

# On Cultural Theories of Marx and Spencer

**E. M. Recio**

*ANTH 410: Cultural Theory*

Department of Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology  
Drexel University, Philadelphia PA 19104

19th April 2001

## **Introduction**

While I was still attempting to discover what aspect of Marx and Spencer I was to concentrate on for this short essay, a friend noted that Marx and Spencer were polar opposites; at first glance, I took this as true. However, I started thinking some more about their differences and found very little different between the two when the concepts were abstracted from the arguments' literal presentation. I will take a look at the *conceptual* differences between the two theories, and argue that either (a) Spencer was unclear about his version of utopia, or (b) they are similar theories leading towards the same type of utopian endpoint.

## **I**

The first consideration that must be taken with the two theories is the literal presentation of the essays. Spencer, throughout his article analyses societies using an analogous<sup>1</sup> argument to biological organisms. Society, argues Spencer, like a biological organism, is a *growth*, independent of people's actual will or influence.

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<sup>1</sup>I have learned early in my academic career through philosophical discourse that arguments from analogy are quite weak. In calling into question the conclusion, we only need to show that the similarity being claimed does not necessarily entail the conclusion. The easiest way to do this is to find a counter-example to the conclusion (another state of affairs which shared all of the similarities of the two subjects, but which did not have the first subject's additional property.)

This growth came about through “general natural causes” facilitated by the division of labour; all industrial organisation, or the division of labour, arose from human wants and activities because each person had been pursuing his own welfare. As time continued, societies grew in number and size, structure went from simple to complex, and a unique form of mutual dependence emerged. Through struggle of the various individual units within each particular division of labour, one will come out victorious. When in all divisions, the best man has won, utopia will be reached-civilisation will be at its apex.

Marx, however, bases his entire argument on one seminal tenet: the materialistic principle. Through the materialistic principle he develops the first, second and third historical acts each happening simultaneously. These acts, says Marx, allows for the creation of culture; more specifically, the deliberate (read *intentional*, in the philosophic sense) methods for expressing their lives. Thus, the first premise of human existence is instantiated: individuals must be in a position to live in order to make history. Hence, to Marx, existence is both *what* real humans produce, and not less, *how* they produce. Marx makes no analogous arguments to any organism or the such; instead, he points towards the increasing complexity from family, through tribal, ancient communal, feudal, to industrial societies. Marx never loses sight of the importance of real humans, producing real culture from which mental production of ideas arise. Hence ideas begin with the concrete and rise to the abstract - not the other way round as the Hegelians would insist. The division of labour arises out of the need for individuals to produce products from material labour. Unlike Spencer, however, Marx believes in a class consciousness that is produced when one is locked into his or her division; this consciousness may appear to represent something unreal because it is so abstracted from everyday life, and so far removed from our accustomed mode of existence, the original primitive familial, or tribal, social relations. Since division of labour exists, then men come into conflict with each other; this conflict, however, is different than Spencer’s struggle in that it is class conflict *because* of the separation of labour. The class wars are played out between the “have”s and the “have not”s. Ultimately, utopia will be reached when the lower classes rid themselves of false consciousness... when they rise up against the “haves” and establish communism universally.

## II

Now the differences between Marx and Spencer taken in the *literal* sense are actually quite salient. After all consider the tongue-in-cheek term biological Spencer-

ism as the view from the left. However, consider the various conceptual premises to both arguments:

- Societies go from simple to complex in a number of stages.
- As societies increase in complexity, they continue along the path towards a utopian society.
- There are certain milestones to be reached before the ultimate goal.
- When the ultimate goal is reached, society will be most complex, yet peaceful.

The fundamental difference in most of the points itemised above, was Spencer's concentration on the analogy between biological organisms and social organisation. Marx, however, simply expanded on his notion of material modes of production.

**Societies go from simple to complex in a number of steps.** According to both Marx and Spencer, this is the natural evolution of culture. They believed that the more so-called primitive cultures of say Aboriginals were at a lower evolutionary stage than Western European civilisation. Both men were attempting to ride the new wave of biological evolutionary theory. They both enumerated a number of steps that human cultures pass through in order to go from primitive to civilised.

**As Societies increase in complexity, they continue along the path towards a utopian society.** For Marx this was directly referred to as the move from the family, the tribe, ancient communal, feudalism and the "current" civilised world. For Spencer, this was the "natural" emergence of more specialised sectors of society. Specifically, he believed that the current times (Victorian England) was close to that point of pure perfection.

**There are certain milestones to be reached before the ultimate goal.** Marx warned of the problems arising from only portions of the world converting to communism. The world had to be sufficiently advanced in technology, to support one person being a doctor one day and an engineer another. If even one of the societies were capitalist, the move towards communism would fail, because there would always be room for that one society to tempt and bribe the communist society towards failure. A universal labour class consciousness, and class conflict

would need to occur. Spencer, on the other hand, warned that these milestones were the intraclass conflict, struggling to come out on top.

**When the ultimate goal is reached, society will be most complex, yet peaceful.**

While the idea of a communist society as utopic seems comprehensible, the idea of a capitalist society as utopic is not as easily grasped. In order for Spencer's form of a utopia to obtain, there necessarily must be a winner in the intraclass conflict. When a winner emerges out of this conflict, there is, by definition, no more conflict. Without any additional intraclass conflict the notion of capitalism vanishes. Yet without capitalism, his entire argument collapses, ceding Marx as the victor in this philosophical discourse.

## References

- [1] Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. "Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook." McGee 53-66.
- [2] Spencer, Herbert. "The Social Organism." McGee 11-27.
- [3] McGee, Jon R. and Richard L Warms, Eds. *Anthropological Theory*. Mountain View, Cal.: Mayfield Publishing, 2000.