

---

# Social Darwinism: Revolutionism of Herbert Spencer (Simmons)

## Summary

Social life had degenerated into a stark, competitive struggle for existence and civil society had descended into the law of the social jungle. The author starts the article with a refer to the jungle. He addressed the sense of alienation, confrontation and defiance. The so called neoliberal policies pursued by many governments of low taxes, reduced government spending, privatization, de-regulation and the replacement of government programs by private-sector, market-driven services rapidly changed societies. The neoliberalism has a stronghold in the modern world. Social worlds are determined by the policies of privatization and deregulation. Erosion of the public sector and the steady expansion of industries dominated by a small group of corporations in the private sector. Citizens has been eclipsed by consumers. The major arbiter of people is nowadays the market or economy. Our present society could be labelled as 'social Darwinism'. The author refers to the law of social jungle. Does it dominate our ideas and world? The author argued that the essence of social Darwinism was the ideology created by Herbert Spencer. Common formula of "competition and selection" is what drives people and also entertains people through television. The author specifically mentions reality television which naturalizes questions the social Darwinism of competitive capitalism and neoliberalism. Besides these factors reality tv also contributes to narcissism, self-promotion and instant celebrity status. The author argued if social Darwinism has returned?

First the author addressed Herbert Spencer and the Rise of Social Evolutionism. Herbert Spencer (Victorian era) was a sociologist with major contradictions in his theory. In developing his evolutionary theory of society, Spencer combined intellectual traditions that were often radically at odds with each other and fundamentally irreconcilable. Other socialist thinkers like Comte, synthesize order and progress in society whereas, Spencer's work is in paradoxes.

In his evolutionary theory Spencer combined organicism; the mutual interdependence of all parts biological or social, the so called function. He had a more individualistic view in contrary to Comte and Durkheim. And positivism; Spencer and Comte agreed that the task of sociology was to discover general laws of society in the way that Newton and Darwin discovered their laws. Although Spencer remained an radical individualist. The last key word: evolutionism; all forms of matter were subject to the general laws of evolution. He distinguished it between the levels of material reality, nonmaterial and human society. Societal foundations of evolution consisted out of social structure and social dynamics. This process was from simple to complex organization. Evolution was necessary for survival argued Spencer. Spencer understood societal evolution primarily in "materialist" terms. He saw the evolution of human societies as going to different stages of material culture such as technology and humanity.

Utilitarianism principle stated; "The greatest good for the largest number is obtained through the unregulated pursuit of individual self-interest. Also referred as rational egoism. The society and economy worked most efficiently when individuals were left to pursue their own self-interest. Nowadays known as the "market principle". Spencer argued that societies were fully reducible to the sum of their individual parts. Although he had a strong radical utilitarian principle which

---

became the trademark of intellectual culture in Britain.

Author mentioned that Spencer's principles of sociology and classification of human societies presents with apparent similarities and differences between his idea and those of Comte. Spencer embraced a positivist theory of knowledge (not of social engineering). And also social statics and social dynamics. Society could be analysed in terms of different systems: the sustaining system, the regulating system and the distributing system. Furthermore, Spencer developed a general classification of all known human societies based on the evolutionary levels of society. The simple societies, compound societies, double-compound societies and treble-compound societies. The most known classification was his categorical distinction between militant and industrial societies. Spencer is well-known for his general ideas for existence and his "survival of the fittest". The ideology of social Darwinism could be explained in four basic assumptions: the biological laws, all species grow exert to the available food supply, highly adaptive traits (competitive) and effects of natural selection and elimination of species.

The conclusions drawn from the ideology of social Darwinism can be drawn as following: survival of the fittest, a combination of shifting and changing intellectuals. Social Darwinism would be seen as a conservative ideology although some facts were more progressive. Furthermore, many different interpretations of the ideology could be made.

Furthermore, theories like Spencer's view evolved and changed in his writings. The lesson the author provides in this article is that people can learn from Spencer. He stated that an important value to uphold is freedom and all utopian schemes for social transformation are circumscribed by global resources and humanity.

## **Evaluation and conclusion**

What I would consider a positive point is that the author (Simmons) constructs his articles in a clear introduction, then chapters more in depth, a simple conclusion, criticism on the mentioned theories and finally a lesson which can be learnt. This makes it interesting and great to read. Furthermore, focussed on this article: the main point of critic is that Spencer has conflicting theories or ideas; for example the social Darwinism and his individualism. The author summarized this multiple times. I would argue that this makes it easier for students to learn from the text. Furthermore, the author has an objective view and considers more 'sides' of the theory.