

## Chapter II— The Incongruous Passage

ALTHOUGH this chapter shows that Mr. Spencer had not fully thought out the question, and saw no way to secure equality in the use of land, save the clumsy one of having the state formally resume land and let it out in lots to suit, the argument is clear and logical, except in one place. This one weak and confusing spot is the beginning of Section 9:

"No doubt great difficulties must attend the resumption, by mankind at large, of their rights to the soil. The question of compensation to existing proprietors is a complicated one—one that perhaps cannot be settled in a strictly equitable manner. Had we to deal with the parties who originally robbed the human race of its heritage, we might make short work of the matter. But, unfortunately, most of our present landowners are men who have, either mediately or immediately—either by their own acts, or by the acts of their ancestors—given for their estates equivalents of honestly earned wealth, believing that they were investing their savings in a legitimate manner. To justly estimate and liquidate the claims of such, is one of the most intricate problems society will one day have to solve."

Taken by itself, this passage seems to admit that existing landowners should be compensated for the land they hold whenever society shall resume land for the benefit of all. Though this is diametrically opposed to all that has gone before and all that follows after, it is the sense in which it has been generally understood. It is the sense in which I understood it when, in quoting from *Social Statics in Progress and Poverty*, I spoke of it as a careless concession, which Mr. Spencer on reflection would undoubtedly reconsider. For after even such a man as John Stuart Mill could say, "The land of every country belongs to the people of that country; the individuals called landowners have no right in morality and justice to anything but the rent, or compensation for its saleable value," the English writers had seemed to me afflicted with a sort of colorblindness on the subject of compensation. And that this affliction had suddenly befallen Mr. Spencer also was the only explanation of this passage that then occurred to me. Nor, if it means compensation for land, is there any other explanation; for all along Mr. Spencer has been insisting on the natural, inalienable and equal right of all men to the use of land. He has not

only denied the validity of all existing claims to the private ownership of land, but has declared that there is no possible way in which land can become private property. He has mercilessly and scornfully exposed the fallacy on which the notion of compensation to landowners is based—the idea that change of hands and lapse of time can turn wrong into right, make valid claims originally invalid, and deprive the human race of what in the nature of things is, not at any one time, but at all times, their inalienable heritage. Nothing but moral color-blindness can explain how a writer who has just asserted all this can in the same breath propose to compensate landlords.

But a more careful reading of this chapter leads me now to think that the apparent inconsistency of these sentences it may arise from careless statement, and that what Mr. Spencer was really thinking of was the compensation of landowners, not for their land, but for their improvements.

In the context Mr. Spencer has scouted the idea of force, or acquiescence, or voluntary partition, or unopposed appropriation, or cultivation, or improvement, or sale or bequest, or lapse of time, giving any title to private property in land. But he realises, as we all do (see especially the last two paragraphs of Section 4), that should the community resume for all the inalienable right to the use of land, there would remain to holders of improvements made in good faith an equitable claim for those improvements.

It is evident throughout *Social Statics* that no idea of the possibility of securing equal rights to land in any other way than that of the state taking possession of the land and renting it out had dawned on Mr. Spencer. And since in all settled countries the land thus taken possession of by the state would be land to which in large part improvements of various kinds had in good faith been inseparably attached, the matter of determining what equitable compensation should be paid to owners on account of these improvements naturally seemed to him a delicate and difficult task—one, in fact, incapable of more than an approximation to justice.

Keeping this in mind, it is clear that a few interpolations, justified by the context, and indeed made necessary by it, will remove all difficulty. Let me print these sentences again with such interpolations, which I will distinguish by italics:—

"The question of compensation to existing proprietors for their improvements is a complicated one—one that perhaps cannot be settled in a strictly equitable manner. Had we to deal with the parties who originally robbed the human race of its heritage, we might make short work of the matter, for their improvements we should be under no obligation to regard. But unfortunately, most of our present landowners are men who have, either mediately or immediately—either by their own acts, or by the acts of their ancestors—given for their estates, which include many inseparable improvements, equivalents of honestly earned wealth, believing that they were investing their savings in a legitimate manner. To justly estimate and liquidate the claims of such for these improvements, is one of the most intricate problems society will one day have to solve."

Thus understood, these sentences become coherent with their context. And that this was what Mr. Spencer had in mind is supported by his more recent utterances; for while he has allowed these sentences to be understood as meaning compensation to landowners for their land, yet in the only places where he has stated in terms what the compensation he has proposed is to be for, he has, as will hereafter be seen, spoken of it as "compensation for the artificial value given by cultivation," or by some similar phrase showed that what was in his mind was merely compensation for improvements. I therefore gladly make what honourable amend I can for having so misunderstood him as to imagine that in *Social Statics* he intended to give any countenance to the idea that it was incumbent on men, when taking possession of their heritage, to pay any compensation to existing landowners for the value of that heritage.