

evolution in general and the Industrial Revolution in particular. Spencer saw evolution as a movement from simple forms to complex forms with greater adaptability. Spencer was born and lived his life in England, which, in contrast to France (where Comte and Durkheim grew up), had experienced slow and steady growth, politically and economically. There was thus a tendency to see the world in terms of gradual and peaceful change. Spencer, like most British people at the time, saw the Empire as the pinnacle of social evolution. Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution were seen as expressions of this superiority. Spencer therefore saw laissez-faire capitalism, the division of labor, free markets, and social competition as part of the survival of the fittest.

Spencer's Sociological Imagination: Functionalism

Functionalism is a theoretical perspective that began with the work of Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century and was systematized by Talcott Parsons in the twentieth (see [Chapter 9](#)). Functionalism is built around the organismic analogy and has at least five defining features: concern for requisite needs, structural differentiation, specialization, integration, and system equilibrium. Functionalism came under a great deal of criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some of this criticism was no doubt due to functionalism's apparent inability to explain the social upheavals of the 1960s. But part was also due to the place that Talcott Parsons held in mid-century sociology. For much of the twentieth century, Parsons was "the major theoretical figure in English-speaking sociology" (Marshall, 1998, p. 480). As Victor Lidz (2000) notes, "Talcott Parsons . . . was, and remains, the pre-eminent American sociologist" (p. 388). A good portion of contemporary theories were penned in reaction to Parsons and were thought of as alternative approaches to his vision of social order.

But functionalism is still part of contemporary theory. *Neo-functionalism* reconceptualizes (see Alexander, 1985) some of these issues and is concerned with the integrity and interrelationship of social structures, and social change as generated by structural differentiation and by the tension produced by the relationships among various social structures. *Equilibrium* in neo-functionalism is seen as simply a reference point for studying an empirical system. Perhaps more important has been functionalism's continuing influence on our thinking as sociologists. The functionalists taught us to think in terms of social systems and the effects that different structures or social units can have on one another and the system as a whole.

This way of thinking is at the core of our ideas of globalization. Another specific idea that has currency in contemporary theory is what Spencer called the problem of coordination and control, but is more currently termed the problem of *steering*. This issue is at the heart of modernity, for society must be able to be controlled or guided in order to meet the goals of the social

project. One theorist who looks at this issue is Anthony Giddens, who argues that late modern societies can no longer be steered or guided. Giddens (1990) characterizes late modern society as a juggernaut, “which threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder” (p. 139).

Concepts and Theory: Social Evolution

The Social System

Spencer sees society as a system. In order to begin thinking about society, Spencer used the *organism analogy*—this eventually became the cornerstone of functionalism. The organism analogy is a way of looking at society that understands the form of society and the way society changes as if it were an organism. For example, in order for you to survive, you need oxygen, and you get your oxygen from air. Because of that need and because of that source, your body has a specific structure built inside it—your lungs. It also has other structures and systems (such as the circulatory system) that aid the lungs in fulfilling this need. Fish don't have lungs, and neither do plants. They have other structures and systems that are designed to meet their specific needs within their environment.



Analogies are often used in sociology as ways of understanding how society works. With an analogy, there is resemblance in some particulars between things that are otherwise unlike—and analogies are used to explain something unfamiliar using something that is well known. The *organism analogy* is specific to functionalist theorizing and implies that society works like a biological organism in that it has survival needs and evolves to greater complexity. The analogy also implies that society, just like complex organisms, operates like a system of interrelated parts that tend toward stasis or balance, and any derivation from that life-balance is seen as illness or pathology.

There are three specific theoretical ideas that come from looking at society as an organism: the relationship between needs and functions, systems thinking, and systemic equilibrium. Societies have specific needs, just like your body, called *requisite needs*. The term underscores the idea that these needs are required for survival. Societies develop certain structures or institutions that meet those needs. Just as your lungs are built differently from your stomach because they fulfill a different function, so, too, different social institutions are built differently from one another because they function to fulfill diverse social needs. Another similarity with your body is that institutions are taken

for granted. That is, they work without our usually being aware of them. In fact, the more we are aware of social institutions, the less power they have over our lives.

Thinking in terms of society as an organism also implies that society works like a system. *Systems* are defined in terms of relatively self-contained wholes that are made up of variously interdependent parts. That's a mouthful, but it really isn't as daunting as it might seem. Your body is a system, and it's made up of various parts and subsystems that are mutually dependent upon one another (your lungs would have a hard time getting along without your stomach), each part contributing to the good of the whole. Thinking about the body also lets us see that systems are *bounded*. That is, they exist separate from but dependent upon the environment. There's a definite place where your body ends and the world around you begins. In that sense, your body is relatively self-contained. We have to negotiate the boundary between ourselves and the physical environment, but they are separate. As we will see, that negotiation is part of the needs of the system. So, for Spencer, society acts like a system with mutually dependent parts that are separate from but interacting with the environment.

In addition, systems tend toward *equilibrium*. If you are reading this book, then you are alive. If you are alive, your body is regulating its temperature, among other things. The point is that it is probably either hotter or colder in the environment than your body wants or needs. Your body senses the difference between its goal (98.6 degrees Fahrenheit) and its environment and uses more or less energy in heating or cooling itself. Your body keeps itself in balance. Spencer posits that society does the same kind of thing: The social system has internal pressure mechanisms that work to keep society in balance. One of the things to notice as we move through Spencer's theory is that change and integration are social responses to system pressures, rather than individual people making decisions. According to Spencer, the mechanisms for integration and change are in the system itself, not in the people who live in the system.

System Needs

Just as every living organism has certain needs that must be met for it to

survive, society, too, has specific needs. For example, every society needs some standardized method of providing food, shelter, and clothing to its members. Every society also needs some agreed-upon method of communication, some way of passing down its culture to succeeding generations, some way of achieving a general but morally binding identity and value system, and so on. Each functionalist has his or her own proposed list of needs. As expected, these lists are pretty similar, but they are usually pretty abstract as well, particularly in the case of a grand theorist such as Spencer.



The concept of *requisite needs* is an essential assumption of Spencer's perspective. Requisite needs are requirements that every system must meet in order to survive. Because every system has the same needs, functionalists argue that all systems can be understood using the same set of ideas.

Spencer argues that because all systems basically work in the same manner, all systems should have the same requisite needs. For Spencer, there are three requisite needs or functions: regulatory, operative, and distributive. The *regulatory function* involves those structures that stabilize the relationships between the system and its external environment and between the different internal elements. In short, it regulates boundaries. An example of a regulatory social structure is government, or polity. Governments, both local and national, set and enforce laws that control relationships, whether between internal units (such as individuals or corporations) or between our society as a whole and other external systems (such as a foreign country). The printing and regulation of money is another example of how governments manage relationships. When exchanges occur between individuals or companies or nations, it is money and its determined value that standardize those exchanges.

The *operative function* concerns those structures that meet the internal needs of the system. For a society, these needs could be cultural or material. The cultural needs of a society are met through institutions such as education, and the material needs are met through the economy. The operative system also

includes such things as values (we can either value material gain or spiritual enlightenment) and communities (the social networks that meet our emotional needs). The *distributive system* involves those structures that carry needed information and substances. It is the transportation (roads, railways, airlines) and communication (telephone, mail, and the Internet) networks that move goods and information through society.

These three different functions are not simply a way to categorize and understand what is going on in society, though they certainly do that. Spencer also says that there are at least two kinds of issues associated with these functions. First, Spencer notes that each subsystem will display the same needs. What that means is that every subsystem acts just like a system and can be understood as having the same needs. So, the distributive system, for example, has needs for distributive, operative, and regulatory functions. Spencer doesn't make subsystem needs and analysis a central feature of his theory, but as we will see, Talcott Parsons ([Chapter 9](#)) does. A second dynamic that Spencer points out is that in social evolution, there is a tendency for the regulatory function to differentiate first. For example, as we move from simple collectives to more complex societies, the first structure to differentiate and specialize is government.

Differentiation and Specialization

Generally speaking, evolution is a scientific theory of the process of continuous change. The process is marked by transformation from simpler, less adaptable forms, to the more complex. Complexity is usually understood in terms of the number, types, and interrelationships among biological structures within an organism. The basic tenets are the same for social evolution: Societies change gradually over time into structurally more complex forms. More complex societies are judged superior by virtue of increased adaptation and survivability. Complexity comes about through the differentiation, specialization, and integration of structures.



Social structure is a central idea for sociology. The notion of structure is an

answer to the problem of patterned human behavior. People tend to act in predictable ways across time and space, even though humans are not directed by instinct. Thus, there are two fundamental characteristics of structures: Structures are made up of connections, and structures create and sustain predictable patterns and shapes. Generally speaking, social structures are built from status positions, roles, norms, values, and resources. Structures are usually understood as existing outside the individual (objective) and having the force necessary to conform the person's behaviors to social expectations. Structures are thus responsible for the general patterns we see in society.

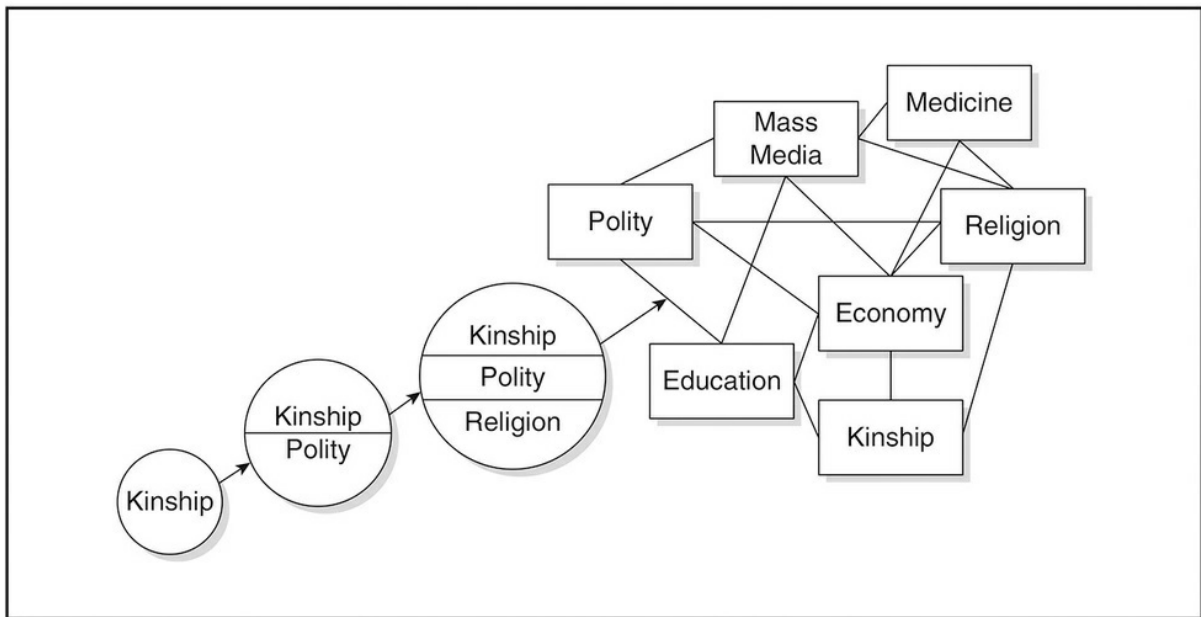
We can think of *social structures* as made up of status positions, roles, norms, values, and resources. When human groups first emerged, the primary way they organized was through kinship relations, and kinship supplied all the operative, distributive, and regulatory functions. As societies grew through population growth and conquest, the single structure couldn't address all the needs; kinship was becoming inefficient. Soon, different social structures emerged and took some of the workload off the family. This process is called *structural differentiation*. Structural differentiation in society, then, is the process through which social networks break off from one another and become functionally *specialized*. That is, the network of status positions, rules, and resources becomes peculiar to a specific function. Social evolution has involved a movement from simple social forms (such as hunter-gatherer societies) to more complex forms (such as postindustrial societies). I've pictured this progression in [Figure 2.1](#).

[Figure 2.1](#) is not meant to be a dynamic model, nor does it attempt to map out all the steps. It simply presents a picture of the general idea of Spencerian social evolution. Notice that in the first circle, which would represent hunter-gatherer societies, there is only one structure: kinship. What that indicates is that all the needs of society are being met through one social institution. So, for example, the religious needs of the group are met through the same role and status structure as family. That is, the head of the family is also the "priest."

The second and third circles indicate that there is some differentiation, but the different institutions are still very closely linked. For example, the first-born son would be expected to go into government and the second-born son into religion. The final picture shows a society that is structurally differentiated

and specialized, much like our own. In our society, your family role is generally not associated with the role you will play in religion, school, government, or the economy (to the degree that it is, there is another structure at work—a structure of inequality).

Figure 2.1 Social Evolution—Simple to Complex



Once an organism has multiple structures performing specialized tasks, *integration* becomes a need. Think of single-celled amoebas. Because of their nature, integration isn't an issue: If there is only one cell, there is nothing with which that cell can be integrated. Differentiated and specialized structures by definition perform dissimilar tasks and will tend to move in different directions. Thus, multicelled animals must create structural solutions to the problem of integration. The human body, for instance, uses the central nervous system to integrate all its different structures and subsystems.

As I implied previously, the force that drives social evolution is population. As populations grow, they need to differentiate their structural system in order to meet the needs of the collective. Population growth happens in two ways. First, there is the growth that comes from a higher birthrate than death rate. Since this is usually rather slow growth, society's evolution tends toward slow change and equilibrium. The second manner in which societies can experience population growth is through *compounding*: the influx of large populations through either military or political conquest. As populations

grow, the social system will start differentiating. The system's initial response to increasing social differentiation is regulatory because of the need to integrate diverse structures.

Types of Society

Spencer gives us two related typologies of society. *Typologies* are used to categorize and understand some phenomenon, and several of our theorists use them. We think in terms of typologies all the time. For example, we use music typologies: Beethoven falls under classical music, Pete Seeger under folk, and Bob Marley under reggae. One of the big differences between our everyday typologies and those used in sociology is that the ones in sociology are more rigorously constructed and defined. We will see that a number of theorists use typologies to understand various aspects of society. Spencer's first societal typology is defined around the processes of compounding (population growth) that we have been talking about.

Regulatory Complexity

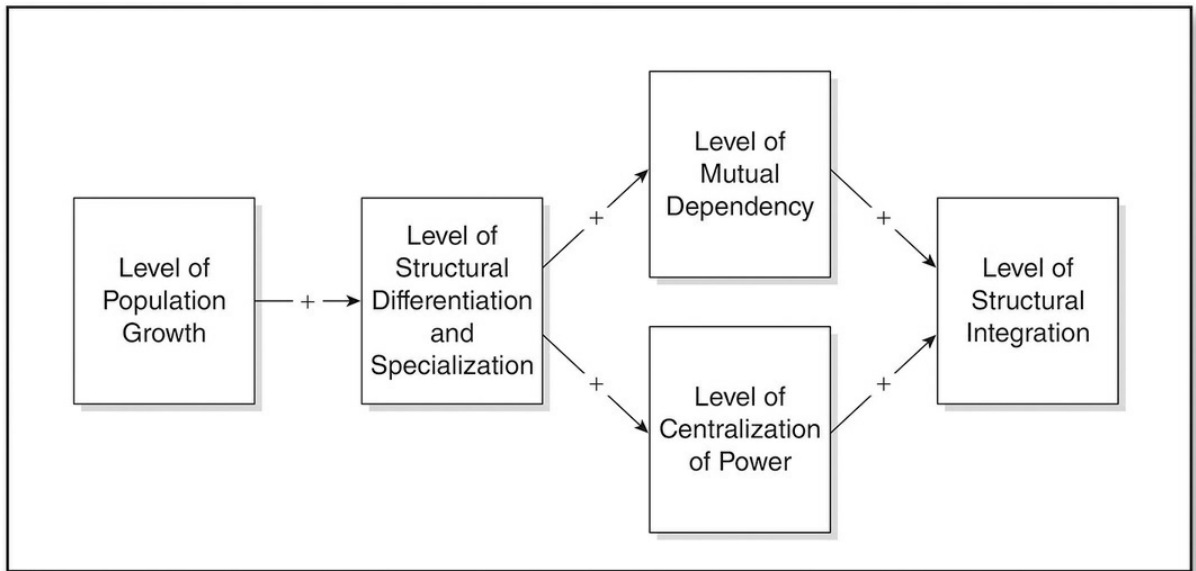
There may be simple, compound, and doubly compound societies. A *simple* society is “one which forms a single working whole unsubjected to any other, and of which the parts co-operate, with or without a regulating centre, for certain public ends” (Spencer, 1876–1896/1975a, p. 539). In this definition of simple societies, we see that the central feature is that the whole must not be subject to political rule from more than one group. I mentioned earlier that the first structure to differentiate is government. The levels of government that form in response to population compounding are, then, the basis of Spencer's first typology. In simple societies, like hunter-gatherer groups, the vertical dimension of government is flat. In other words, if the group has a chief, there is only one chief with no one above him. *Compounded* societies, on the other hand, not only have larger populations, but they also have several governing heads subordinated to a general head. In *doubly compounded* societies, there are additional layers of governing bodies. Obviously, we are talking about increasing complexity in social structures; this typology notes the important role the political structure plays.

When all the functions were carried out by one social structure, coordinating the way it fulfilled those functions was easy. However, as structures differentiate, they also become segmented and specialized. Each structure develops its own set of status positions, norms, goals, methods of organizing,

values, and so on. This process of differentiation continues as each of the subsystems becomes further differentiated through the principle of segmentation and multiplication of effects. For example, airlines, financial markets, automobiles, the Internet, and newspapers are all part of the distributive system, but each has its own language and values. Spencer identifies these issues as *problems of coordination and control*: As societies become more differentiated, it becomes increasingly difficult to coordinate the activities of different institutions and to control their internal and inter-institutional relations. As a result of these problems, pressures arise to centralize the regulatory function (government). Notice the way that is phrased: It is not the individuals or political parties that decide there needs to be increased governmental control; it is the system itself that creates these pressures.

Spencer's basic model of evolution is outlined in [Figure 2.2](#). For societies, population growth is the basic driving force; the rapidity and diversity of the population growth is what creates different sorts of societies. Society responds to influxes of population by structurally differentiating. Each of the differentiated structures is functionally specialized; each fulfills one rather than several functions. As a result, structures become mutually dependent. So, if the economic system only produces goods and services necessary for collective and organic survival, then it must depend upon another structure like the family for socialization. Because diverse structures require organization, the regulatory sector tends to become more powerful and exert greater influence on social units (both organizations and people). Together, mutual dependency and a strong regulatory subsystem facilitate structural integration. The positive feedback arrow from integration to population growth indicates that a well-integrated social system makes possible further population growth and aggregation (gathering together diverse populations through processes like migration).

Figure 2.2 Structural Differentiation and Integration



Industrial and Militaristic

Increasing regulation thus solves the problems of coordination and control, but it in turn can create productive stagnation and resentments over excessive control. Increased authority over people's behavior makes them less likely to innovate. It also hampers the exchange of information, the flow of markets, and so forth. Freedom brings innovation; thus, stagnation in the long run creates pressures for deregulation. As you might already be able to tell, this is a kind of cycle that societies go through, but there are a variety of complications in the process.

This cycle of increased and decreased regulation brings us to Spencer's second societal typology. In some ways, we can think of his first typology as a rough guide to understanding the structural aspect of social evolution. It focuses on the kind of polity, or government, a society has defined in terms of its structure. That is, the structure surrounding governmental actions can be measured along a continuum from simple, with one level of governing structure, to complex, with multiple levels of governing structures.

Understanding evolution in terms of the regulation function makes a certain amount of intuitive sense. In terms of evolutionary survival, the most complex and adaptive species is the human being, and it is mainly our brain and mind that give us the evolutionary advantage. Evolution, then, can be seen as the progress toward more and more complex regulatory systems.

Spencer's second typology also focuses on the regulatory system. While with the first he is interested in understanding the structural differentiation of polity, in this one he is looking more at the content of government and its relationship to society—in particular, the economic system. There are two types in this scheme—militaristic and industrial—that are defined around the relative importance of the regulatory and operative functions. The fundamental difference between them is that the militaristic type operates according to the principle of compulsory cooperation and the industrial according to voluntary cooperation.

I've listed the defining features of each type in [Table 2.1](#). In *militaristic* societies, the state is dominant and controls the other sectors in society. The religious, economic, and educational structures are all used to further the state's interest. The economy's first mission is to provide for military needs rather than consumer products. In militaristic societies, religion plays a key role in legitimating state activities. The religious structure itself is rather homogeneous, as religion needs to create a singular focus for society. Religion also provides sets of ultimate values and beliefs that reinforce the legitimacy and actions of the state. Information is tightly controlled, and the government exercises strong control over the media. Public meetings and individual behaviors are controlled as well. Religion in particular provides ultimate sanctions (death and hell) for social deviance. The status structure also assures individual compliance. The status hierarchy in militaristic societies is much more pronounced, and the rituals surrounding status (like bowing or using status titles such as *madam*, *lord*, *mister*, and so forth) are clear, practiced, and enforced.

Table 2.1 Militaristic and Industrial Typologies

	<i>Militaristic</i>	<i>Industrial</i>
Dominant Institution	The state: the nation (including all social institutions and actions) seen as synonymous with the army; power is centralized	The economy: freedom of economic exchange and association; profit motivation; regulatory function is diffused
System Equilibrium	Compulsory cooperation	Functional equilibrium maintained through individual choices
Religious Function	Oriented toward legitimating government—direct regulatory function: • Government identified as God-ordained • Homogeneous religious types • Legitimizing political myths tend to contain ultimate values • Social deviation is defined as sin	Oriented toward the individual and indirect regulatory function: • Greater separation of church and state • Religious pluralism • Focus on individual salvation and happiness
Status Structure	Greater status differentiation with distinct categories and clear ceremonial practice	Overlapping and vague status positions with unclear and infrequently practiced ceremonial distinctions
Educational Function	Directly controlled by state with strong ideological socialization	Indirectly monitored by state with emphasis on general and scientific knowledge
Mass Media	Information tightly controlled by state	Information freely flows from the bottom up
Conception of Individual	Individual exists for the benefit of the whole; individual behaviors, beliefs, and sentiments are of interest to the state	State exists to protect rights of the individual; duty of individual to resist government intrusion; belief in minority rights

As you can see from [Table 2.1](#), *industrial* societies are less controlled by the state and are oriented toward economic freedom and innovation. Rather than the collective being supreme, the individual is perceived as the focus of rights, privileges, consumer goods, and so forth. Religion is more diverse, and there is a greater emphasis on individualistic reasons for practicing religion than on collective ones. Individual happiness and peace are associated with salvation and religiosity. Education shifts to scientific and inclusive knowledge rather than increasing patriotism through selective histories and ideological practices (like the Pledge of Allegiance). Information is freed and flows from the bottom up.

Both the typology of compounding and the centralization of power are meant as ways of classifying and understanding social evolution. According to Spencer, the typology of compounding is clear: Societies have a tendency to become structurally more complex over time, especially with regard to the regulatory function. This progression is analogously seen in organisms. There has been an overall inclination toward more complex entities because they have a greater chance to survive.

The evolutionary path between militaristic and industrial societies is less clear. It seems that there is a general evolutionary trend toward industrial societies. Spencer characterizes the movement from industrial to militaristic as regressive. All societies begin as militaristic. Aggressive and protective behaviors became pronounced for humans once we began to use agriculture for survival; it was also at this point that people became aware of themselves as a society and not simply as a family. Land was paramount for survival and something that could be owned and thus taken or protected. The regulatory function, then, grew to be most important and differentiated from the rest. Early society developed through warfare, and eventually standing armies and taxation were created. Once established, it is then functional for society in the long run to move toward the industrial type. However, society can “regress.” Having set the general tendency, Spencer delineates the reasons why there is likely to be a “revival of the predatory spirit” and the various complications involved in such a regression.

There are three main reasons why a society would, once it has become industrialized, regress back to the militaristic type. First, there is pressure in the system toward militaristic society originating from the military complex itself. A standing army and the parts of the economy that are oriented toward military production form a military complex. It’s a fact of evolution: Once an organism comes into existence, it will fight for its own survival; this is no less the case for social entities than for natural organisms. Thus, a military complex by its very existence is not only available for protection; it is in its best interests to instigate aggression: “Of the traits accompanying this reversion towards the militant type, we have first to note the revival of predatory activities. Always a structure assumed for defensive action, available also for offensive action, tends to initiate it” (Spencer, 1876–1896/1975a, p. 569). This is not to deny the existence of legitimate threat,

which is the second reason for regression to militarism. Spencer argues clearly that there are times when a system is threatened by other societies, internal pressures, or the natural environment. Under such threat, the system will revert back to militaristic configurations for its own survival. However, a constant pressure toward militaristic society is exerted by the military complex. The final reason a society might revert is the presence of territorial subjects. A *territorial subject* is a social group that lives outside the normal geographic limits of the state, yet is still subject to state oversight. A current example of this kind of relationship for the United States is Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States with autonomy in internal affairs, yet its chief officer is the U.S. president and its official currency is the U.S. dollar. The United States not only has a vested interest in Puerto Rico, it is also organizationally and politically involved. As such, the United States is ultimately responsible for Puerto Rico's internal stability and external safety. Issues of investments and responsibilities provide opportunity for military action and the creation of a militaristic society.

However, there are complications on the road to regression. The first complexity is *social diversity*. When Spencer talks about social diversity and societal types, he generally has race in mind. He also, however, acknowledges that what he has in mind is best “understood as referring to the relative homogeneity or heterogeneity of the units constituting the social aggregate” (1876–1896/1975a, pp. 558–559). Race, in this case, is the most stable social difference because it has the clearest visible cues associated with it. Spencer argues that groups have natural tendencies to band together and to create their own social structures. If such different groups do not affiliate with one another in larger collectives, then society will not be internally integrated.

Spencer terms this the “law of incompleteness” and says that it represents a risk to society if an institutional shock were to occur. In other words, segregated societies are unstable because functional unity is difficult to achieve. This situation represents a potential threat: It indicates that the society may not be able to respond quickly enough to changes in the environment (societal or physical). Because of this potential threat, societies with diverse groups that do not associate with one another will tend to be militaristic. However, if the groups *do* affiliate with one another and the

differences are perceived to be small, then the society is “relatively well fitted for progress.” Such societies tend to produce heterogeneous groups that are functionally linked together, and are thus more flexible and gravitate toward the industrial type.

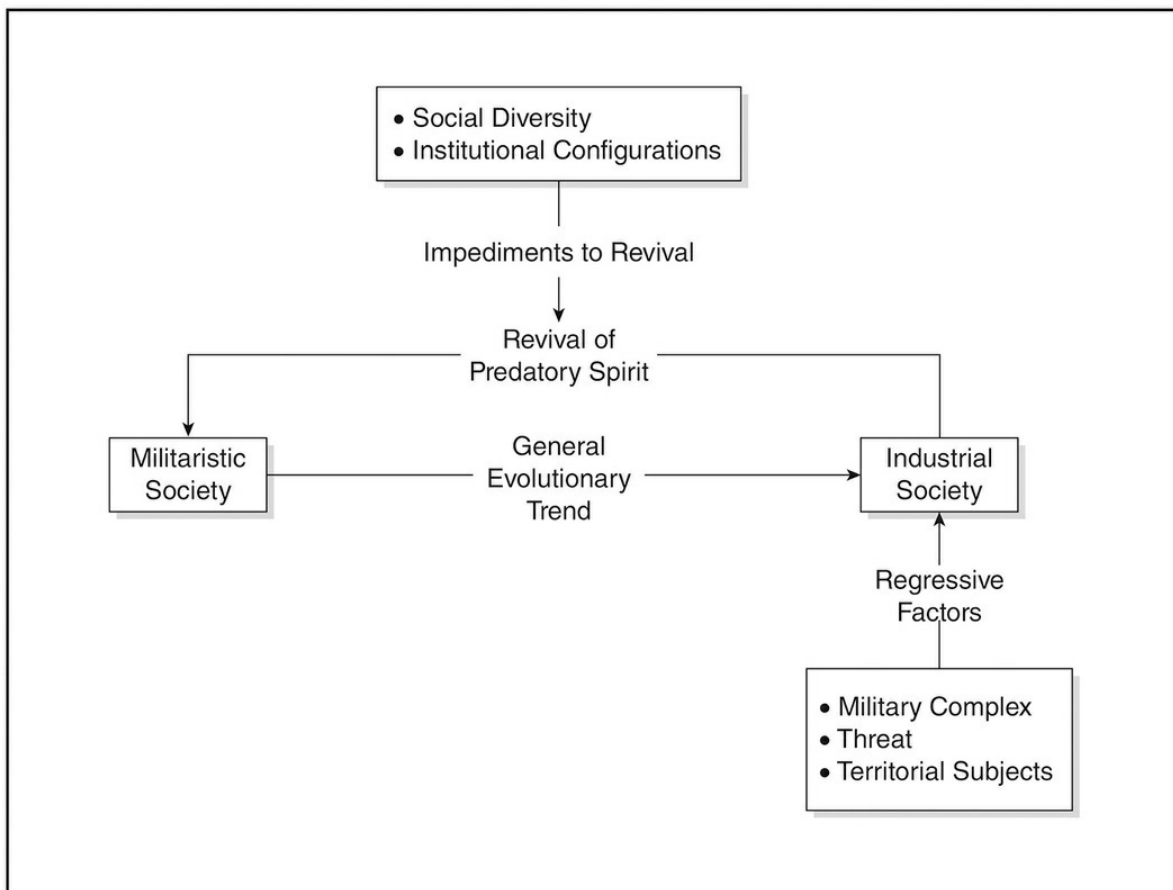
Another complication of regression is the effects of different institutions and their previous growth. For a society to regress to militarism, it must first have been industrial. Under the conditions of the industrial type, the economy grows and its power can rival or even exceed that of the state; religion diversifies and becomes more focused on the individual; and the culture of individualism grows. Returning to a militaristic posture, then, must counter all of these institutional developments.

I’ve diagrammed these factors and their relationships in [Figure 2.3](#). As I mentioned before, there is a back-and-forth movement from centralized to decentralized state control. The general evolutionary movement is toward industrial forms, but there are also pressures to revert back to militarism that are themselves countered by other social pressures and complications. In the diagram, both the regressive factors (military complex, threat, and territorial subjects) and impediments (social diversity and institutional configurations) are pictured as mitigating forces. In other words, a society that has moved from militaristic to industrial will tend to stay industrial unless the regressive factors mitigate the general evolutionary trend. Moreover, once a revival of the predatory spirit begins, it will continue to move society to militarism unless the impediments mitigate the effects. Thus, modern society is generally seen as moving along the continuum from military to industrial forms in response to population pressures, system stagnation, internal or external threats (other nations or changes in physical resources), previous institutional arrangements (such as the military complex or diversified religion), and the level of social integration.

Spencer does allow himself a speculative moment about future types. He says that the change from militaristic to industrial and back again involves a change in belief. In militaristic societies, people believe that the individual exists for the state and common good. Industrial societies represent a reverse of that belief: The state exists for the individual, to protect his or her rights and freedoms. Spencer says that the next type will also require an inverting of

belief. In industrial societies, people believe that life is for work. As we'll see when we get to Weber, this is the work ethic of capitalism. The next step in social evolution inverts the belief from life is for work, to work is for life. As an illustration, Spencer (1876–1896/1975a) points to “the multiplication of institutions and appliances for intellectual and aesthetic culture and for kindred activities not of a directly life-sustaining kind, but of a kind having gratification for their immediate purpose”; unfortunately, he also says, “I can here say no more” (p. 563).

Figure 2.3 Militaristic–Industrial Cycle



Concepts and Theory: Social Institutions

Spencer uses the term *institution* but never provides a clear definition. I'm going to give you a definition that is in keeping with Spencer, but it probably goes a bit beyond him as well. *Social institutions* have four interrelated elements. First, institutions have functions: They are collective solutions to survival needs that provide predetermined meanings, legitimations, and normative scripts for behavior. This notion of function is probably the most important defining feature of an institution. As we've seen, functionalists assume that societies, like every other system, have requisite needs. Institutions are perceived to meet those needs, so they tend to be quite meaningful and people tend to believe in them. That's what we mean by legitimation—*legitimations* are stories we tell others and ourselves that give social relationships a moral basis. And because institutions are seen as necessary for social existence, the scripts for behavior (roles) are normative. *Norms* are expected behaviors that have sanctions attached to them. Sanctions can be positive or negative, reward or punishment. A good example of all this is family, or what Spencer calls domestic institutions.



Theory is as much about the process of thinking as it is about knowledge. So, be sure to think through the concepts, definitions, and relationships when given. Here, use the concept of family to look at examples of these elements of an institution: meanings, legitimations, and norms.

The second defining feature of institutions is that they are not reducible to individual actions or agency. Institutional behaviors aren't something that one person does. Institutions are part of what everybody knows; there is a taken-for-grantedness about them. Further, institutions resist modification by the individual or even groups of individuals. In addition to not being reducible to individual agency and resisting modification, the third defining feature of institutions is that they are not subjectively available. Let's take

marriage as an example. There isn't one of us living that was around when marriage was created. We don't have a subjective memory of it or personal orientation toward it. Everything we know about the reasons why marriage was instituted and the functions it fulfills is contained in stories that we tell each other, and these legitimations give us a justifiable basis for believing in them. The fourth characteristic of a social institution is that it tends to be wrapped in morality—institutions are moral phenomena. Here's an important point: Sociologists don't use "moral" to mean something intrinsically good. One reason for this is that we are only concerned with empirical phenomena, and empirically, nothing is intrinsically good or bad. Morality simply means something a society has infused with a great deal of emotion and meaning. An idea or belief can be moral in one society and not another.



Social institution is a key concept in many macro-level theories of society. For most sociologists, social institutions are collective moral sets of predetermined meanings, values, legitimations, and scripts for behavior that resist individual agency and are perceived to meet the survival needs of a society. The main institutions studied by sociologists are family, education, religion, law, government, and the economy.

Domestic Institutions

Kinship or family is one of the most basic of all social institutions. Its essential function is to facilitate biological reproduction, without which any species will die. In the long run, family also usually functions to provide for patterned relationships between men and women, emotional and physical support, lines of inheritance, care and socialization for the young, and care for the elderly.

In the absence of alternatives, kinship is the chief organizing principle of collective life. Before there were state bureaucracies or economic organizations, people were organized by kinship. The roles and status positions found in the kinship system informed people regarding how to act toward one another and what their obligations and rights were. All social functions were met through the status positions and roles of family. Spencer argues that there is a clear association between the structure of family and the regulation of social action and relationships generally. This idea makes sense when we consider it in the evolutionary model. Humans depend more upon social networks for survival than any other creature.

In the beginning of human history, Spencer argues, there was almost complete and universal promiscuity. However, under general promiscuity, social relationships are weak and can only extend as far as the mother and child. Children are easily linked to their mothers. However, it wasn't until just recently, with DNA testing, that we could be certain that a child was related to his or her father. This implies that fatherhood was the first true social relationship. Under general promiscuity, then, political subordination and control were limited to brute force. Only the strongest led, and leadership was based on contests of strength and was thus continually changing.

The development of religion was also hampered under promiscuity. Spencer argues that early forms of religion involved ancestor worship. When human beings first began to see past the objective line of this life, they saw it in terms of social relationships. The thing that connected us to the next life was kinship. We saw ancestors who had gone before as paving the way for us. It was through them that communication with the spiritual world could occur.

Further, some of our first inklings of the idea of the soul came through the idea of ancestral reincarnation. Thus, when kinship only extended as far as mother to child, the ability of people to see past this life was limited.

Over time, monogamy was naturally selected as the primary form of kinship. It's important for you to see that it wasn't any religious or political group that chose monogamy; according to Spencer, it was *naturally selected through survival of the fittest* and then *legitimated* by religious and political groups. Monogamy was selected for a number of evolutionary reasons. First, it added to the political stability of the group. Leadership could be established through family lineage rather than physical prowess. Spencer also notes that using inheritance to establish a family line is conducive to stability because it secures the supremacy of the elder; the use of elders for ruling tends to create what Max Weber would later call traditional authority. Further, the practice of monogamy was an important component in the evolution of religion, as it favors a single line of ancestral worship. The establishment of religion, of course, also helped to systematize socialization, which led to further social stability. In addition, monogamy tends to increase the overall birthrate and decrease the childhood morbidity rate. Interestingly, a feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, gives us this same evolutionary theory about monogamy. However, she also argues that monogamy is now dysfunctional. We'll talk about her ideas in [Chapter 7](#).



Initially, all requisite needs—regulatory, operative, and distributive—were met through family. As social groups began to differentiate structurally, the functions of family became more specialized and monogamy was selected to provide for political succession and clear lines of ancestral worship. *Domestic institutions* currently function to provide regulated ways of satisfying sexual and emotional needs, biological reproduction and support, socialization, and social placement.

Ceremonial Institutions

Spencer argues that there are three major forms of social control: ceremonial, ecclesiastical, and political. Most sociology students are familiar with the latter two. Religious, or ecclesiastical, institutions bring about social control internally by providing sets of beliefs about right and wrong behaviors. These moral standards exert their force from inside of the individual. Political entities govern human behavior externally, rather than internally, through laws, coercive force, and authority. One of the defining characteristics of nation-states is the monopolization of legitimate force. This monopoly serves not only to protect the nation's external boundaries but also to maintain internal peace.

Spencer gives us another, more basic type of social control in the form of ceremonial institutions. These are made up of formal or informal acts or series of acts that function to link people together hierarchically. Ceremonies may be simple, as in an act of politeness, or quite elaborate, as in prescribed rituals. For instance, there are certain protocols that apply when a head of state visits another country. Ceremonies indicate the hierarchical relationship among nations: Some visiting dignitaries are afforded more elaborate ceremonies than others. Ceremonies can also be conventional and practiced every day. In this case, Spencer has in mind forms of address, titles and emblems of honor, forms of dress, and the like. For example, when we use titles like "Professor" or "Doctor" or "Miss," we are reproducing a hierarchical system of authority and control. This is a deep insight because it shows us how power is exercised insidiously in society.



Ceremonial institutions are ritualized behaviors that carry meaning and display social respect. In Spencer's evolutionary theory, these rituals create hierarchical social networks and are the most general and earliest form of social control. As societies develop economically and politically, and social groups become reflexive, rituals and ceremonial institutions become more symbolic, complex, and internalized through socialization, thus creating both formal and informal

rituals and social control.

Ecclesiastical Institutions

There is an intrinsic and complex relationship that religion has with the rest of society. Émile Durkheim argues that society began in religion: It was in religion that humans first sensed something outside and greater than individual consciousness. Religion functions on a number of levels. For one, it acts as an agent of social control. If social structures are seen as an extension of a god's spiritual order and behaviors are seen as holy directives, then questioning social arrangements becomes a matter of questioning the god, and inappropriate behavior becomes sin. This control isn't usually exercised outwardly, for religious people will conform to these norms, values, and beliefs in the name of their god. Religion is also the strongest legitimating force we know; it functions to reinforce and justify existing social structures, particularly those built around inequality.

Spencer argues that all religions share a common genesis and began as "ghost-propitiation." Spencer argues that human beings became aware of themselves as double. We have the waking, walking self, and we also have a self that can be absent from the body. We became aware of this other-self through dreams and visions. During dreams, we have out-of-body experiences. We travel to far-off places and engage in some pretty amazing behaviors. In thinking about these experiences, primitive humans concluded that we are double. Part of us is tied to the earth and time, but there is also part of us that can transcend both.

Moving from conceptualizing the other-self from dream states to thinking that the other-self survives death is a short and quite intuitive step. Death seems a lot like permanent sleep; it's a sleep from which we don't awake. If we soul-travel when we are temporarily asleep, then we must also travel when we are permanently asleep. This idea led early humans to minister to the dead, especially dead relatives. These dead relatives could cause mischief if not taken care of, but they could also prove to be valuable allies in times of need. Further, these disembodied spirits also came to be seen as the source for life on this earth through reincarnation. Early humans were quite in tune with the cycles of nature. Trees that appear to die in winter came back to life in the spring. Thus, it was not a very big step, once souls were seen as

surviving death, to see them also as the source for the other-self in life. In this way, early humans began their ancestor worship.

Obviously, ancestor worship is linked to family, and the head of the family was also the head of religious observance. However, two factors that came from military conquest brought about significant social and structural changes. First, the religious function differentiated from family. As human beings moved from nomadic existence to settled farming, war became more and more common. People were tied to the land in a way never before realized, and land became a limited resource that had to be protected from other groups. The increased involvement in war by the clan chief meant that he had to shift his priestly responsibilities to another family member. Eventually, these religious functions were separated structurally as well.

As societies continued to evolve to more complex forms of organization, so did the structure of religion. Organized pantheons developed as the political structure became more centralized and class inequalities increased. The hierarchy of higher and lower gods thus reflected the organized divisions of society. Because polity relies a great deal on religion for legitimation, the more warlike, and thus more successful, societies developed images of vengeful and jealous gods. And as the political structure became more centralized and bureaucratized, the religious structure did as well. When governments rely on religion for legitimation, it is in the best interest of the professional priestly class to organize and unite. As religious leaders organize and unite, they have to simplify the religious belief system, which in turn leads to monotheism.



Ecclesiastical institutions (religion) function to legitimate other social institutions and to provide motivation for and assurance of social conformity. Religion initially came to be as people became aware of an existence apart from fully awake life, through dreams and visions. These alternative states helped create a belief in life after death, out of which developed ancestral worship and propitiation. Religion evolved as ecclesiastical functions differentiated from kinship and as religion became more organized and symbolic in response to the political need to organize increasingly diverse populations. As an effect of the

professionalization of a priestly class, ecclesiastical institutions became more complex, in terms of beliefs and practices, and generally evolved toward monotheism.

Thinking About Modernity and Postmodernity

There are certain qualities and social arrangements that are specific to modernity, and Spencer's theory explains the evolution of society from primitive, simple structures to modern, complex structures. His argument is that as populations grow and compound, structures differentiate. Differentiated structures are held together within a system by mutual need and a powerful regulatory system.

You might remember that there are those who argue we are no longer modern. People talk about these changes in various ways, but one of the most common is postmodernity. Obviously, postmodernity is what comes after modernity. But what precisely does that mean? Our theorists of modernity give us different keys to understanding what's changed.

Defining Postmodernity

Spencer holds an important key because of his ideas of structural differentiation occurring within a cohesive, interdependent system. A postmodern society is one wherein social institutions are not simply differentiated, but rather, they are fragmented. There are at least five important reasons for this fragmentation and deinstitutionalization: the level of structural differentiation, the level of transportation and communication technologies and infrastructures, the level of market velocity and expansiveness, the level and rate of commodification, and the level of institutional doubt (Allan & Turner, 2000). I don't expect you to completely understand each of these variables right now (we will be looking at them in subsequent chapters), but I do want you to have a basic idea of what we mean by modernity and postmodernity.

Modernity and *postmodernity* are terms that are used in various ways, but the basic elements are the same: Modernity is characterized by unity, and postmodernity is distinguished by disunity. In modern literature, for example, the unity of narrative is important. Novels move along according to the plot, and while there might be twists and turns, readers can feel fairly confident in how time is moving and where the story is going. Postmodern literature, on the other hand, doesn't move in predictable patterns of plot and character. Stories will typically jump around and are filled with indirect and reflexive references to past styles of writing or stories. The goal of a modern novel is to convey a sense of continuity in the story; the goal of a postmodern work is to create a feeling of disorientation and ironic humor.

In the social world, modernity is associated with the Enlightenment and is defined by progress; by grand narratives and beliefs; and through the structures of capitalism, science, technology, and the nation-state. To state the obvious, postmodernism is the opposite or the critique of all that. According to most postmodern thought, things have changed. Society is no longer marked by a sense of hope in progress. People seem more discouraged than encouraged, more filled with a blasé attitude than with optimism. We'll explore some of the specifics of the postmodern critique of grand narratives, science and technology, capitalism, and the nation-state as we work our way

through this book.

However, right now I want to give you a couple of handles on postmodernism. First, let me say that any attempt to capture postmodern ideas is doomed to fail on one level or another. Postmodern theory is based on the idea of the inability of categories to express human reality. So if I say that I'm going to reduce postmodernism to a few concepts or categories, I'm already outside the postmodern project. Keep in mind that I can't capture what is meant by postmodernity—postmodernism is an open-ended discussion.

The various postmodern theories seem to boil down to two main issues or effects: culture and the individual. Because of certain social changes, culture has become more important in our lives than social structure, and we are more individually oriented than group oriented. Thus, culture and the individual are more important now than they ever have been. Nevertheless, both culture and the individual are less effectual than ever before as well. Culture is important, but it has become fragmented and unable to aid in the production of a unified society. Further, a decisive break between reality and culture has occurred, such that all we have are texts and subjective meanings. The individual is more important, too, but has become decentered and unable to emotionally connect in any stable or real fashion.

Religion: A Postmodern Case in Point

We will explore these themes as we move through the theorists, but let me give you an example of what we're talking about. Spencer argues that there is a symbiotic connection between religion and the state. Religion serves to legitimate the state, and the state in turn provides religion with structure and protection. In this relationship between the state and religion, Spencer also explores the evolution of religion from polytheism to monotheism. In his work, Spencer actually considers the future of religion, but he doesn't get very far. To see what might be going on with religion in a postmodern society, let's look at what Thomas Luckmann, a contemporary sociologist of religion, has to say.

According to Luckmann (1991), society has always used religion to create ultimate meanings. Like Spencer, Luckmann acknowledges that these meanings are used to legitimate social institutions, as well as to answer impossible questions (such as, what is the meaning of life?). Religion also serves to stabilize our meaning systems. We can intentionally change our meanings, but because they're socially constructed they will tend to shift and change on their own. Let's look at it in terms of what we do to the natural environment. Most of us have lived in houses with yards. "Yards" don't naturally happen. We have to kill the weeds, rototill the soil, or bring topsoil in. We also have to plant all the trees, grass, and bushes in the exact places that we want them. But once we put in the yard, we also have to work to maintain it. If we didn't, the yard would revert back to nature and be gone. The same is true with symbolic meanings. Once in place, they have to be kept up and stabilized in order to continue to exist. Religion does an amazing job of stabilizing our meaning by equating our constructed meanings with eternal truths and by equating deviance and disorder with sin.

However, according to Luckmann (1991), modern structural differentiation and specialization have made the great transcendences (the ultimate meanings of life) that religion provides structurally unstable. In the twentieth century, as the "great" religions such as Christianity lost their monopolies over faith, they were joined by a multiplicity of churches, sects, religious communities or movements. This is what Luckmann calls the "privatization of religion":

The religious landscape, once dominated by inherited, institutional religions—one was born a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew—with little individual choice, becomes a market that offers a multiplicity of religious choices. Individuals not only pick and choose, but also combine those beliefs, religious practices, and meanings at will. In fact, sociologists of religion often speak of “bricolage” to describe this new, DIY way to assemble one’s own religious beliefs. (p. 176)

Not too long ago, I met someone who exemplifies what Luckmann is talking about. When she introduced herself to me, she told me she was a “Christian-Pagan.” That threw me for a loop. The word *pagan* originally meant “country dweller,” but its current meaning of “heathen” or “irreligious hedonist and materialist” came from some Christians who used it to refer to nonbelievers and people who practiced magic. So tell me, what is a Christian-nonbeliever? Or better yet, what is a Christian-non-Christian? You might respond and say, “Well, that’s her choice and she should be able to create her own meanings for her own life.” I don’t disagree, but this kind of situation begs a larger, more important question: How will this loss of predictable meaning influence society?

We will return to these issues surrounding modernity and postmodernity in most of the chapters that follow. Throughout the book, we are going to explore the main issues of postmodernism—culture and self—using some of the ideas that our theorists will provide. My hope for this exercise is to better attune you to the possibilities of the historical moment in which we live.

Summary

- Spencer's perspective is in many ways foundational for sociology. He explicates the basic premises with which most sociologists will either agree or disagree. Spencer's point of view is founded on positivism, the search for the invariant laws that govern the universe. He approaches society as if it were an object in the environment, and his purpose as a theorist is to simply describe how this object works. For Spencer, society works much like an organic system, with various parts functioning for the welfare of the whole. He extends the analogy to explicate the evolutionary changes in society, from simple to complex structural differentiation.
- All systems have universal needs: regulation, operation, and distribution. Every system, including society, meets these needs through various kinds of structures. The ways in which the needs are met produce the unique features of each system and society. Generally speaking, there is an evolutionary trend toward greater structural differentiation and specialization, with system needs being met through separate and distinct structures. For society, this trend is driven by increases in population size. As the population increases, especially through compounding, structures differentiate and specialize in function. This process produces not only inter-structural dependency, but also problems in coordination and control. In response, society tends to centralize the regulatory subsystem, which, along with dependency, facilitates system integration. However, too much regulation can cause stagnation and pressures for deregulation. In reaction to these system pressures, societies in the long run move back and forth on a continuum between militaristic and industrial.
- Social institutions are special kinds of structures. They are organized around societal needs, resist change, and are morally infused. All institutions, however, change slowly through evolutionary pressures, and because they are functionally related, change is mutual and generally moves in the same direction. Generally speaking, family has evolved from universal promiscuity to monogamy. (Monogamy is evolutionarily chosen because it provides more explicit and stable social

relations.) Religion generally moves from polytheism to monotheism. (Monotheism has the evolutionary advantage of providing a single legitimating and enforcing mechanism for diverse populations and bureaucratic states.) The state generally moves from militaristic with simpler political structures to industrial with more complex structures. Ceremonial institutions generally recede in importance as religion, family, and polity become successful structures. In spite of this, the political and ceremonial structures tend to move back and forth on a continuum in response to vested interests, perceived threat, and the level of social inequality.

- Modernity for Spencer is characterized by high levels of structural differentiation. This increased complexity gives modern societies greater adaptability and increased chances of survival. Postmodernity is characterized by institutional and cultural fragmentation. The main difference between differentiation and fragmentation revolves around unity: In differentiated systems, the different elements are linked together, whereas in a fragmented system, the parts are not as organized and have greater freedom. The effects of postmodernity are contradictory: Culture and self (subjective experience) are simultaneously becoming more important and less real and meaningful. Religion is a case in point: Religion in postmodernity is less centrally organized and is thus open to increasingly idiosyncratic interpretations.

Building Your Theory Toolbox

