

PART II—REPUDIATION

There are people who hate anything in the shape of exact conclusions; and these are of them. According to such, the right is never in either extreme, but always half-way between the extremes. They are continually trying to reconcile Yes and No. Ifs and buts, and excepts, are their delight. They have so great a faith in "the judicious mean" that they would scarcely believe an oracle, if it uttered a full-length principle. Were you to inquire of them whether the earth turns on its axis from East to West, or from West to East, you might almost expect the reply—"A little of both," or "Not exactly either." It is doubtful whether they would assent to the axiom that the whole is greater than its part, without making some qualification.—

Herbert Spencer, 1850.

Chapter I—

Letter To The *St. James's Gazette*.

WITH the early years of the last decade a marked change in common thought began to show itself; and the doctrine of natural, inalienable and equal rights to land, which Mr. Spencer had avowed as it were in academic groves, began to stir in the hearts and minds of common men, and to make way among the great disinherited. Vaguely and blindly, the land question had come to the front in Ireland, and in this form forced its way into British politics. And *Progress and Poverty*, first published in the United States in 1879, had begun, by the close of 1882, to circulate in Great Britain as no economic work had ever circulated before, reinforcing what Herbert Spencer had said of the ethical injustice of private property in land with the weight of political economy and the proposal of a practical measure for restoring equal rights. Everywhere, in short, that the English language is spoken, the idea of natural rights to the use of land, that in 1850 seemed dead, was beginning to revive with a power and in a form that showed that the struggle for its recognition had at last begun.

Believing in Mr. Spencer's good faith, deeming him not a mere prater about justice, but one who ardently desired to carry it into practice, we who sought to promote what he himself had said that equity sternly commanded naturally looked for some word of sympathy and aid from him, the more so as the years had brought him position and influence, the ability to command attention, and the power to affect a large body of admirers who regard him as their intellectual leader.

But we looked in vain. When the Justice that in the academic cloister he had so boldly invoked came forth into the streets and market-places, to raise her standard and call her lovers, Mr. Spencer, instead of hastening to greet her, did his best to get out of her way, like the young wife in the old story, who charmed the bystanders with her invocations to Death to take her rather than her elderly husband, but who, when Death rapped at the door and asked, "Who calls me?" quickly replied, "The gentleman in the next room!"

In March, 1882, when Mr. Spencer issued "Political Institutions," and even in August of the same year, when he left England for a visit to the United States, there was on the surface of English society nothing to indicate that such views as he had expressed in *Social Statics* were any nearer attracting popular attention and arousing feeling than in 1850, for the Irish land movement was considered what it indeed was in the main,—not an attack on private property in land, but an effort of Irish tenants to become landowners or to get better terms. But when Mr. Spencer returned, toward the close of November, it was to find that the days of contemptuous tolerance on the part of Sir John and his Grace had gone, and that all that was deemed "respectable" in English society had become roused to the wickedness of those who denied the validity of private property in land.

To explain the change that had taken place in this brief interval I must refer to my own books.

Progress and Poverty was received by the English press, as all such books are at first, in silence or with brief derision. Messrs. Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., who first published it in England, in sheets brought from the United States, were on publication able to sell only twenty copies in all the three kingdoms. But ere long it began to make its way, and when, toward the close of August, 1882, a six-penny edition was issued, it began to sell in tens and scores of thousands, "in the alleys and back streets of England," the Quarterly Review said "audibly welcomed there as a glorious gospel of justice."

Hardly was this cheap edition out and beginning to circulate, when, conjoining with it my pamphlet on *The Irish Land Question*,⁴ which had also been published in England in cheap form, the *Times*, on September 11, 1882, gave to *Progress and Poverty* a long and fair

⁴ Now published under the name of *The Land Question*, since its effort is to show that the Irish Land Question is simply the universal land question.

review. At once the silence of the press was broken, and from the quarterlies to the comic papers the British journals began to teem with notices and references, most of them naturally of a kind that made the Duke of Argyll seem mild when he called me "such a preacher of unrighteousness as the world has never seen," and spoke of my "immoral doctrines" and "profligate conclusions," the "unutterable meanness of the gigantic villainy" I advocated, and so on.

And from being regarded in this way in the very society in which as a great philosopher he had come to be an honored member, it was evident that Mr. Spencer could not escape if he adhered to his views. For although *Social Statics* was little known in England, the quotations I had made from it, both in *Progress and Poverty* and in *The Irish Land Question*, were bringing those views into sharp prominence.

This was the situation as Mr. Spencer found it on his return from the United States. The burning question—a question beside which that of chattel slavery was almost small—had been raised in England. And he must either stand for the truth he had seen, and endure social ostracism for it, or he must deny it.

"Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you!" For this to the man who has striven to uproot a great wrong—a wrong that by the fact of its hitherto unquestioned existence has necessarily enlisted on its side all the powerful influences that dominate the organs of opinion and rule society—is the sure sign that the day he has hoped for is at hand.

When, in 1850, Mr. Spencer had said that the rent of land could be collected by an agent or deputy agent of the community, quite as well as by an agent of Sir John or his Grace, he must have known that if ever his proposition attracted the attention of the interests he thus personified he would be denounced in all the established organs of opinion, and in "polite society" regarded as a robber. Then, I am inclined to think he would have hailed with joy such indications of the progress of thought. But in 1882, he no sooner found that Sir John and his Grace had been aroused by such a proposition and were likely to hear that he had made it, than he hastened to get the evidence out of their sight, and as far as he could to deny it. At once, it seems from

what he tells us in 1892, he, "resolved not again to import a supply" of *Social Statics*,⁵ and took the first opportunity to write a letter.

The *Edinburgh Review*, for January, 1883, in an article entitled "The Nationalization of the Land," reviewed *Progress and Poverty*—as fairly, it seemed to me, as could be expected, but of course adversely. In doing so it referred to what Mr. Spencer had said on the land question in *Social Statics*, giving him credit for proposing to indemnify landowners, and quoting with that interpretation the incongruous sentences in Section 9. In concluding it said:

Writers like Mr. George and Mr. Herbert Spencer are at war not only with the first principles of political economy and of law, of social order and domestic life, but with the elements of human nature. ... To attack the rights of private property in land is to attack property in its most concrete form. If landed property is not secure, no property can be protected by law, and the transmission of wealth, be it large or small, is extinguished. With it expires the perpetuity of family life, and that future which cheers and ennobles the labor of the present with the hopes of the future. These are the doctrines of communism, fatal alike to the welfare of society and to the moral character of man.

This brought out from Mr. Spencer a letter to the *St. James's Gazette* of London, an able Tory journal. Since he was writing on the subject, here was an opportunity for Mr. Spencer to correct the misapprehension (as I now think it to be) that he had in *Social Statics* proposed to compensate landowners for their land. And, if he wished to defend himself against the charge of attacking property rights and upholding the doctrines of communism, here was an opportunity for him to show, for all of us as well as for himself, that the denial of the justice of private property in land involves no denial of true property rights. Or if he chose to do so, here was a chance for him straightforwardly to recant, to apologize to landowners, and to plead that he was young and foolish when he asserted, as quoted by the *Edinburgh*, that "equity does not permit property in land, and that the right of mankind to the earth's surface is still valid, all deeds, customs, and laws notwithstanding."

⁵ "Ten years ago, after all copies of the third edition had been sold, I resolved not again to import a supply to meet the still continued demand—Preface to "*Social Statics*, Abridged and Revised", 1892.

But, instead of manfully defending the truth he had uttered, or straightforwardly recanting it, Mr. Spencer sought to shelter himself behind ifs and buts, perhaps and it-may-bes, and the implication of untruths. Here is his letter:

To the Editor of the St. James's Gazette:

During my absence in America, there appeared in the St. James's Gazette (27th of October, 1882) an article entitled "Mr. Herbert Spencer's Political Theories." Though, when it was pointed out to me after my return, I felt prompted to say something in explanation of my views, I should probably have let the matter pass had I not found that elsewhere such serious misapprehensions of them are being diffused that rectification seems imperative.

Before commenting on the statements of your contributor, I must devote a paragraph to certain more recent statements which have far less justification. In old days among the Persians, the subordination of subject to ruler was so extreme that, even when punished, the subject thanked the ruler for taking notice of him. With like humility I suppose that now, when after I have been publishing books for a third of a century "the leading critical organ" has recognized my existence, I ought to feel thankful, even though the recognition draws forth nothing save blame. But such elation as I might otherwise be expected to feel is checked by two facts. One is that the Edinburgh Review has not itself discovered me, but has had its attention drawn to me by quotations in the work of Mr. Henry George—a work which I closed after a few minutes on finding how visionary were its ideas. The other is that, though there has been thus made known to the reviewer a book of mine published thirty-two years ago, which I have withdrawn from circulation in England, and of which I have interdicted translations, he is apparently unconscious that I have written other books, sundry of them political; and especially he seems not to know that the last of them, "Political Institutions," contains passages concerning the question he discusses. Writers in critical journals which have reputations to lose usually seek out the latest version of an author's views; and the more conscientious among them take the trouble to ascertain whether the constructions they put on detached passages are warranted or not by other passages. Had the Edinburgh reviewer read even the next chapter to the one from which he quotes, he would have seen that, so far from attacking the right of private property, as he represents, my aim is to put that right upon an unquestionable basis, the basis alleged by Locke being unsatisfactory. He would have further seen that, so far from giving any countenance to communistic doctrines, I have devoted four sections of that chapter to the refutation of them. Had he dipped into the latter part of the work, or had he consulted the more recently published "Study of Sociol-

ogy" and "Political Institutions," he would not have recklessly coupled me with Mr. George as upholding "the doctrines of communism, fatal alike to the welfare of society and to the moral character of man;" for he would have discovered the fact (familiar to many, though unknown to him) that much current legislation is regarded by me as communistic, and is for this reason condemned as socially injurious and individually degrading.

The writer of the article in the *St. James's Gazette* does not represent the facts correctly when he says that the view concerning ownership of land in *Social Statics* is again expounded in "Political Institutions"—"not so fully, but with as much confidence as ever." In this last work I have said that, "though industrialism has thus far tended to individualize possession of land, while individualizing all other possession, it may be doubted whether the final stage is at present reached." Further on I have said that "at a stage still more advanced, it may be that private ownership of land will disappear;" and that "it seems possible that the primitive ownership of land by the community ... will be revived." And yet again I have said that "perhaps the right of the community to the land, thus tacitly asserted, will, in time to come, be overtly asserted." Now it seems to me that the words I have italicized imply no great "confidence." Contrariwise, I think they show quite clearly that the opinion conveyed is a tentative one. The fact is, that I have here expressed myself in a way much more qualified than is usual with me; because I do not see how certain tendencies, which are apparently conflicting, will eventually work out. The purely ethical view of the matter does not obviously harmonize with the political and the politico-economical views; some of the apparent incongruities being of the kind indicated by your contributor. This is not the place to repeat my reasons for thinking that the present system will not be the ultimate system. Nor do I propose to consider the obstacles, doubtless great, which stand in the way of change. All which I wish here to point out is that my opinion is by no means a positive one; and, further, that I regard the question as one to be dealt with in the future rather than at present. These two things the quotations I have given above prove conclusively. I am, etc.,

HERBERT SPENCER.

Mr. Spencer has had much to say of the unfairness of his critics. But this reply is not merely unfair; it is dishonest, and that in a way that makes flat falsehood seem manly.

From this letter the casual reader would understand that the Edinburgh reviewer, on the strength of detached passages, had charged Mr. Spencer with attacking the right of private property and upholding socialism, in a sense unwarranted by the context and disproved by the next chapter; and that the passage quoted from "Political Insti-

tutions" covers the same ground and disproves the constructions put on *Social Statics*.

The fact is, that the Edinburgh Review had not charged either Mr. Spencer or myself with more than attacking private property in land. This we had both unquestionably done, not, only in the passages it had quoted but in many others. It had made no misconstruction whatever. What it had said of "attacking the right of private property" and "upholding the doctrines of communism" was a mere rhetorical flourish, made as an inference from, and by way of reply to, our denial of the right of private property in land. Mr. Spencer ignores the real charge and assumes the mere inference to be the charge. Thus, changing the issue, he cites the next chapter as if it disproved the Edinburgh's charge. This chapter (Chapter X., "The Right of Property"), which has been given in full, contains nothing to lessen the force of the attack on private property in land made in the preceding chapter. On the contrary, in this chapter he reiterates his attack on private property in land, and seeks a basis for property by carrying the idea that the community should control land to the length of absurdity.

Nor was the writer in the St. James's unjustified in taking the reference to land in "Political Institutions" to be a briefer indorsement of the views more fully set forth in *Social Statics*; for "Political Institutions" refers to private property in land as established by force, says that it does not stand on the same basis as ownership established by contract, likens it to slavery and predicts its abolition—expressions which, in the absence of any modification of the views elaborately asserted in *Social Statics*, could be taken in no other way than as indorsing them. The passages Mr. Spencer quotes no more modify the view of landownership set forth in *Social Statics* than Lord Lytton's *Coming Race* controverts Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. In *Social Statics* Mr. Spencer declares what ought to be done; in the passage he quotes from "Political Institutions" he is prognosticating as to what it is likely will be done. By now substituting prognostication for declaration of right, Mr. Spencer seeks to convey the false impression that the Edinburgh reviewer has been guilty of carelessness, and the writer in the St. James's of misrepresentation, and that he himself has never gone further than to express the guarded opinion that at some time, a great way off, men may substitute a common ownership of land for private ownership.

Mr. Spencer is more than unfair, too, in assuming that the charge of upholding communism, etc., is applicable to me, though not to him. For, although my book was too visionary for him to read, he had at least read the Edinburgh's article, and knew that the charge against me had no other ground than that against him—the denial of the moral validity of private property in land.

Even what he says about such a plain matter of fact as the withdrawal of *Social Statics* from circulation in England conveys untruth.

The grievance that Mr. Spencer here alleges is that the Edinburgh Review had commented on a book "published thirty-two years ago, which I have withdrawn from circulation in England, and of which I have interdicted translations." What is to be understood from this, and what Mr. Spencer evidently intended to have understood, is that he had, presumably years before, withdrawn *Social Statics* from circulation—not in the mere territory of England, as distinguished from Scotland, Ireland or the United States, but—in English. To make sure of this understanding, he adds that he has interdicted translations—which means, not in other places, but in other languages than English. Now the truth is, that at the time he thus wrote, that book was being published by his arrangement in the United States', as it had been for years before, and continued to be for years afterwards; and that up to this very time he had been importing it into England, and circulating it there. The only filament of truth in this statement, which though made incidentally is of prime importance to his purpose, is, as we now discover from his own utterance in 1892, that at this very time, or possibly a few weeks previous, he had resolved not again to import any more copies of *Social Statics* into England from the United States, though still keeping the book in circulation there, to be bought by whomsoever would buy!

As for the rest of this letter, the admirers of Mr. Spencer may decide for themselves what kind of ethical views they are that will not harmonize with political economy, and what kind of political economy it is that will not harmonize with ethics, and what they think of an ethical teacher who, on a question that involves the health and happiness, nay, the very life and death of great bodies of men, shelters himself behind such phrases as, "it may be doubted," "it may be," "it seems possible," and so on, and endeavors to make them show

that he regards the matter of right as one to deal with in the future and not at present.

This letter is not a withdrawal or a recantation of what Mr. Spencer had said against private property in land. It does not rise to that dignity. It is merely an attempt to avoid responsibility and to placate by subterfuge the powerful landed interests now aroused to anger. But it does indicate that a moral change had come over Mr. Spencer since he wrote *Social Statics*.

In several places in that book occurs the strong, idiomatic phrase, "a straight man." This letter to the St. James's is not the letter of a straight man.

But as hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue, so the very crookedness of this letter indicates Mr. Spencer's reluctance flatly to deny the truth to which he had borne witness. He no more wanted to deny it than Simon Peter to deny his Lord. But the times had changed since he wrote *Social Statics*. From an unknown man, printing with difficulty an unsalable book, he had become a popular philosopher, to whom all gratifications of sense, as of intellect, were open.⁶ He had tasted the sweets of London society, and in the United States, from which he had just returned, had been hailed as a thinker beside whom Newton and Aristotle were to be mentioned only to point his superiority. And, while the fire in the hall of the High Priest was warm and pleasant, "society" had become suddenly aroused to rage against those who questioned private property in land. So when the St. James's and the Edinburgh, both of them chosen organs of Sir John and his Grace, accused Herbert Spencer of being one of these, it was to him like the voices of the accusing damsels to Peter. Fearing, too, that he might be thrust out in the cold, he, too, sought refuge in an alibi.

⁶ "His recreations have been systematic—concerts, operas, theaters, billiards, salmon-fishing, yachting, city rambles, and country excursions; and it has been his fixed rule, when work grew burdensome, to strike his tasks abruptly and go away for pleasure and amuse himself till work itself again became attractive and enjoyable. —"Preface, by Professor E. L. Youmans, to "Herbert Spencer on the Americans and the Americans on Herbert Spencer, being a full report of his interview and of the proceedings at the Farewell Banquet of Nov. 9, 1882." New York: D. Appleton & Co.