



LESSON 8 PRIMARY CONCEPTS: CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIETY: DURKHEIM & SPENCER

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8.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Meaning of Society
- Classification of Society
- Durkheim and Spencer's Understanding of Society

8.1 Introduction

All sciences have their technical terminologies, their own sets of concepts and professional words. Such terminologies are indispensable, for they reduce the vagueness, the ambiguity and the confusion. Without a technical language, scientific communication becomes cumbersome and inefficient. Sociologists, like other scientists, have technical vocabulary. Most of the sociological vocabulary is taken from ordinary English words and has given them a technical meaning. 'Culture', for example, does not mean refinement in artistic or literary taste or good manner, when it is used in sociology or anthropology. Each term is a technical term and has a set of connotations different than its everyday usage. Sociological concepts are different from the ideas of commonsense.

In everyday conversation we use such words as 'society', 'community', 'institution', 'culture', 'custom' and the like. These words or concepts are also basic to an understanding of sociology. **Stuart Chase (1941)** term as 'big words' of sociology be clarified and rendered precise. Definitions are elusive because these words as said above are part of everyday speech and this creates confusion in the minds of social sciences. Every science has its own terms or concepts. These terms helps a student of a science to understand it more clearly. The student of sociology also should have a clear vision and correct understanding of its basic terms. We are trying to clarify basic concepts in this unit and next lessons.

Durkheim Classification of Society

Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer, two foundational figures in sociology, both sought to understand the evolution and structure of societies. While both employed an evolutionary perspective, they differed in their primary focus and the key criteria they used to classify societies.

Émile Durkheim's Classification: Mechanical and Organic Solidarity



Durkheim's classification of societies is primarily based on the nature of social solidarity, the bonds that hold society together and create social cohesion. He identified two main types of solidarity, which correspond to different stages of societal development:

1. Mechanical Solidarity:

This type of solidarity is characteristic of traditional, pre-industrial, and smaller-scale societies. It is based on similarity, homogeneity, and a strong collective consciousness. Individuals in these societies share similar beliefs, values, experiences, occupations, and lifestyles. The division of labor is minimal. Individuals perform similar tasks and have a broad range of skills. There is little specialization. Individualism is weak. The collective consciousness is strong and pervasive, dominating individual thoughts and actions. Individuals are tightly bound by shared norms and traditions. Repressive law is dominant. Deviations from the collective norms are seen as threats to the social order and are met with harsh, punitive sanctions aimed at reaffirming the collective values. Social change is slow and limited. The strong collective consciousness and resistance to deviation make significant societal transformations difficult.

Key Characteristics of Societies with Mechanical Solidarity:

- Homogeneity: Members are alike in many aspects.
- Strong Collective Consciousness: Shared beliefs and values are deeply ingrained and widely held.
- Limited Individual Freedom: Individual expression and deviation are discouraged.
- Emphasis on Tradition and Custom: Social life is governed by established norms and practices.
- Repressive Justice: Focus on punishing offenders to reinforce collective values.

2. Organic Solidarity:

This type of solidarity is characteristic of modern, industrial, and larger-scale societies. It is based on interdependence and specialization arising from a complex division of labor. Individuals perform highly specialized tasks and rely on others for their needs. The division of labor is highly complex and extensive. Individuals have specialized roles and skills, leading to interdependence as they rely on each other for goods and services. Individualism is more pronounced. While social norms still exist, the complex division of labor allows for greater individual differences in beliefs, values, and lifestyles. Individuals are bound together by their functional interdependence. Restitutive law becomes more dominant. Deviations are seen as breaches of contract or disruptions to the social order that need to be repaired or compensated for. The focus shifts from punishment to restoring social equilibrium.



Social change is more rapid and dynamic. The greater tolerance for individual differences and the interconnectedness of the complex system make societies more adaptable to change.

Key Characteristics of Societies with Organic Solidarity:

- **Heterogeneity:** Members are different in many aspects due to specialization.
- **Weaker, More Abstract Collective Consciousness:** Shared beliefs are less pervasive and more general.
- **Greater Individual Freedom:** Individuals have more autonomy in their thoughts and actions.
- **Emphasis on Individual Rights and Laws:** Formal laws and contracts regulate social interactions.
- **Restitutive Justice:** Focus on repairing harm and restoring social order.

Spencer's Classification of Society

One of his key classifications of societies was based on their degree of composition, essentially how many individual units or groups they comprised and how integrated they were. He identified four main types in this evolutionary sequence:

1. Simple Societies:

These are the most basic and primitive forms of social organization. They consist of a small number of families that are loosely connected and largely self-sufficient. There is minimal division of labor beyond that based on age and sex. Political organization is either absent or very rudimentary, often lacking formal leadership or having only temporary leaders for specific tasks. Social differentiation is minimal; members share similar skills, knowledge, and social standing. Examples: Small hunting and gathering bands, nomadic groups with little permanent settlement, and some isolated tribal communities with very basic structures. Spencer cited groups like the Eskimos, Fuegians, and some Guiana tribes as examples.

2. Compound Societies:

Compound societies arise from the union (either peacefully or through conflict) of two or more simple societies. This leads to an increase in population size and the beginnings of social differentiation and specialization. We see the emergence of more defined social strata, perhaps with chiefs or leaders overseeing multiple family groups or clans. A more structured division of labor begins to develop, though it's still relatively basic. Some form of rudimentary political organization



beyond the familial level starts to appear. Examples: Tribal societies where several families are organized into clans under a paramount chief or council. Spencer mentioned the Homeric Greeks, the Teutonic peoples in the 5th century, and some pastoral societies as fitting this category.

3. Doubly Compound Societies:

These societies are formed by the further integration of several compound societies, often resulting in larger populations and more complex social structures. There is a more significant division of labor, with specialized roles and occupations becoming more prevalent. A more elaborate political hierarchy emerges, potentially including a central authority, administrative structures, and even the beginnings of a military or priestly class. Social stratification becomes more pronounced, possibly with the development of rudimentary caste systems or distinct social classes. Towns and roads may begin to appear, facilitating trade and communication. Examples: Early states or kingdoms formed by the unification of multiple tribes or chiefdoms. Spencer pointed to examples like the ancient Peruvians, the Spartan Confederacy, and England in the 11th century.

4. Trebly Compound Societies:

Characteristics: Trebly compound societies represent a further stage of integration, where several doubly compound societies (or nations/states) become unified into very large and complex entities, such as modern nation-states or empires. These societies exhibit a highly specialized and intricate division of labor, with numerous interdependent occupations and institutions. Political organization is highly centralized and complex, with sophisticated systems of governance, law, and administration. Social stratification is typically well-developed, with distinct social classes and potentially intricate systems of social mobility. Advanced infrastructure, communication networks, and complex economic systems are characteristic.

Examples: Large, industrialized nations of Spencer's time and the present day, such as Great Britain, the United States, and other major global powers.

It's crucial to understand that Spencer viewed this classification as an evolutionary progression. He believed that societies naturally tend to move from simpler to more complex forms as they grow in size and interact with other societies. This evolution is driven by the principles of increasing differentiation (specialization of parts) and integration (coordination of these parts).

Limitations:

While influential in its time, Spencer's linear evolutionary model has faced criticism for being overly simplistic and deterministic. It doesn't fully account for the diversity of societal development, the possibility of societal regression, or the influence of cultural and environmental factors in shaping social structures. However, his



framework provided an early and important contribution to the sociological understanding of social organization and societal change.

Herbert Spencer, influenced by evolutionary biology, also classified societies based on their primary mode of social organization and the nature of their relationships with other societies. He identified two ideal types:

1. Militant Society:

Primary Goal of this society is survival through conquest and defense. The society is organized around military needs and hierarchical structures. It is characterized by centralized authority, strict hierarchy, and coercive control. Individuals are subservient to the state, and their roles are largely determined by their position in the military or its support systems. Individualism is suppressed. The needs of the state and the military take precedence over individual desires and freedoms. Social life is highly regulated through strict rules, customs, and laws enforced by a powerful central authority. It is primarily focused on self-sufficiency and resource acquisition through conquest. There is limited specialization and trade. Emphasis is laid on patriotism, obedience, discipline, and the glorification of war and military prowess. Examples: Ancient Sparta, early feudal societies focused on warfare.

Key Characteristics of Militant Societies:

- Centralized Government: Strong, authoritarian rule.
- Hierarchical Structure: Clear lines of authority and obedience.
- Coercive Control: Use of force and strict regulation.
- Suppressed Individualism: Emphasis on collective needs and state power.
- Military Emphasis: War and defense are central to social organization.

2. Industrial Society: Primary Goal in this society is survival through production and exchange. The society is organized around economic activities and voluntary cooperation. It is characterized by decentralized authority, greater individual freedom, and voluntary cooperation. Individuals pursue their own interests within a framework of laws and contracts. Individualism is highly valued and encouraged. Individuals have more autonomy in their choices, occupations, and lifestyles. Social life is regulated primarily through voluntary agreements, contracts, and laws that protect individual rights and facilitate exchange. Coercion is minimized. It is based on a complex division of labor, specialization, and extensive trade both within and between societies. Production is geared towards meeting diverse individual needs and wants. Emphasis is on individual liberty, voluntary cooperation, economic productivity, innovation, and peaceful relations with other societies. Examples: Modern capitalist societies with developed economies and democratic political systems.

Key Characteristics of Industrial Societies:



- Decentralized Government: Limited state intervention, protection of individual rights.
- Voluntary Cooperation: Social interactions based on mutual agreement and contracts.
- Emphasis on Individual Liberty: Freedom of thought, expression, and economic activity.
- Complex Division of Labor: High specialization and interdependence.
- Economic Productivity: Focus on production, innovation, and trade.

COMPARISON BETWEEN DURKHEIM AND SPENCER'S CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIETY:

Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim, both foundational figures in sociology, offered classifications of societies to understand their organization and evolution, albeit with distinct focuses. Durkheim primarily categorized societies based on the type of social solidarity arising from the division of labor, distinguishing between simple societies characterized by mechanical solidarity (unity through shared similarities and a strong collective conscience) and complex societies marked by organic solidarity (unity through interdependence in a high division of labor). Simple societies, in Durkheim's view, exhibit homogeneity and repressive law, while complex societies display specialization and restitutive law. This dichotomy centers on the nature of the social bonds that hold societies together as they increase in complexity.

In contrast, Herbert Spencer's classification was more granular and multifaceted. He initially categorized societies based on their degree of social composition, outlining a linear evolutionary progression from simple societies (small, undifferentiated units) to compound societies (union of simple units), doubly compound societies (integration of compound units), and finally trebly compound societies (large, modern nation-states). This framework emphasized the structural complexity and organizational scale of societies as they grew through the integration of smaller units.

Beyond compositional complexity, Spencer also introduced a crucial dichotomy based on the nature of social control: militant societies, characterized by compulsory cooperation, centralized control, and a focus on defense, and industrial societies, marked by voluntary cooperation, decentralized control, and a focus on economic production. Spencer's militant type aligns more with earlier stages of societal composition, while his industrial type corresponds to the advanced trebly compound societies. This additional layer considers the dominant mode of social regulation as societies evolve.

While both theorists recognized a general evolutionary trend from simpler to more



complex forms and acknowledged the importance of the division of labor, their primary lenses differed. Durkheim's focus was on the social and moral integration of society, emphasizing the changing nature of social solidarity. Spencer, on the other hand, concentrated on structural complexity and the shift in the mode of societal organization and control. Durkheim's simple and complex categories broadly align with the lower and higher ends of Spencer's compositional scale, with his concept of organic solidarity resonating with the principles of interdependence in Spencer's industrial societies. However, Spencer's detailed stages of composition and his explicit classification based on militant versus industrial organization provide a more nuanced breakdown of societal evolution based on structural and regulatory changes, offering a perspective that complements Durkheim's emphasis on social cohesion.

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