thought with the development of social organisation, types of social order, the types of social units and material conditions found in society. He believed that social life evolved in the same way as the successive changes in human thought took place.

According to Auguste Comte all societies undergo changes. There is a stage in which a society enjoys social stability. Intellectual harmony prevails in such a society and various parts of the society are in equilibrium. This is the organic period of the society. But when the critical period comes the old traditions, institutions, etc. become disturbed. Intellectual harmony is lost and there is a disequilibrium in society. The French society, in Auguste Comte's view, was undergoing this critical period. He said that there is always a transitional state of anarchy which lasts for some generations at least and the longer it lasts the more complete is the renovation of that society (Cosser 1971: 8).

In terms of the history of human race, the theological stage of human thought, in relation to political dominance, was dominated by the priests and ruled by military men. The metaphysical stage which corresponded roughly to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, was dominated by the Church men and lawyers. The positive stage, which was just dawning, will be dominated by industrial administrators and scientific moral guides.

The theological stage, in terms of social unit, had family as its important unit, the metaphysical stage had state as its important unit, and the positive stage will have the whole human race as the operative social unit.

Auguste Comte believed that intellectual evolution, i.e. the evolution of human thought, was the most important basis of his explanation of human progress. However, he did not rule out other causal factors. For example, he considered growth in human population a major factor that determined the rate of social progress. The more population there was, the more division of labour occurred. The more division of labour there was found in a society, the more evolved it became. Thus, he saw division of labour as a powerful force in the process of social evolution. Following on his footsteps, Emile Durkheim developed his theory of social division of labour which you will learn in Block 3 of this course.

The law of the three stages was also linked with the hierarchy of the sciences. The same way as thought systems evolved, as did the different sciences came to be established. All the sciences, except sociology had reached the positive stage but with the development of sociology the process was complete. Let us examine the hierarchy of the sciences in the next

sub-section (2.3.2.1) and before proceeding to it, it is better to complete Activity 1.

Activity 1

You have just read the central ideas of Auguste Comte. In relation to his ideas of society, in an organic period there is social stability and equilibrium and in a critical period there is social unrest, disequilibrium, etc. Discuss with two elders the social situation in our own country.

On the basis of your discussion, write a short note on Indian Society and its State of Disequilibrium.

Compare your note, if possible, with those of other students at your Study Centre.

2.3.3.2 Hierarchy of the Sciences

Auguste Comte felt that an examination of the several established sciences showed not only that human thoughts in general have passed through the three stages mentioned earlier, but also each subject has developed in the same way. That is, each subject has evolved from a general, simple level to a highly complex level. He put forth a hierarchical arrangement of the sciences in a way which coincided with

- i) the order of their historical emergence and development
- ii) the order of dependence upon each other (each rests on the one which precedes it, and prepares the way for the one that follows it)
- iii) their decreasing degree of generality and the increasing degree of complexity of their subject matter, and
- iv) the increasing degree of modifiability of the facts which they study.

Thus, the final arrangement of the sciences in terms of their emergence and complexity on this basis were Mathematics, Chemistry, Astronomy, Physics, Biology, Sociology, and finally Morals – by which Comte really meant a study of human beings as individuals (a study which followed sociology and was a mixture of psychology and ethics).

Sociology was the most complex science because it had to study the most complex matter, i.e. society. Sociology therefore also arose much later than the other sciences. The object of study of the other subjects was relatively simpler than sociology. Sociology thus emerged because human beings recognised a new set of objective facts concerning their society; such as social disorganisation, development of slums, poverty, etc. which they could not explain, but which they needed to explain in order to deal effectively with them. When Auguste Comte spoke of Sociology as the ‘crowning edifice’ of the hierarchy of sciences, he had the general **unifying** nature of science in mind. He was not claiming any superior status for sociology. He only felt that with the growth of positive knowledge all sciences can be brought into relationship with each other.

According to Auguste Comte, all sciences pass through the three stages, the theological, the metaphysical and finally, the positive stage. But the

individual sciences do not move through these three stages simultaneously. In fact, the higher a science stands in the hierarchy, the later it shifts from one stage to another. With the growth of positive knowledge he also advocated the use of positive methods for sociology (Timasheff 1967: 23).

2.3.3.3 Static and Dynamic Sociology

Auguste Comte divided sociology into two major parts, namely, static and dynamic sociology. The idea of this division is borrowed from biology, which is in keeping with his notions of a hierarchy of sciences. Biology is a science which precedes sociology and thus shares common features with this science.

The static sociology studies the conditions of the existence of society, while the dynamic sociology studies the continuous movement or laws of the succession of individual stages in society. In other words, the first part studies the social order and the second social changes or progress in societies.

In his discussion on Auguste Comte, Timasheff writes that statics is a theory of order or harmony between the conditions of man's existence in society. Dynamics, according to Comte, is a theory of social progress, which amounts to the fundamental development or evolution of society. Order and progress, are closely interlinked because there cannot be any social order if it is not compatible with progress while no real progress can occur in society if it is not consolidated in order. Thus although we distinguish between static and dynamic sociology for analytical purposes, the static and dynamic laws must be linked together throughout the system. Auguste Comte's distinction between statics and dynamics each associated with the idea of order and progress is no longer acceptable today since societies are far more complex than to be explained by the simple notions of order and progress. Auguste Comte's perception was guided by the spirit of the Enlightenment period in which these ideas developed. Contemporary sociologists do not agree with these ideas. But his basic division of sociology continues to exist in the terms, social structure and social change (Timasheff, 1967: 25).

2.3.4 Significance of Auguste Comte's Ideas to Contemporary Sociology

You must have realised by now that the origin and development of sociology as a science of society owes deeply to the contributions of Auguste Comte. His ideas have influenced several major sociologists like, Sorokin, J.S. Mill, Lester Ward, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and several others.

Auguste Comte's law of three stages has been more or less rejected by the contemporary sociologists. But the essential notion of stages of development in ideas and culture in a modified form has been accepted. This can be perceived in the major works of such sociologists as Sorokin.

Auguste Comte's ideas anticipate majority of trends, which are observable in contemporary sociology. His propositions concerning the scope and methods of sociology have been rediscovered in later sociology. In the next section you will learn about another founding father of sociology,

Herbert Spencer, whose ideas proved to be equally significant to the history of sociology.

Before moving on to Herbert Spencer, let us complete Check Your Progress 1.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Which of the following would you categorise as a part of Auguste Comte’s theory?
 - a) A typology of three stages of development
 - b) Emphasis on building a science of society on the model of a natural science
 - c) One of the three stages of development in society is the democratic stage.
 - d) The final stage of development is the positivist stage.
 - e) Sociology is one of the earliest sciences to emerge.
 - f) In the metaphysical stage, the mind explains phenomena by referring to abstract concepts like ‘nature’.
 - g) The task of positive science is the discovery of laws.
 - h) Positivism was thought to be one of the bases of change.

ii) List our three central concepts in Auguste Comte’s sociology.

iii) Discuss Auguste Comte’s ideas about division of labour in society. Use about four lines.

2.4 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. You will learn more about these ideas in section 2.4.3. Let us first discuss the biographical sketch of Spencer and the social environment to which he belonged.

2.4.1 Biographical Sketch

Herbert 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 (see Figure 2.2: Herbert Spencer, 1820-1903: Survival of the Fittest).



Figure 2.2: Herbert Spencer, 1820-1903: Survival of the Fittest

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’.

Spencer also advocated the principle of laissez faire or free market, which was popularised by the English economists of his time. He reached the peak of his popularity in 1882, when he visited the United States of America. However, at the end of his life he died a sad man because he believed that his life work had not achieved its goal as much as he expected.

2.4.2 His Social Environment

The turmoils around Spencer and around Comte were the same. The issues confronting them were the same too. Important differences apart, a broad similarity of concern and focus marked the two thinkers.

Both believed in progress and also had deep faith in the unity and irreversibility of historical development. This faith can be perceived in other major thinkers of this period too, such as Karl Marx. The period to which these thinkers belonged was the Century of Great Hope. Belief, therefore, in the law of progressive development of society is central to their argument. Now let us discuss some of the central ideas of Herbert Spencer.

2.4.3 The Central Ideas

The sociological works of Herbert Spencer, such as, *Social Statics* (1850), *The Study of Sociology* (1873), *Principles of Sociology* (1876-96), are dominated by the idea of evolution. Spencer believed that throughout all times there actually has been social evolution from a simple, uniform or homogeneous structure to a complex, multiform or **heterogeneous** one. Spencer has been influenced deeply by Charles Darwin’s book, *The Origin of Species* (1859). It had brought a revolutionary change in the understanding of how life evolved on earth from a simple unicellular organism to multicellular complex organisms like, human beings themselves.

Although Spencer wrote several books on sociology, he did not give a formal definition of the discipline. According to him, the social process is unique and so sociology as a science must explain the present state of society by explaining the initial stages of evolution and applying to them the laws of evolution. Thus, the evolutionary doctrine is central to his thesis. After explaining this doctrine, we will explain the meaning and significance of organic analogy. You will also learn about Spencer’s classification of societies according to their place in social evolution.

2.4.3.1 The Evolutionary Doctrine

Spencer’s entire scheme of knowledge rested upon the belief that ‘evolution’ was the key concept for the understanding of the world as a whole and of human beings place within it. The concept of evolution in turn rested on the assumption that the various forms of nature – be it mountains or oceans, trees or grass, fish or reptiles, bird or humans are forms and transformations of the same basic material substance.

All knowledge will thus consist of a systematic and testable body of propositions about these several patterns of transformation, which constitute the world, as we experience it. And this basic process of transformation,

present in every element of nature, is the evolutionary principle. By the terms systematic and testable body of propositions we mean simply the set of ideas, which can always be proved right or wrong in terms of changes that occur in the world. In other words, we are talking about the process of evolution that takes place on earth.

If you are finding this a little complicated, think about our own bodies, our own selves. Our bodies consist mainly of water, blood, bones, flesh – and each one of these has been drawn from the nature around us. When we die, we go back into the natural substances around us.

All processes of change are thus similar, in that they emerge out of the physical stuff of the world, have their own patterns of transformation and change, and according to these patterns, in due course decline and dissolve. In this, they move from

- i) a condition of simplicity to a condition of organised complexity.
- ii) a condition of indefiniteness to a condition of definiteness.
- iii) a condition in which their parts are relatively undifferentiated to a condition of increasing specialisation, in which their parts are characterised by a complex differentiation of structure and function.
- iv) from an unstable condition consisting of a large multiplicity of very similar units, relatively incoherent and disconnected in their behaviour, to a stable condition consisting of relatively fewer parts. Human beings now are so intricately organised and articulated that their behavior is regular, coherent and predictable.

2.4.3.2 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 (Timasheff 1967: 38).

Spencer sought to build two classificatory systems of society related to his thesis of social evolution. The first thesis states that in the process of social evolution societies move from simple to various levels of compound on the basis of their degree of composition (See Figure 2.3: The Process of Evolution of Societies as Explained by Herbert Spencer).

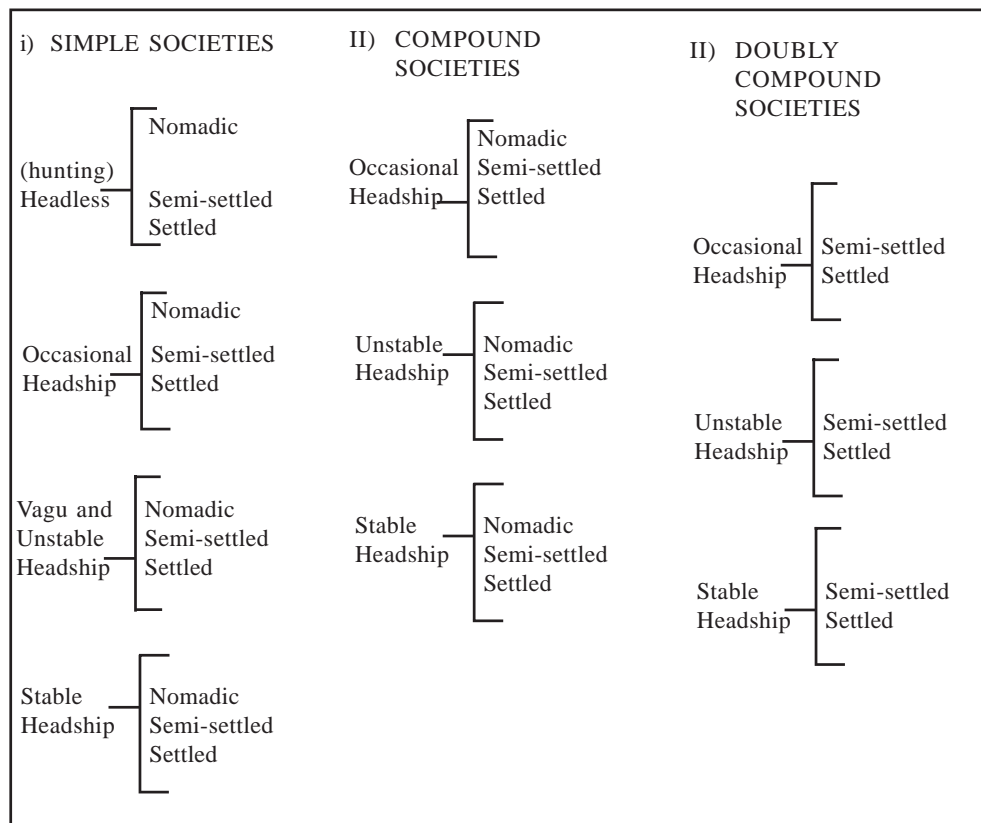


Figure 2.3: The Process of Evolution of Societies as Explained by Herbert Spencer

From the above diagrammatic representation, you would easily understand the process of evolution of societies’ as explained by Spencer. Let us explain it further. According to Spencer the aggregate of some simple societies gives rise to compound societies, the aggregate of some compound societies gives rise to doubly compound societies. The aggregate of some doubly compound societies gives rise to trebly compound societies (these have not been given in the above diagram). According to Spencer simple societies consist of families, a compound societies consist of families unified into clans, doubly compound societies consist of clans unified into tribes and the trebly compound societies, such as our own, have tribes brought together forming nations or states (Timesheff 1967: 40).

The second classificatory system is based on construction of types which may not exist in actual reality but which would help in analysing and comparing different societies. Here a different type of evolution is conceived of, from (i) military to, (ii) industrial societies.

i) **The Militant Society**

The Militant society is a type in which predominant organisation is offensive and defensive military action. Such society has the following characteristics.

- Human relationships in such societies are marked by **compulsory cooperation**.
- There exists a highly centralised pattern of authority and social control.
- A set of myths and beliefs reaffirm the hierarchical nature of society.
- Life is marked by rigorous discipline and a close identity between public and private life.

ii) **The Industrial Society**

The Industrial society is one in which military activity and organisation is peripheral to society. The greater part of society concentrates on human production and welfare.

The characteristics of such a society are that these societies are marked by

- voluntary cooperation,
- firm recognition of people's personal rights,
- separation of the economic realm from political control of the government and
- growth of free associations and institutions.

Herbert Spencer was aware that societies need not fit into either of the systems totally. They served the purpose of models to aid classification. These are some of the central ideas of Herbert Spencer. Now let us see in the next section (2.4.3) how relevant his sociology is for the contemporary period and what his influence is on contemporary sociologists. But, before going on to the next section, we need to complete Activity 2.

Activity 2

You have read the description of social evolution given by Herbert Spencer. Keeping this account in mind, discuss with three persons, one of your grandfather's generation, one your father's generation and one your own generation about the changes they have seen in any one of the major social institutions like marriage, family, economy or polity in India.

Write a note of about two pages comparing the details of social change observed in a social institution in each generation. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

2.4.4 Significance of Herbert Spencer's Idea to Contemporary Sociology

Unlike Auguste Comte, who is the first founding father of sociology, Spencer, known as the second founding father of sociology, had very different expectations from sociology. Auguste Comte wanted to guide men in the construction of a better society. Spencer, instead told people through sociology that human beings should not interfere with the natural processes in societies. Spencer had great faith in the innate instinct of freedom and believed any interference with this instinct to be harmful.

Herbert Spencer, under the influence of Darwin, believed in the notion of “the survival of the fittest”. He like Darwin said that nature had the power to get rid of the weak and unfit. The fittest people are those who are healthy and more intelligent. For him, the state was a “joint-stock company for the mutual protection of individuals” (Timasheff 1967: 41). According to him, nature is more intelligent than human beings and therefore, the government should stop interfering in the process of this evolution. He asked the Government to prohibit such activities as, education, sanitary measures, improvement of harbours, etc. Thus, for Spencer the Victorian laissez faire i.e. free market type society (where there was no government intervention and individuals were free to compete with each other) was the apex of all societies.

Herbert Spencer’s concept of society as a super-organic system had several problems. He was unable to see culture as part of an integrated whole. His explanation regarding the social evolution of societies from simple to compound, and so on, was also faulty. However, he formulated an integral theory of all reality. His law of evolution is a cosmic law and therefore, according to Timasheff (1946: 43) his theory is strictly speaking a philosophical theory rather than sociological.

In his own time, Herbert Spencer became very popular and it was considered a shame if an intellectual did not read his books. His popularity extended to England, the United States of America and Russia but he was not all that known in France and Germany. His ideas became popular because they served the need of his time, namely, the desire for unifying knowledge and the need to explain in a scientific manner the laissez faire principle. This principle was made popular by such economists as Adam Smith and Ricardo. It advocated the idea of a free market where prices will be determined on the basis of demand and supply. In such a market perfect competition could be the basis of demand and supply. In such a market perfect competition could be possible. This principle became popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it was considered by economists and social thinkers to be the best way to increase the wealth of a nation.

Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, both succeeded in raising the status of sociology to that of a science of society. In the next unit you will learn about some more pioneers of sociology.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Which of the following would you categorise as characteristics of Herbert Spencer’s thought?
 - a) Evolution is the key concept.
 - b) All knowledge will consist of a systematic and testable body of propositions.
 - c) All processes of change are markedly different.
 - d) Society is a super-organic entity.
 - e) Society is more than a collection of individuals.

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- f) A classificatory system was of society constructed.
 - g) The system built on the basis of composition comprised simple societies, compound societies, doubly compound societies and trebly compound societies.
 - h) The other system consisted of the industrial and military societies.
 - i) Scientific knowledge is unlimited.
- ii) Write in seven lines about the essence of Spencer’s arguments regarding social evolution.

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- iii) What is common in the ideas of Comte and Spencer? Write your answer in three lines.

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you learnt that the systematic study of human behaviour and human society is a relatively recent development. You read about the biographical sketch of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and the social environment to which Auguste Comte belonged. He is the founding father of sociology. He coined the word sociology to describe the science of society. The central ideas of Comte are

- the law of the three stages: the theological state, the metaphysical stage, and the positive stage
- the hierarchy of the sciences
- the static and dynamic sociology.

You learnt also about the significance of Auguste Comte’s ideas to contemporary sociology.

In the second part of this unit, we outlined a sketch of Harbert Spencer the social environment to which he belonged. He is considered to be the second founding father of sociology. We explained the following central ideas of Spencer

- the evolutionary doctrine
- the organic analogy
- the evolution of societies, firstly in terms of composition from simple to compound and so on; and then in terms of transition from military to industrial societies.

Finally, we discussed the significance of Herbert Spencer's ideas to contemporary sociology.

2.6 KEY WORDS

Compulsory Cooperation	It is that kind of cooperation among people which is compulsorily imposed by the leaders who represent authority.
Dynamic	It is any mass or object or force which is in a state of motion. In society it corresponds to the notion of social change.
Evolution	The process of slow changes through a long period of time in which life forms have developed from simple unicellular beings, such as amoeba, to complex multicellular beings, such as human beings.
Heterogeneous	Composition of unlike elements. For example, India is considered to be a heterogeneous society since it has people of different languages, religions and cultures living in it.
Metaphysical	Metaphysics literally means that branch of philosophy which investigates the first principles of nature and thought. For Comte it is a stage of development of mind in which the mind explains phenomenon by invoking abstract entities or forces like "nature". In this stage human beings explain the meaning of the world in terms of "essences", "ideas", etc.
Method	The way of collecting data or facts about social phenomena, such as the method of observation, interview, survey, etc.
Positive	Positive literally means anything in the affirmative. For Comte it is the last stage of the development of mind. Here the search for 'original sources' 'final ends' about existence of human beings stops. Instead human beings start observing phenomena and establishing

regular links which exist between these phenomena. Thus, in the positive stage human beings search for social laws which link facts and which govern social life.

Science	Systematised knowledge derived from observation, study and experimentation. Scientific knowledge can be tested, verified or proved.
Static	Any mass or object or force which is at an equilibrium, i.e. which does not move. In society it corresponds to the notion of the structure of society.
Theological	According to the dictionary, theology is the study of religion. For Comte it is the first stage of development of mind. In this stage mind explains phenomenon by ascribing them to beings or forces comparable to human beings. Here explanations take the form of myths concerning spirits and supernatural beings.
Unifying	The comprehensive nature of a science which can explain all aspects of existence.
Voluntary cooperation	It is the kind of cooperation among people which is not imposed on them but is voluntarily accepted by them.

2.7 FURTHER READING

Coser, Lewis A. 1971. *Masters of Sociology Thought Ideas in Historical and Social Context*. Second Edition, Harcourt Brace Jovonovich, Inc.: New York.

Hubert, Rene, 1963. *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*. Vol. 1-IV, pp. 151-152. 15th printing. The MacMillan Co.: New York.

Timasheff, Nicholas S., 1967. *Sociological Theory. Its Nature and Growth*, Third Edition. Random House: New York.

2.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) a, b, d, f, g, h
- ii) a) Comte wanted to build scientific laws of society.

- b) Comte focused on both statics and dynamics, i.e. the analysis of the social system and the study of the changing forms over time and space.
 - c) Comte built a hierarchy of sciences, at the apex of which stood sociology.
- iii) Auguste Comte saw division of labour in society as a powerful force in the process of social evolution. It is closely linked with the increase in population. The more division of labour that occurs in a society the more complex and evolved that society becomes.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) a, b, d, e, f, g, h.
- ii) Spencer's theory rested on the principle of 'evolution'. The concept of evolution in turn rested on the premise that every form of nature undergoes changes and in essence derives from the same substance. The task of science therefore would be to build a body of knowledge to study the way various patterns of transformation are taking place in the world around us.
- iii) Both Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer believed in
 - a) the task of scientific knowledge being the establishment of testable laws.
 - b) Scientific laws were statements of interconnection, i.e. they are 'uniformities of co-existence and succession'.
 - c) Scientific knowledge alone provided reliable basis for prediction.