

# Body and Politic in Modern Japan: The Transmission of Spencer's Concept of "Organism" to Japan

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**Abstract** | Organicism has long been considered as a subcategory of social Darwinism. However, acknowledging that organicism is intimately connected with social Darwinism does not mean that there is any necessary connection between organicism and authoritarian or totalitarian discourse. These misunderstandings are mainly based on the belief that organicism cannot be compatible with individualism. This alleged incompatibility, however, rests on the confusion between various viewpoints of the body. Cell theory, on which Herbert Spencer's thought is based, can illustrate that independent units constitute the body in cooperation with other units without the centralization of control and the subjugation of the parts to the interests of the whole. In this view, the reception of the meaning of organism in Japan also cannot be irrelevant to the conception of the body in Japan. Consequently, "organism" and its Japanese translation "*yūkitai*" cannot have the same meaning and usage. When Spencer's social organism was translated in modern Japan, the Japanese translator agreed with Spencer that the same logic exists between the biological and social body. Nonetheless, Spencer's organicism, rather than his individualism, was appropriated to support the introduction of the parliamentary system. What Japanese politicians wanted to see through Spencer's organicism was the urgent need to introduce the representative system in Japan. However, strictly speaking, this is not the gist of Spencer's cell-oriented organicism. Decoupling the political thought from biology in Meiji Japan, where the meaning of cell theory was not accepted, brings out this discrepancy.

**Keywords** | Herbert Spencer, organicism, body politic, sovereignty, cell theory, organism

## Introduction: "Organism" and "*Yūki*"

In studying modern East Asia, we often encounter concepts translated from Western languages. The absence of related notions made it necessary to "import" these concepts, and in that sense, modern East Asia can be portrayed

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as a “translated modernity.” It is easy to think that the Western concept and its translated word are one and the same. For example, the words “organism” and “*yūkitai*” are thought to connote the same meaning and usage. We tend to believe that initially there might have been a certain degree of inconsistency between the two words, due to a lack of understanding of the concept, but such gaps would have gradually been filled in and misunderstandings remedied over time. Therefore, when we see the word “*yūkitai*,” we automatically link it to the term “organism” and balance it with the Western concept. Of course, translated works are supposed to induce such linkages, yet there is no guarantee that the two words always share the same meaning and usage.

As the theory of translation generally supports the “impossibility of translation” (that there can be no expression that transmits the same experiences) and the “indeterminacy of translation” (that there is more than one correct way of translating sentences and it is impossible to determine which one is the same with the original sentence), it is impossible to establish translation “equivalency.” We often presuppose the equivalence relationship between the original and translated works, yet what is in fact “the same” can only be determined only in ex-post facto evaluation. After all, the “exchange” that occurs during the process of translation does not take place where the two identical concepts or words already exist, but instead the equivalence is created and molded within the course of the “exchange.” In other words, translation is not an exchange between two equivalents, but what has been exchanged becomes equivalent vis-à-vis the other (Yonaha 2009, 3-4). Translation plays the role of bridging two languages, yet the bridge cannot be perfect. The bridge does not naturally exist a priori between the original and the “other” (translated), but the “other” exists only when the bridge exists.

From this perspective, the problems of translations are not the ones between “the original” and its “copy.” When we judge the quality of translation in terms of how well it “copied” the original work, we can only reach an unsatisfying and hasty conclusion that the translator had a deep understanding of the concept or text, or if we find errors, how he or she “misunderstood” the original work. It means that, if we fixate on finding the “limitations” in the translation process, it leads to ignoring the concrete problem of transmitting and reconstructing one language to the context of another (Howland 2002, 6).

Therefore, it is necessary to look at the unbridgeable gap in the logical structure behind the basis of translation. When translating “organism” into “*yūkitai*,” the fundamental difference in the logical structure elucidates the political and ideological characteristics of the language—from what ideas were or were not incorporated into the concept of “*yūkitai*” to how the Japanese

intellectuals at that time viewed the “body” and, more broadly, “life” itself.

Of the word “organism,” “organ” was initially incorporated into the English language in the fourteenth century as a term that designated “musical instrument.” Later it came to designate piano-type instruments. Etymologically, the word originated from the ancient Greek *órganon*, which meant “instrument,” “implement,” or “tool.” The word contained two derivative meanings—one that described “instrument” in an abstract sense, and another that was used to describe “musical instruments.” In the early fifteenth century, the word “organ” began to be used to describe a part of the physical body. In relation to these usages of the word “organ,” the new term “organism” began to appear in writings in the seventeenth century. In other words, in association with the verb “organize,” the word “organism” came to indicate “organization” or “social system.” In the nineteenth century, the term extended its usage to indicate a living system, such as animals and plants. And the word “organism” came to indicate living entities composed of organs, or the institutions that share similar structures and functions.

In Japan, it was by the Dutch-educated scholars in the late Edo period that the term “organism” was first translated as “*yūkitai*.” They drew the idea from the Dutch words *bewerk'tuigd*, or “organic,” and *organisch*, meaning “organ.” As it can be seen in *Shokugaku keigen* [A Primer of Botany] (1834), at first it was translated as *kiseitai* (organic) and *mukiseitai* (inorganic), but later it was changed to *yūkitai* and *mukitai* (inorganic). The terms *yūkitai* and *mukitai* can also be found in *Kikai kanran kōgi* [Study of the Atmosphere] (1851-56), as well as in Ogata Kōan's *Byōgaku tsūron* [Introduction to Pathology] (1849), which is the first work on pathology written in Japanese (Sugimoto 2005, 620). As it can be inferred from *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language Translated into Japanese* (1888), the term *yūkitai* as the translation of “organism” seemed to have taken root by the mid-Meiji period.<sup>1</sup>

However, in appropriating the word *yūki*, the way in which they comprehended the characteristics of life and made analogical inference to social organization seem to contain significant differences from those of Western imagery and intellection. As is widely known, the concept of *yūkitai* was drawn

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1. The term *yūki* cannot be found in traditional writings, and the reason that the letter “*ki*” came to be used is unclear. One possibility may be found in Zhuangzi's “Perfect Happiness.” There is a phrase “all things spring from *ki* and return to *ki*” (Zhuangzi, 2010, 457-58), and here *ki* can be interpreted as the source of all changes. In “Heaven and Earth,” on the other hand, Zhuangzi uses the letter *ki* as in “tool”: “When there is a tool there is going to be a job for that tool, and when there is a job for the tool then the heart will rely on the tool. When the heart relies on the tool then there can be no purity of mind” (Zhuangzi 2010, 327).

from German-style national rights theory (*kokkenron*), namely the Bluntschli-Stein-Haeckel school of the organismic theory of state, which emphasized the hierarchical aspect of an organic union with the “head” at its apex. On the other hand, the advocates of the theory of people’s rights (*minkenron*) mainly defended Herbert Spencer’s (1820-1903) “social organicism.” As will be discussed in detail later, it was a completely different form of organicism. In modern East Asia, therefore, it was difficult to find a unified discourse on the theory of organicism. As Spencer’s theoretical concept indicates, organicism does not necessarily cohere to authoritarianism or totalitarianism. Rather, organicism must be perceived within its unique historical context, as well as through the Japanese view of the physical body and, more broadly, life itself.

From this perspective, it becomes crucial to link the history of medicine with the state analogy of organicism (Cohen 1994, xiv-xv). Organicism is often derided as an unflattering anachronism. However, the discourse that perceives the body politic as analogous to the physical body cannot be separated from the history of medicine or science. And organicism plays a critical role in mediating two completely different academic disciplines—medicine and politics. Furthermore, understanding societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as organisms was not a mere analogical or rhetorical debate. It was impossible to find distinctions between biological and sociological arguments of organicism in the eighteenth century, and society was understood as living thing—or at least it was deemed necessary to recognize it as one. From this perspective, the organicism of the West needs to be approached not only as political theory, but also in relation to the study of biology. As Comte once pointed out, the age of biology shifted the central viewpoint of natural philosophy from astronomy to biology. Therefore, it is necessary to elucidate how political thought developed in connection with biology.

It is essential, therefore, to evaluate how the Japanese perceived “body” or “life” before they first encountered the concept of organicism. While existing studies tend to focus on the historical context in which Spencer’s notion was imported to Japan, this study attempts to focus on the internal approach to his text and explain the differences in the ways they perceived the “individual body” and “body politic.”

## Society as an Organism: Where Does Sovereignty Reside?

Spencer’s theory of the social organism is the beginning of modern Japan’s discourse on the analogy between society and the human body (Howland 2002,

171-82). *Shakai heikenron* [On Equal Rights in Society] (1884), a translated work of Spencer's *Social Statics* (1851), not only provided an ideological background for the theory of people's rights but also popularized the term "society," or "*shakai*." As is widely known, Spencer perceived society as an "organism." By introducing the concept of organism through the works of Johann Kasper Bluntchli and Spencer, the concept of "*yūki*" and "*yūkitai*," which at that time had only been used in chemistry, began to refer to politics in the 1870s.

At that time, Spencer was arguably the most influential thinker in Great Britain and the US. His influence did not escape Japan, and twenty-one books written by Spencer had been translated into Japanese and circulated among the people before the enactment of the Meiji Constitution. By comparing the number of translated works of other contemporary figures, such as Jeremy Bentham's nine books and John Stuart Mill's twelve, it is possible to grasp the degree of Spencer's vast influence. Moreover, Spencer's works were widely used as textbooks at renowned universities, including Tokyo Imperial University and Keiō Gijuku (today Keiō University). His impact was so large that the Japanese intellectuals and political figures would fall over one another to speak to Spencer himself and seek advice from him (Yamashita 1983, 5-6).

However, while Spencer's argument functioned as the logical basis for the theory of people's rights, the Meiji government, which stood at the opposite end in terms of political ideology, also relied on Spencer's theoretical concepts. As Shimizu Ikutarō aptly called "two souls of Spencer," the ways in which Japanese elites apprehended Spencer were double-sided. Shimizu argued that Spencer's idea of organicism derived both from natural law and romantic organicism, which allowed two incompatible ideologies of the Meiji period—the theory of people's rights and theory of national rights—to equally incorporate his thought to legitimize their claims. In other words, Shimizu argued that Spencer's logic was dichotomized into individualism and organicism, and while the people's rights advocates incorporated the former, the national rights advocates absorbed the latter (Yamashita 1983, 7-10). Needless to say, even in Europe this duality became a target of criticism when it was first published; some criticized that Spencer amalgamated two irreconcilable ideologies—liberal individualism and organic theory (Vergata 1995, 197-98; Gray 1996, 1-14).

However, such categorization seems too expedient and schematic. It is admissible that Spencer's philosophical foundation rests upon evolutionistic "survival of the fittest" perspective that leaves the possibility for exploitation by conservative ideologists. However, there is no necessary connection between his organicism and authoritarian or totalitarian ideologies. Such orientation would go against the liberal political philosophy that runs consistently throughout his

ideas. For this reason, it is necessary to reevaluate which aspects of Spencer's organicism were particularly emphasized—or left out—by the Japanese intellectuals as they adapted them to their worldviews.

Baba Tatsui (1850-88) was one of the first thinkers who was influenced by Spencer's theory of the social organism. In *Honron* [Basic Principles] (1882), an uncompleted series published in *Liberty Times* (*Jiyū shinbun*), Baba introduces the analogy of the organism to society:

While in the physical body it is the brain that does all the thinking and feeling, in society that is never the case. This is because even fools can feel. In other words, while in a person's body the abilities to think and feel are placed in one particular part of the body, in society they exist ubiquitously. ... Essentially, we form a society not because we exist for the society, but we organize a society in order to entitle ourselves to the gift of freedom. From this perspective, for higher animals, the purpose can be found only in a limited part of the body, but the purpose of a society rests upon its elements—the people. This is why our party [i.e. Liberal Party (*Jiyūtō*)] has written in the preface that it is necessary to form a society for humanity to entitle ourselves to the gift of freedom. (Baba 1973, 206)

In other words, generally speaking, it is only the brain that possesses the ability to think in a human body, but such allotment of function does not apply to a social organism. As he claimed the necessity of forming a society was in order to enjoy freedom, he draws upon Spencer's conception of the organism in emphasizing individuals' democratic rights. Within a society like an organism, inherent senses are not localized to a certain part of the body, but instead they exist throughout body politic. Such idea can also be found in their translation of Spencer's "The Social Organism" (1860). *Shakai soshikiron* (Theory of Social Organization), translated by Yamaguchi Matsugorō in 1882, begins as follows:

In the past, people had no way of knowing where "mind" was, and some said it is in the belly and others said it was in the head, and they were never able to agree on one answer. This was because physiology of human body remained widely unknown. Only recently has the knowledge been accumulated so that the people came to know these facts, and it is very helpful to mankind. Recently, civilians talk about sovereignty. Some claim the power lies with the Diet, and others say it belongs to the monarch, and there are also those who insist that the sovereign power exists in between, never being able to settle on the answer. This is also because the physiology of society is yet to be fully explored. This book explores deep into the physiology of a society, and by doing so it will become clear where the sovereign power resides, which helps us in various ways. The readers will be able to see this themselves. (Spencer 1882, i-ii)

Here the author points out that, in the past, people were unable to know where the “mind”—*shin*, or spirit or psyche—existed. He argues that people could not agree on where the “mind” or “sovereignty” existed, due to a lack of physiological knowledge. Therefore, in order to know whether the sovereignty rests with the Diet, the monarch, or in between, it is necessary to understand the physiology of society. Though he did not provide an explicit answer, he thought that sovereignty should rest with the Diet. This corresponds with the logic of society as an organism.

Underneath this argument lay the idea that these two—the physical body and society—are in fact the same. This perspective also appears in the preface of the second edition published the following year, in which he discusses how the second edition came to be published:

It is the nature of scholars to discuss the state and talk about its weal and woe by using the analogy of a human body, so how could it be a mere coincidence? There are definite similarities between the two. Yet the books that compare the state and human body and discuss the similarities between them are rare and have always been mere wild ravings. And I have always found it deplorable that these things are never fully explained in detail. In early summer of last year, I read the article “The Social Organism” compiled in *Illustrations of Universal Progress* written by English legend Herbert Spencer, and the accuracy of the argument in which he talks about the similarities between society and human body was enough to satisfy my aspiration. (Spencer 1883, i-ii)

The analogy between the state and the human body was not necessarily an entirely new approach as such ideas often appeared in Eastern classics, such as *Four Books* and *Five Classics*. While the translator found the logic was often far-fetched and even misleading in these works, he praised Spencer’s precise line of reasoning. However, how far is the idea to empower the Diet as a congressional check from Spencer original notion? And what made him interpret Spencer in this way? The next section will evaluate which aspect of Spencer’s organicism Yamaguchi found mesmerizing.

### What is an Organism?: “The Social Organism” and “*Shakai Soshikiron*”

In his first book, *Social Statics*, Spencer introduces a germinal idea about organisms. He claims that biological evolution is a synthesis of individuation and mutual dependence, and in the same way, human society progresses by following the law of the social organism that evolves around isolation and

integration. This idea preceded Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) in presenting the universal principle of evolutionary law (Suzuki 2007, 115). After the publication of *Social Statics*, it took him about a decade to incorporate the idea of the social organism into the center of his philosophical system in "The Social Organism." While at the end of *Social Statics* Spencer explains the evolutionary process from simple to complex structures and suggests that both individual and social organisms share the same characteristics, it was not until the publication of "The Social Organism" that his unique idea of the social organism was described in detail (Yamashita 2009, 137-44). He writes in his autobiography:

That the conception of the social organism is an evolutionary one, is implied by the words; for they exclude the notion of manufacture or artificial arrangement, while they imply natural development. Briefly expressed in *Social Statics*, and having grown in the interval, the conception was now to be set forth in an elaborated form. The leading facts insisted on were, that a social organism is like an individual organism in these essential traits: that it grows; that while growing it becomes more complex; that while becoming complex its parts acquire increasing mutual dependence; and that its life is immense in length compared with the lives of its component units. It was pointed out that in both cases there is increasing integration accompanied by increasing heterogeneity. (Spencer 1904, 55-56)

Here Spencer emphasizes that a society is a natural organism, not an artificial one. For him, the essential commonality between society and the individual is the fact that they grow, they become increasingly complex as they grow, and as they do so, their parts become more mutually dependent. It becomes clear that his organicism is established in line with the history of a particular ideology that explains the political structure as a collective body. He discusses the political structure with literal use of the term "body politic," as well as the analogy of the state to "a living organism." In the Japanese translation, the term "body politic" is translated to *shakai*, or society, and it discusses the similarities between society and living organisms:

The theory that there are similarities between a society and organisms is something that has been considered by the late thinkers and it is often talked about in the old books. Yet how could we have been sure if this kind of idea was not mere delusion? The reason why it was impossible to recognize the similarities that surely existed between the two at the time was because the study of physiology was underdeveloped, and particularly the recent method of generalization—to detect one theorem from all beings—remained unknown. (Spencer 1883, 20-21)



The translator's foremost concern in Spencer was the concept of a society that had been absent or was in the process of being created in East Asia. But what were the characteristics of a society in Spencer's society as an organism? Spencer discusses Plato and Hobbes as pioneers who had first discovered the likeness between an individual organism and social organism. However, he claims that while Plato and Hobbes highlighted the "structural" similarities between society and the physical body, historically it was based on a mechanistic view. As it had been written in his autobiography, this was Spencer's criticism against their perspectives on the "artificiality" of society. On the other hand, the bigger problem for Spencer was the fact that such parallelism remained vague and abstract because of the absence of physiological knowledge. In criticism of the mechanistic approach toward the body politic, Spencer introduced four analogies between society and organisms that had been made known as the result of the development of physiological science: (1) That organisms grow; (2) That they develop from simple to complex organisms; (3) That activity of a particular part relies on and cannot be independent from other parts; and (4) That even when partial changes occur, they do not lead to the overall change (Spencer 1883, 32-34).

Needless to say, not all organisms are the same and every society has different traits. What needs to be pointed out is that, like less developed organisms, in primitive societies each constitutive part is isolated and independent from one another. Therefore, no harm would be caused if some parts are dismembered or its "core" removed. On the other hand, in a civilized society, just like for higher organisms, if some parts become segregated or its essence is removed, then it would most certainly lead to confusion and destruction of the whole. While primitive societies cannot last for a long time, due to their internal divisibility, enlightened societies persevere because it is difficult to dismember their components (Spencer 1883, 36-38). In other words, the "organic" characteristics of both higher animals and civilized societies derive from the inseparability and mutual dependence of the constitutive parts. Spencer attributed the essential meaning of "organic life" to close interdependence among components, and the same perspective also applies to society. This image of social organization captivated the Japanese translators.

At the same time, Spencer talks about the differences between social and individual organisms. First, societies have no specific external forms. Second, though the living tissue whereof an individual organism consists forms a continuous mass, the living elements of a society do not. Third, while the living elements of an individual organism are mostly fixed in their relative positions,

those of the social organism are capable of moving from one place to another. Fourth, while in the body of an animal only special tissues are endowed with feeling, in a society, all the members are endowed with feeling. For Spencer, the most important distinction was the fourth characteristic—that a society consists of cells, each of which possesses the sensory function. He argues that in living organisms some cells have senses while others do not, but in society, all cells carry senses. Animals can deliver pleasure from one part of the body to another through the nervous system, yet in social organisms, such a function does not exist.

However, it is indeed possible to see the exact opposite features between social and individual organisms. In a living organism, the exhilaration of each cell is directly related to the exhilaration of the nervous system, therefore if the nervous system feels exhilarated then the cells would feel the same, while if it feels discomfort, so does each unit. On the other hand, in society, the sensory power is retained by all individual cells rather than by the whole. Therefore, there is extremely little correlation between the joy and sorrow of each cell and of the entire society. Therefore, the life expectancy of individual organisms is determined by that of the individual cells. In society, on the other hand, the life expectancy of individual cells is determined by that of the whole. This notion requires us to carefully observe that there are differences between social and individual organisms. The purpose of constructing a government is to protect the people, and for the government to sacrifice the happiness of its people in the name of public good is not permissible for this very reason. (Spencer 1883, 49-50)

Here it is important to evaluate his argument that sensory organs exist ubiquitously throughout the entire society. Because in individual organisms the senses are “monopolized” by specific organs, the rest of the parts remain dependent on the nervous system and all parts must be integrated into the whole. On the other hand, since all constituting parts of a society maintain individual consciousness, the society as a whole does not have a unified consciousness. Unlike living organisms, in a social organism, each cell has its own sensory function. Therefore, no single part is entitled to sacrifice the people’s happiness in the name of public good. Drawing upon the idea that, rather than the brain alone, all cells within the human body are capable of executing sensory functions, Spencer pictures “the social” as individualistic and autonomous. The second concern of the translator was the idea that the monarch could not have the right to act alone, but that the people in the society could constitute the body politic in the name of “public good.” This seemed to be the perfect logic to create a new type of society in Japan.

## Analogy between the Parliament and the Brain

In that sense, the Japanese concern was with the urgent need to introduce the Diet. Spencer goes on to compare the functions between the parliament and the brain as analogy between society and animals.

And as it is in the nature of those great and latest-developed ganglia which distinguish the higher animals, to interpret and combine the multiplied and varied impressions conveyed to them from all parts of the system, and to regulate the actions in such way as duly to regard them all; so it is in the nature of those great and latest-developed legislative bodies which distinguish the most advanced societies, to interpret and combine the wishes of all classes and localities, and to make laws in harmony with the general wants. We may describe the office of the brain as that of averaging the interests of life, physical, intellectual, moral; and a good brain is one in which the desires answering to these respective interests are so balanced, that the conduct they jointly dictate, sacrifices none of them. Similarly, we may describe the office of a Parliament as that of averaging the interests of the various classes in a community; and a good Parliament is one in which the parties answering to these respective interests are so balanced, that their united legislation allows to each class as much as consists with the claims of the rest. (Spencer, 1884, 302–303)

However, in *Shakai soshikiron*, the above excerpt is translated as follows:

From the brain flow all kinds of ideas and thoughts, and every one of its ideas and thoughts is related to the gains and losses of the entire human body, which makes the brain the vital place within the nervous system. Therefore, we can interpret that the function of the brain is to weigh and balance the understanding of wisdom, benevolence, courage, and other virtues. Therefore, if the brain is healthy, a person can balance the virtues so that he would not face failure; he would not practice too much wisdom and neglect benevolence, nor would he become too courageous and neglect wisdom. Similarly, a variety of debates erupt in the parliament, and these debates are related to the gains and losses of the entire society, which makes the parliament the vital place within the governmental structure. It is its responsibility to adjust the interests of the four occupations (*shi-nō-kō-shō*) and to eliminate the imbalance among them. If the parliament were good and true, then it would institute fair and selfless laws based on objective understanding of all occupations, making compromises if necessary. It would not execute a law that is harmful to the samurai and beneficial to the peasants, nor would they enact a law that would benefit the merchants and inflict the losses to the artisans. (Spencer 1883, 106)

The brain and the parliament share the similar function of judging the gains and losses of the whole. That the translators explain the function of the

parliament with additional details exposes their attempts to incorporate Spencer's argument in order to legitimize the establishment of the parliament. Such arguments by both Spencer and the translators appear to equally emphasize the unifying function of the brain and the parliament as synthesizers of diverse interests.

However, this argument seems contradictory to Spencer's earlier observation of the differences between social and individual organisms, where he argued that thinking and feeling not only occur in the brain but also in each unit. Thomas Henry Huxley, an evolutionist who often argued against Spencer, acutely pointed out the internal contradiction inherent to Spencer's argument. In other words, in "The Social Organism" Spencer had argued that, as the brain coordinates the interests of "life, physical, intellectual, moral [sic]" within individuals, the government is also responsible for accommodating the diverse interests of the various classes within the community. Huxley criticized that this line of reasoning is mutually inconsistent with Spencer's laissez-faire philosophy that emphasizes the autonomous role-sharing among individual cells.<sup>2</sup>

However, it appears that Huxley had misunderstood Spencer. When emphasizing the role of the brain, Spencer did not deny the sensory function of individual cells. In the translated version, the sense of the brain, explained as "representative consciousness" (*daichikaku*), is distinguished from those of the five senses (*gokan*).

External objects cannot "impress" the brain directly; that the brain can be influenced only indirectly is a commonly known truth of physiology (*seirigaku*). In order to distinguish the consciousness of the brain from that of the five ganglia, let us call it the "representative consciousness." Then, in order to be certain of the duties of the British House of Commons, we can say that it is indeed profound to call it the "representative house" (*daigiin*). This is because the parliament shares similarity with the brain in that the people do not directly attend and discuss their interests at the House, but rather they have the representatives speak for them. (Spencer 1883, 108)

While the five sensory organs have their own nervous systems, the brain receives only the indirect "representation" of these senses. He argues that this function of the brain is similar to the concept of the "representative body" in

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2. Opposing Spencer's laissez-faire ideology, Huxley argued for state interference in welfare policies, especially in education. He criticized Spencer's analogical inference to the social organism and living organism, and showed preference for a chemical analogy over a biological analogy. This debate took place in an academic journal *Fortnightly Review*. In *Administrative Nihilism* Huxley criticized Spencer's argument and Spencer rebutted in *Specialized Administration*, published the following issue (see Yamashita 2009).

politics. The members of the parliament speak for the people as representatives. As the brain is an organ that senses in other organs' stead, the parliament is also a place where the people's demands are executed by the representatives. Put another way, while the brain is a "representative consciousness" that cannot feel directly, as other nervous systems do, in politics, the function of members of parliament is to speak in people's stead as "political representatives" (Spencer 1883, 112).

This theory needs to be understood as part of his effort to define what representation means. Spencer brings up the body politic to demonstrate the concept of representation. What is important to Spencer, however, is that the National Assembly does not simply discuss the public affairs on behalf of the people. Representation means to re-present people's desires and feelings as they are.<sup>3</sup> Yet Spencer did not necessarily emphasize the aspect of representative democracy that simply relegates political decision-making to members of parliament. For Spencer, representative democracy is only worthwhile if it is able to realize equal freedom for each individual (Gray 1996, 105). What was most important for Spencer was the "principle of equal freedom," and a society that exists for the sole purpose of guaranteeing the happiness of each individual. In addition, what he advocated was laissez-faire organicism that only allowed the minimum interference in individual lives. In discussing representative democracy, Spencer focused not on the functional importance of the parliament, but rather on its "representative" aspect that directly reflects the demands of the people, just as the brain embody the senses of the cells.

Spencer's argument for the social organism continues in his cumulative work, *Principle of Sociology* (1876). He distinguishes the "militant type of society" from the "industrial type of society" and emphasizes that the peaceful industrial type of society is characterized by relatively weak central power and very little interference in individuals' private activities. It is a society where the individual does not exist for the state, but the state exists for the individual. If Spencer believed that organisms are characterized by centralized control and unitary actions, then he might have argued that the militant stage is more similar to organisms than the industrial stage. Yet his theory of the social organism is not a concept that assigns greater value on society than on individuals, but rather it is a relational concept that illuminates voluntary cooperation among the individuals within the society. In other words, rather than a militant society that functions through coercion, an industrial society

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3. "Representation means, as the word's etymological origins indicate, re-presentation, a making present again" (Pitkin 1967, 8-9).

based on voluntary cooperation can be described as a more advanced social organism.

For Spencer, the militant stage was dominated by the “brain” before evolving into the industrial stage, where the brain gradually shrinks and becomes vestigial. In contrast to the brain, he compares the industrial structure with a self-regulatory digestive system. He claimed that while the evolution of animals takes place as the nervous system supersedes other organs, the evolution of a social organism occurs as the digestive system presides over others (Schwartz 1983, 77). Contrary to the industrial stage, the priority of the militant stage is the preservation of society, while the protection of its members is of secondary importance. The ultimate value in the militant stage is the obedience to authority, and the social structure needs to become centralized and disciplined in order to deal with any hostile neighboring societies. Therefore, all components of such a society must be subordinate to the center, and their cooperation becomes “compulsory.” Spencer argued that this phenomenon could also be found in the individual organism in which the external organs are completely subjugated to the central nervous system. On the other hand, the most important value in the industrial stage is the will of the people, and the role of the ruler is to simply execute the demands of people. Voluntary cooperation brings about various social activities, and it is structured through representative, decentralized authority, while in individual organisms the dependent organs function as a controlling apparatus. Of course, such theoretical categorization of societies into two dichotomous images had limitations, yet Spencer believed that, as society progressed, the supremacy of the militant stage would be overtaken by the evolution of industrial societies (Yamashita 2009, 167-77).

Tokutomi Sohō is one Japanese thinker who was deeply influenced by this contrast. In *Shōrai no Nihon* (Japan of the Future, 1886), he illustrated the historical evolution from militarism to productionism within the comparative frameworks of “militarism—aristocratism—muscular society” and “productionism—democracy—peace society.” He distinguished the forced unity within the militarist society from the voluntary unity within the productionist society. And he accurately reconstructed Spencer’s argument by arguing that a society in which the military function is enhanced is aristocratic and dominated by inequality, while a society with a developed production system is peaceful and ruled by the common people (*heimin*) (Tokutomi 1974, 56).

As it has been pointed out, Spencer defines the state as an institution for individuals and describes it as the result of an autonomous alignment of the people for their mutual protection. Even in discussing the concept of representation, the purpose of the body is not to unify the whole as one, but

rather the nervous system is understood as the tool by which individuals' senses would be expressed further. This perception may have been the reflection of Spencer's dilemma: While placing significant emphasis on individuals, he never went so far as to deny the centralization of power. As hinted by Spencer's so-called "two souls," depending on which aspect of the organism one focuses, Spencer's works can incite both individualism and statism.

However, Spencer's influence soon hit the ceiling in Japan. Tokutomi's sudden conversion around the period of the Sino-Japanese War is indicative of this trend. In *Dai-Nihon bōchōron* (On the Expansion of Great Japan), he claimed that Japan should undertake military expansionism in order to guarantee state survival and to preserve and enhance its newly acquired status as a major power. The production system, therefore, needed to be developed simultaneously with the military buildup (Tokutomi 1974, 272). This argument illustrates Japan's inability to transform from the militant stage to industrial stage at that time. More significantly, however, there seems to be a fundamental inconsistency between the Japanese conception of the body. They emphasized the horizontal nature of the body, as well as the complementary function of the nervous system to encourage individual autonomy.

### Cell Theory and Political Ideas: Virchow's Cell State Theory

As Benjamin Schwartz once pointed out, there is something odd about Spencer's logic. Spencer draws an in-depth analogy between social and individual organisms, and compares the integrative evolutionary process of the nervous system, nervous center, and the brain with the consolidation process of the nation states. In the world of biology suggested by Spencer himself, the ceaseless development of the brain and enhancing control of power becomes the goal of almost all evolutionary processes. This can also be inferred from that fact that, as an organism evolves, the level of dependency of the "parts" on the "whole" gradually increases. In this end, such an analogy would imply that, as the role of the state continues to increase, all subordinate organs within a society become subjugated to the goal of the state. Scholars continuously pointed out this aspect of Spencer's internal vacillation between his liberalist philosophy and organicism.

Yet Spencer beats a hasty retreat and goes on to compare the differences between individual organisms and social organisms. There is certainly something odd about such a logical shift. While the development of biological science would enhance the understanding of the similarities between the two types of organisms, it cannot provide meaningful explanations as to why there

are differences between social and living organisms. Biological science cannot provide a plausible explanation to Spencer's argument that there is no sensorium in society, and unlike living organisms, in society every unit—namely, individuals—possesses the sensory organ. From this standpoint, one can only assume that his political bias interfered with his perspectives on organisms (Schwartz 1983, 77-78).

As Spencer writes in "The Social Organism," his ideas on organisms were influenced by the development of biological science at the time. It is necessary, then, to assess what was revealed by this "new biology." Only by doing so can we reevaluate the perceived internal contradiction of Spencer's logic—namely that organicism and liberalism are inevitably mutually incompatible. Among the new developments made by biological scientists at the time, the establishment of "cell theory" in the late 1830s by Theodor Schwann (1810-82), Matthias Schleiden (1804-81), and others, deserves attention. While the concept of "cells" was not new, it was after the second half of the 1830s when cells were recognized as the basic unit of organisms, common to both animals and plants. And this became the very first condition of "life" in modern biology (Suzuki 2007, 110). They argued that the fundamental element of life is not organisms, organs, or tissues, but the "individual cell," and such debates had considerable effects on the field of political thought.

Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), a medical doctor and politician who advocated the cell theory, provides important insights to understanding Spencer's reasoning. He argued that cells are living things, and his famous phrase "*omnis cellula a cellula*" (all cells come from cells) overturned a prevailing theory at that time. Based on this approach, he was skeptical to the idea that the entire body can become sick. Calling humoral and solid pathologies "despotic," he favored the therapy of individual units (Unschuld 2009, 180). He claimed that all diseases must be understood as cellular phenomena. Yet he was not just a cellular pathologist; he is known as the founder of the German Progress Party. As a member of the Prussian Reichstag, he confronted Bismarck's policy of military buildup. What pushed him into the political arena was the belief that both laboratory research in pathology and social policies can equally affect the social outcomes. He insisted that state resources for military buildup must be spared for public sanitation projects (Otis 1999, 15-19).

He saw higher animals, especially humans, as organisms characterized by the outcomes of cooperative activities among the cells that constitute them. In this process, Virchow used a number of social metaphors and analogies, and he compared the human body with a society that consists of citizens who are independent and cooperative. In his renowned work *Cellular Pathology* (*Die*



*Cellularpathologie*, 1858), he combined the studies of biology and politics and introduced the concept of the “cell state” (*Zellenstaat*). He argued that the human body is a “cellular democracy” or “republic of cells” in which all cells possess equal abilities. As Georges Canguilhem once claimed, the history of the concept of “cells” cannot be separated from that of “individuals.” Regarding the close relationship between cell theory and liberalism, Canguilhem goes so far as to claim that no one really knows whether Virchow became a republican because he firmly believed in cell theory, or he came to believe in cell theory because of his faith in republicanism.<sup>4</sup>

Virchow assures that the focus on the diversification of life does not lead to the loss of unity within the organism. His argument that a free state is constructed by the individuals who are entitled to equal rights—but not necessarily to the same abilities—derived from cell theory. In other words, the analogy of a cell state was not a mere rhetorical argument, but he only expressed his political views under the cloak of biological theory (Temkin 1977, 274).

At that time, microscopic observation enabled the scientists, including Virchow himself, to formulate their theories. They discovered surprisingly free-moving cells that form different parts of the body. At that time, new revelations were being made in the field of biological science. They discovered that a sperm cell was an active single cell; white blood cells displayed amoeboid motion; and an embryo is the result of repeated division of a single ovum cell. Yet it is premature to claim that these scientific developments alone were the only factors that shaped his perspective toward medicine. Virchow applied biological facts to his republican and liberalist political thought and described the state as a multi-celled organism comprised of free individuals. It is difficult to know which came first for Virchow—whether he became a republican through the study of cell theory or whether his republican ideology induced his understanding of cells. Nevertheless, he asserted that his belief as a natural scientist made him a republican, and claimed that other scientists who had conflicting perspectives on human biology always seemed to have different perspectives on political ideologies as well.

Not only did he realize that political beliefs affect the person’s scientific thinking, he also concluded that a scientist builds upon his own view of the human body in forming political opinions about the ideal society (Unschuld 2009, 176). For Virchow, cell theory not only underpinned his political beliefs,

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4. This Canguilhem’s assessment was in response to Ernst Haeckel (1834-1918), yet in a sense it is more applicable to Virchow. Virchow’s philosophy leads to Heinrich Haeckel, who is famous for the phrase, “politics is applied biology.” Haeckel extends Virchow’s “*Zellen-Republik*” (cell-republic) model to the “*Zellen-Monarchie*” (cell-monarchy) model.

but he also interpreted cell theory through such beliefs. Viewing each cell as an individual life force, he drew a picture of the human body and body politic that did not require the dominance of a central power or monarch. Sovereignty, once exclusively possessed by a single ruler, was transferred to the individual basic particles, and this alteration came to be applied equally in interpreting the bodies of both the “state” and “individuals.”

On the other hand, Virchow did not necessarily consider the individuals as entirely independent from the whole. As individual cells are dependent upon one another to maintain life, individuals within a society are also dependent on one another. He criticized the totalitarian form of centralization, yet he did not advocate a societal model in which individuals are isolated. Virchow also criticized the use of term “state organism.” He denounced the idea of only placing “parts” in relation to the “whole,” which has a specific sense of purpose, as if the parts cannot uphold any purpose of their own outside the framework of the state or society (Unschuld 2009, 179). Yet organisms are not arranged in accordance with a central control or hierarchy. Like Virchow, Spencer opposed the idea of state control over individuals, and he even supported the individuals’ right to ignore the state. He claimed that, within a society, individual cells have their own senses, and this perspective overlaps with Virchow’s liberalist view. We do not know much about the personal relationship between Virchow and Spencer. Yet it seems quite clear that their perspectives on the human body are grounded upon a common episteme about how they perceived the ideal form of society. Virchow’s perspectives on the “body” and “state” can be interpreted as an extension of the liberalist aspect of Spencer’s organicism with enhanced logical consistency.

Earlier studies have largely focused on Spencer’s political theory and overlooked his ideas and perspectives on the human body, leading to an insufficient understanding of the duality inherent to his arguments. Reading into Virchow’s logic, however, it becomes clear that Spencer saw the potential in the liberalistic organism. For Spencer, liberalism and organicism were not contradictory concepts in that what is “organic” is made of independent cells that among themselves are able to form free and cooperative relationships.

## **Conclusion: Views of Life and Political Thought**

The translation of Spencer’s works on organisms appears to have succeeded in conveying the context without errors. Aside from the degree to which the translators themselves understood Spencer’s views on the body and life, or how

much the readers were able to appreciate his reasoning, at least Spencer's ideology was presented without distortion. While there are some omissions or errors in translation in *Shakai soshikiron*, the translators introduced Spencer's organicism to Japan with all sincerity.

At the same time, however, Spencer's original work and the Japanese translation are not identical. As written in the preface of *Shakai soshikiron*, the translators focused on Spencer's concept of organicism in defending the Diet as the holder of sovereignty. However, Spencer always emphasized the importance of individual freedom, seeing the government as a necessary evil and warned about expecting too much from the legislative body. In the endnote of "The Social Organism," Spencer notes that his argument is not a specific analogy between society and individuals in contemporary Britain. He wrote that "no such specific analogy exists," and "the above parallel is one between the most developed systems of governmental organization, individual and social." Indeed, Spencer advised in a letter to Kaneko Kentarō (1892) that "free institutions, to which the Japanese have been utterly unaccustomed, are certain not to work well, and that there must be a gradual adaptation to them. I suggest ... [a representative body in Japan] not having any authority either to take measures for remedying them, or authority even for suggesting measures, but having the function simply of saying what they regard as grievances" (Spencer 1908, 321-23).

Yet this author's endnote was not translated. We will never know whether the translators intentionally omitted this part in order to argue that the institutional analogy between specific individuals and society can be applied universally—and to Japan. But it is possible to assume that they exploited Spencer's work for the authority to legitimize their claim to establish the Diet.

If we follow Spencer's logic, sovereignty is placed in the hands of the individual, rather than in the Diet. His liberalist theory of the social organism claims that, as each cell has its own authority, sovereignty is attributed to the individuals within the society. What characterized Spencer's philosophy was the idea that the state is structured for the individual, rather than the other way around. On the other hand, those who encountered Spencer's ideology and sought to utilize it, accepted Spencer's emphasis on individuals, yet their focus seemed to be on highlighting the Diet, not the monarch, as the sovereign power. In that sense, what Spencer tried to emphasize in his argument—individual freedom and autonomy—was again reduced to the issue of control and the question of where sovereign power resided. While this may have been the intention of the people's rights advocates who sought the establishment of the Diet, differences in the basic definition of life could also have been a factor.

Discussing the concept of organisms, they paid particular attention to the problem of the location of the center, which was where they believed sovereignty resided. The concept of cell theory, which in the West carried significant implications for political ideology, did not seem to have the same impact on the Japanese intellectuals. If the basis of cell theory is the key to unravelling Spencer's duality of organism and liberalism, it is sensible that such a gap between the West and Japan existed because the debates on cell theory did not fully develop in Japan until the 1890s. By then, the cell theory had come to be accepted as fact, rather than theory in Meiji Japan. In other words, they did not see it as a scientific theory that needed to be evaluated, but as an object that needed to be discovered. Its utility did not reside in its logical structure but rather in its usefulness in inducing a deeper understanding of society. In particular, the cell theory's mechanistic logic, or the reductionist reasoning that stands upon the idea of a "whole" consisting of independent units, was uncommon among the Japanese intellectuals (Hayashi 1998, 115-32).

Suzuki Sadami (2007, 136-42) once argued that the Western evolutionism and the view of life as its foundation were decoupled as they first entered Japan. Due to the absence of western knowledge on "life" as the foundation of related debates, individualistic science was accepted not as science but as a worldview. At the same time, however, this should not be dismissed as a mere limitation in importing foreign ideas; rather, such gaps may have been the inevitable consequences of differing worldviews.

As we have seen, Spencer's theory of the social organism was imported with a certain level of modification in modern Japan. While the differences in historical contexts could be the cause of these disparities, differences in the understanding of body and life were another possible reason. For Spencer, explaining the society as an organism meant more than providing an analogy or metaphors, and he believed that the structural principles of both individuals and society were founded upon the same biological logic. In that sense, his synthetic philosophy was a consistent and complete theoretical system that ran through all subfields of science. Right or wrong, he posed one of the most critical issues to the philosophical world of the nineteenth century. Biological science at the time introduced a worldview that was derived from the basic perspective of all academic disciplines, and this viewpoint was adopted to observe society and the state. That is the precise reason why it is impossible to segregate Spencer's perspectives on life and society. However, in modern Japan, no one successfully incorporated Spencer's ideas into one perspective. Considering the difficulty of accepting the concept of "organism" in East Asia, it was inevitable that this view of life was not congruent with the perspective on society. This gap seems to be

reflected in the chasm between “organism” and “*yūkitai*,” as well as in the cognitive void that runs between the two different worldviews on “life.”

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