

Chapter VI—  
From *Social Statics* To *Political Institutions*

BUT the crudities and seeds of error in Mr. Spencer's treatment of the land question in *Social Statics* were of little moment beside its sterling merit. It was a clear, and, if we except or explain the one incongruous passage, an unfaltering assertion of a moral truth of the first importance—a truth at that time ignored. If Mr. Spencer had not mastered all the details of its application, he had at least seen and stated the fundamental principle that all men have natural, equal and inalienable rights to the use of land; that the right of ownership which justly attaches to things produced by labor cannot attach to land; that neither force, nor fraud, nor consent, nor transfer, nor prescription can give validity to private property in land; and that equal rights to land are still valid, "all deeds, customs, and laws notwithstanding," and must remain valid "until it can be demonstrated that God has given one charter of privileges to one generation and another to the next."

He had, moreover, shown that the practical recognition of these equal rights, even in the rude way he proposed, involved no community of goods and nothing like socialism or communism; but that it may be carried out in a way that "need cause no very serious revolution in existing arrangements," and would be "consistent with the highest civilization."

And this was in England, where the whole structure of society—social, political and industrial—was based on and embedded in private ownership of land, and in the year 1850, when, except by a few "dreamers," no one thought of making any distinction between property in land and property in other things, and by the vast majority of men of all classes and conditions private property in land was looked on as something that always had existed, and, in the nature of things, always must exist.

But beyond the warnings that this was no way to success, which he doubtless received from friends, there is no reason to think that this revolutionary utterance of Mr. Spencer in *Social Statics* brought him the slightest unpleasant remonstrance at the time or for years after. If "Sir John and his Grace"—by which phrase Mr. Spencer had personified British landed interests—ever heard of the book, it was to

snore, rather than to swear. So long as they feel secure, vested wrongs are tolerant of mere academic questioning; for those who profit by them, being the class of leisure and wealth, are also the class of liberal education and tastes, and often find a pleasing piquancy in radicalism that does not go beyond their own circles. A clever sophist might freely declaim in praise of liberty at the table of a Roman emperor. Voltaire, Rousseau and the encyclopedists were the fashionable fad in the drawing-rooms of the French aristocracy. And at the beginning of this century, and for years afterwards, a theoretical abolitionist, provided he did not talk in the hearing of the servants, might freely express his opinion of slavery among the cultured slaveholders of our Southern States. Thomas Jefferson declared his detestation of slavery, and, despite amendment, "writ large" his condemnation of it in the Declaration of Independence itself. Yet that declaration was signed by slaveholders and read annually by slaveholders, and Jefferson himself never became unpopular with slaveholders. But when the "underground railway" got into operation; when Garrison and his colleagues came with their demand for immediate, unconditional emancipation, then the feeling changed, and the climate of the South began to grow hot for any one even suspected of doubting the justice of the "peculiar institution."

So it was with private property in land for over thirty years after *Social Statics* was written. One of the first to congratulate me on *Progress and Poverty*, when only an author's edition of a few hundred copies had been printed, and it seemed unlikely to those who knew the small demand for works on economic questions that there would ever be any more, was a very large landowner. He told me that he had been able freely to enjoy what he was pleased to term the clear logic and graceful style of my book, because he knew that it would be read only by a few philosophers, and could never reach the masses or "do any harm."

For a long time this was the fate of Mr. Spencer's declaration against private property in land. It doubtless did good work, finding here and there a mind where it bore fruit. But the question had not passed beyond, and Mr. Spencer's book did not bring it beyond, the point of extremely limited academic discussion.

Though it brought Mr. Spencer the appreciation of a narrow circle, and thus proved the beginning of his literary career, *Social Stat-*

ics had but a small and slow circulation. The first and only English edition, as is usual with books for which no large sale is expected, was printed directly from type, without making stereotype plates. As Mr. Spencer tells us in the preface of his recent "revision and abridgement," it took some ten years to sell that, after which, the sale not being enough to justify republication, which, in the absence of stereotype plates, would have involved the cost of setting up the type again, the book went out of print in England, without having attracted any general attention. This was but in the nature of things; for the class that profits by any wrong which affects the distribution of wealth must be the wealthy class, and consequently the class whose views dominate the existing organs of opinion. And until recently private property in land has been the sacred white elephant of English respectability, not even to be named without a salaam. The conspiracy of silence was therefore all that such a book could expect until it began to make way among the masses, and that neither the style of *Social Statics* nor the price at which it was published was calculated for. A similar fate to that which *Social Statics* met in England befell a very similar book, covering much the same ground—*Theory of Human Progression*, by Patrick Edward Dove, published a little before *Political Institutions*, but in the same year, and also asserting the equal right to the use of land. While Dove is not so elaborate as Spencer, he is clearer in distinctly disclaiming the idea of compensation, and in proposing to take ground-rent for public purposes by taxation, abolishing all other taxes. His book must have done some good work on the minds it reached, but it passed out of print and was practically forgotten.

*Political Institutions*, however, had a happier fate in passing over to the United States. Among those early attracted by Mr. Spencer's writings was the late Professor E. L. Youmans, who in 1861-62 sought his acquaintance and entered into correspondence with him. Professor Youmans's tireless energy, backed by the resources of the strong publishing house of D. Appleton & Co. of New York, with which he was connected, was thenceforward devoted to the task of popularizing Mr. Spencer and his teachings in the United States. Through the efforts of Professor Youmans, D. Appleton & Co. arranged with Mr. Spencer for the publication of his books, and in 1864, making stereotype plates, they reissued *Political Institutions*,

and from that time forward kept it in print; and as may be seen, both from the preface of 1877 in their edition of *Social Statics* and from the preface to the abridgement of 1892, such English demand as existed was supplied by the sending over of sheets printed by them<sup>2</sup>—a more economical arrangement than that of printing a book of small circulation on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus in a larger sphere it continued to circulate, mainly in the United States (where Mr. Spencer's reputation, aided by the active work of Professor Youmans, grew first in popular estimation), and to some small extent at least in Great Britain. But the radical utterances on the land question that it contained gave no evidence of attracting active interest or passing for more than an academic opinion.

Between 1850 and 1882, during the greater part of which time Mr. Spencer was engaged in developing his evolution philosophy, nothing more that I am aware of was heard from him on the land question. But *Political Institutions*, in the United States at least, increased in circulation as Mr. Spencer's reputation grew, and its declarations continued to stand for his opinions without even a suggestion of change. Several prefaces, or notes, were from time to time added, but none indicating any modification of views with regard to the land question. The last of these was dated January 17, 1877. In this, certain changes in Mr. Spencer's opinions as to teleological implications, the political status of women, the useful effects of war, etc., are noted, but there is no modification of the radical utterances as to the tenure of land. On the contrary, he says:

To the fundamental ethical principle expressing in its abstract form what we know as justice I still adhere. I adhere also to the derivative principles formulated in what are commonly called personal rights, of this or that special kind.

In *Political Institutions*, which, after some magazine publications of chapters, was finally published in book form in the early part of 1882, Mr. Spencer again spoke of the tenure of land, and in a way that would lead any one acquainted with his previous fuller treatment

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<sup>2</sup> "A number of years passed—some ten, I think—before the edition was exhausted; and as the demand seemed not great enough to warrant the setting up of type for a new edition, it was decided to import an edition from America, where the work had been stereotyped. After this had been disposed of a third edition was similarly imported."—Preface to *Social Statics, Abridged and Revised*, 1892.

of the subject to understand that he still adhered to all that he had said in *Social Statics*.

*Political Institutions*, like the other divisions of the "Principles of Sociology" to which it belongs, is "in part a retrospect and in part a prospect." First explaining in accordance with his general theory how social institutions have been evolved, Mr. Spencer proceeds to indicate what he thinks will be the course of their further evolution. In the chapter on "Property," after some pages of examination he says (Section 539):

Induction and deduction uniting to show as they do that at first land is common property, there presents itself the question—How did the possession of it become individualized? There can be little doubt of the general nature of the answer. Force, in one form or other, is the sole cause adequate to make the members of a society yield up their joint claim to the area they inhabit. Such force may be that of an external aggressor or that of an internal aggressor, but in either case it implies militant activity.

Having thus repeated in a form adapted to the character of the book the declaration of *Social Statics* that the original deeds to private property in land were written with the sword, he proceeds to develop it, showing by the way a comprehension of the fact that the feudal tenures did not recognize the private property in land which has grown up since, or, as he phrases it, that "the private landownership established by militancy is an incomplete one," being qualified by the claims of serfs and other dependents, and by obligations to the crown or state, and saying:

In our own case the definite ending of these tenures took place in 1660; when for feudal obligations (a burden on landowners) was substituted a beer-excise (a burden on the community).

From this, in a passage which will hereafter appear,<sup>3</sup> he proceeds to consider what is likely to be the future evolution of land tenure. Saying that "ownership established by force does not stand on the same footing as ownership established by contract," he likens individual property in land to property in slaves, and intimates that as the one has disappeared so the other will doubtless disappear, to make place. for landholding "by virtue of agreements between individuals

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<sup>3</sup> See Mr. Spencer's letter to the Times, pp. 98-99.

as tenants and the community as landowner. ... after making full allowance for the accumulated value artificially given."

This is a restatement of what was said in Chapter IX., Section 9, of *Political Institutions*, where, speaking of the once universal assumption that slavery was natural and right and the better faith that had been generated, he adds:

It may by and by be perceived, that Equity utters dictates to which we have not yet listened; and men may then learn, that to deprive others of their rights to the use of the earth, is to commit a crime inferior only in wickedness to the crime of taking away their lives or personal liberties.

Thus, in so far as was consistent with the very different scope and character of the book, Mr. Spencer repeated in March, 1882, the views on the land question that he had set forth in 1850. And in this connection the words I have italicized are noteworthy as showing what was really meant in that incongruous passage in *Social Statics* previously discussed.

With this reassertion in "Political Institutions" of the views on the land question set forth in *Social Statics* we must draw a line in our review.