

## Primary Source 13.1

**HERBERT SPENCER, “PROGRESS: ITS LAW AND CAUSE” (1857)<sup>1</sup>**

*Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was an English scientist, philosopher, social thinker, and exponent of Utilitarianism and classical liberalism, primarily known for his work concerning evolution and the development of human society. He was born in Derby, England, into a Quaker family, and was educated by his father. He also frequented the Derby Philosophical Society, which introduced him to biological evolution and other cutting-edge ideas. Spencer is probably best remembered for his phrase, “the survival of the fittest.” This idea originated as an alternative way of describing the process behind natural selection, a concept developed by Charles Darwin (1809–82) in his 1859 book, *The Origin of Species*. Numerous thinkers and active people, like the American steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919), misinterpreted Spencer’s idea to mean a moral sanctioning of cut-throat competition. In reality, Spencer, as a proponent of Utilitarianism, held the best society to be the one promoting the greatest good of the greatest number. He also believed that human individuals naturally and correctly strive to check their own tendencies to anti-social selfishness. Nevertheless the social philosophy and pseudoscience of Social Darwinism, to which Spencer unwittingly contributed and which stressed the necessity of competition and conflict for progress, helped to justify race theories, militarism, and imperialism. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Social Darwinism had become a prominent idea in Europe and the United States.*

*The passage below, excerpted from Spencer’s 1857 essay “Progress: Its Law and Cause, advances his interpretation of progress. In a word, it results from a natural tendency toward differentiation, toward ever-greater complexity. Although Spencer does not draw specific conclusions about his own culture and society, it was easy for less subtle thinkers to infer, from the Europeans’ achievement of greater complexity of technological, scientific, institutional, economic, and political development, their overall superiority as a civilization.*

*For a link to the full text, click [here](#).*

**PROGRESS: ITS LAW AND CAUSE**

The current conception of Progress is somewhat shifting and indefinite. Sometimes it comprehends little more than simple growth—as of a nation in the number of its members and the extent of territory over which it has spread. Sometimes it has reference to quantity of material products—as when the advance of agriculture and manufactures is the topic. Sometimes the superior quality of these products is contemplated; and sometimes the new or improved appliances by which they are produced. When again we speak of moral or intellectual progress, we refer to the state of the individual or people exhibiting it; whilst, when the progress of knowledge, of science, of art, is commented upon, we have in view certain abstract results of human thought and action. Not only, however, is the current conception of progress more or less vague, but it is in great measure erroneous. It takes in not so much the reality of progress as its accompaniments—not so much the substance as the shadow. That progress in intelligence which takes place during the

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Progress: Its Law and Cause, With Other Disquisitions* (New York: J. Fitzgerald, 1881), 233–34, 236, 238, 243.

evolution of the child into the man, or the savage into the philosopher, is commonly regarded as consisting in the greater number of facts known and laws understood: whereas the actual progress consists in the produce of a greater quantity and variety of articles for the satisfaction of men's wants; in the increasing security of person and property; in the widening freedom of action enjoyed whereas, rightly understood, social progress consists in those changes of structure in the social organism which have entailed these consequences. The current conception is a teleological<sup>2</sup> one. The phenomena are contemplated solely as bearing on human happiness. Only those changes are held to constitute progresses which directly or indirectly tend to heighten human happiness. And they are thought to constitute progress simply *because* they tend to heighten human happiness. But rightly to understand progress, we must inquire what is the nature of these changes, considered apart from our interests. Ceasing, for example, to regard the successive geological modifications that have taken place in the Earth, as modifications that have gradually fitted it for the habitation of Man, and as *therefore* a geological progress, we must seek to determine the character common to these modifications—the law to which they all conform. And similarly in every other case. Leaving out of sight concomitants and beneficial consequences, let us ask what progress is in itself.

In respect to that progress which individual organisms display in the course of their evolution, this question has been answered by the Germans. The investigations of Wolff,<sup>3</sup> Goethe,<sup>4</sup> and Van Baer<sup>5</sup> have established the truth that the series of changes gone through during the development of a seed into a tree, or an ovum into an animal, constitute an advance from homogeneity<sup>6</sup> of structure to heterogeneity<sup>7</sup> of structure. In its primary stage, every germ consists of a substance that is uniform throughout, both in texture and chemical composition. The first step in its development is the appearance of a difference between two parts of this substance; or, as the phenomenon is described in physiological language—a differentiation. Each of these differentiated divisions presently begins itself to exhibit some contrast of parts; and by these secondary differentiations become as definite as the original one. This progress is continuously repeated—is simultaneously going on in all parts of the growing embryo; and by endless multiplication of these differentiations there is ultimately produced that complex combination of tissues and organs constituting the adult animal or plant. This is the course of evolution followed by all organisms whatever. It is settled beyond dispute that organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous.

Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the earth, in the development of life upon its surface, the development of society, of government, of manufactures, of commerce, of language, literature, science, art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through a process of continuous differentiation, holds throughout. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find

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<sup>2</sup> Teleological means goal oriented, as intended by nature.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Wolff (1679–1754) was a German philosopher during the Enlightenment.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was a German writer and politician.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Ernst von Baer (1792–1876) was an Estonian scientist and explorer who studied biology and is famous for founding the field of embryology.

<sup>6</sup> A uniform composition.

<sup>7</sup> A non-uniform composition.

that the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, is that in which progress essentially consists.

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Whether an advance from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous is or is not displayed in the biological history of the globe, it is clearly enough displayed in the progress of the latest and most heterogeneous creature—man. It is alike true that, during the period in which the earth has been peopled, the human organism has become more heterogeneous among the civilized divisions of the species and that the species, as a whole, has been growing more heterogeneous in virtue of the multiplication of races and the differentiation of these races from each other.

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... In the course of ages, there arises, as among ourselves, a highly complex political organization of monarch, ministers, lords and commons, with their subordinate administrative departments, courts of justice, revenue offices, &c.,<sup>8</sup> supplemented in the provinces by municipal governments, county governments, parish or union governments—all of them more or less elaborated. By its side there grows up a highly complex religious organization, with its various grades of officials from archbishops down to sextons, its colleges, convocations, ecclesiastical courts, &c.; to all which must be added the ever-multiplying independent sects, each with its general and local authorities. And at the same time there is developed a highly complex aggregation of customs, manners, and temporary fashions, enforced by society at large, and serving to control those minor transactions between man and man which are not regulated by civil and religious law. Moreover it is to be observed that this ever-increasing heterogeneity in the governmental appliances of each nation, has been accompanied by an increasing heterogeneity in the governmental appliances of different nations all of which are more or less unlike in their political systems and legislation in their creeds and religious institutions, in their customs and ceremonial usages.

Simultaneously there has been going on a second differentiation of a still more familiar kind; that, namely, by which the mass of the community has become segregated into distinct classes and orders of workers. While the governing part has been undergoing the complex development above described, the governed part has been undergoing an equally complex development, which has resulted in that minute division of labour characterizing advanced nations. It is needless to trace out this progress from its first stages, up through the caste divisions of the East and the incorporated guilds of Europe, to the elaborate producing and distributing organization existing among ourselves. Political economists have made familiar to all, the evolution which, beginning with a tribe whose members severally perform the same actions each for himself, ends with a civilized community whose members severally perform different actions for each other; and they have further explained the evolution through which the solitary producer of any one commodity, is transformed into a combination of producers who united under a master, take separate parts in the manufacture of such commodity. But there are yet other and higher phases of this advance from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous in the industrial structure of the social organism.

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<sup>8</sup> An archaic abbreviation for etcetera.

Long after considerable progress has been made in the division of labour among different classes of workers, there is still little or no division of labour among the widely separated parts of the community: the nation continues comparatively homogeneous in the respect that in each district the same occupations are pursued. But when roads and other means of transit become numerous and good, the different districts begin to assume different functions, and to become mutually dependent. The calico manufacture locates itself in this county, the woollen-cloth manufacture in that; silks are produced here, lace there; stockings in one place, shoes in another; pottery, hardware, cutlery, come to have their special towns; and ultimately every locality becomes more or less distinguished from the rest by the leading occupation carried on in it. Nay, more, this subdivision of functions shows itself not only among the different parts of the same nation, but among different nations. That exchange of commodities which free-trade promises so greatly to increase, will ultimately have the effect of specializing, in a greater or less degree, the industry of each people. So that beginning with a barbarous tribe, almost if not quite homogeneous in the functions of its members, the progress has been, and still is, towards an economic aggregation of the whole human race, growing ever more heterogeneous in respect of the separate functions assumed by separate nations, the separate functions assumed by the local sections of each nation, the separate functions assumed by the many kinds of makers and traders in each town, and the separate functions assumed by the workers united in producing each commodity.

Not only is the law thus clearly exemplified in the evolution of the social organism, but it is exemplified with equal clearness in the evolution of all products of human thought and action; whether concrete or abstract, real or ideal. . . .

. . . Or we might trace out the evolution of science; beginning with the era in which it was not yet differentiated from art, and was, in union with art, the handmaid of religion; passing through the era in which the sciences were so few and rudimentary, as to be simultaneously cultivated by the same philosophers; and ending with the era in which the genera and species are so numerous that few can enumerate them, and no one can adequately grasp even one genus. Or we might do the like with architecture, with the drama, with dress.

But doubtless the reader is already weary of illustrations; and our promise has been amply fulfilled. We believe we have shown beyond question, that that which the German physiologists have found to be the law of organic development, is the law of all development. The advance from the simple to the complex, through a process of successive differentiations, is seen alike in the earliest changes of the universe to which we can reason our way back, and in the earliest changes which we can inductively establish; it is seen in the geologic and climatic evolution of the earth, and of every single organism on its surface; it is seen in the evolution of humanity, whether contemplated in the civilized individual, or in the aggregation of races; it is seen in the evolution of society in respect both of its political and economical organization; and it is seen in the evolution of all those endless concrete and abstract products of human activity which constitute the environment of our daily life. From the remotest past which science can fathom, down to the novelties of yesterday, that in which progress essentially consists, is the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous.

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