

## Chapter II— *The Man Versus The State*

MR. SPENCER'S letter to the *St. James's Gazette* seems to have produced the effect he intended, and though in the United States, D. Appleton & Co. continued to advertise and sell *Social Statics*, and to send to Mr. Spencer his royalties upon it;<sup>7</sup> in England, Sir John and His Grace were satisfied that he had been much maligned by garbled extracts from an early work that he had since suppressed.

But Mr. Spencer himself seems to have felt that to make his position among the adherents of the House of Have quite comfortable, he must do something positive as well as negative. So we find his next work to be one which the Liberty and Property Defense League, a society formed in London for defending private property in land, have ever since been active in pushing.

In 1884 Mr. Spencer issued four magazine articles, "The New Toryism," "The Coming Slavery," "The Sins of Legislators," and "The Great Political" which were then published in a volume entitled "The Man versus the State," and have since been used (1892) to fill out the revised edition of *Social Statics*.

These essays are strongly individualistic, condemning even bitterly any use of governmental powers or funds to regulate the conditions of labor or alleviate the evils of poverty. In this Mr. Spencer was continuing and accentuating a line begun in *Social Statics*, and, in the view of those who think as I do, was in the main right; for governmental interferences and regulations and bonuses are in their nature restrictions on freedom, and cannot cure evils that primarily flow from denials of freedom.

But what in these essays marks a new departure, what makes their individualism as short-sighted as socialism, and brutal as well, is that they assume that nothing at all is needed, in the nature either of palliative or remedy; that they utterly ignore the primary wrong from which proceed the evils that socialism blindly protests against. In them Mr. Spencer is like one who might insist that each should

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<sup>7</sup> "The American people have returned the compliment by purchasing more than a hundred thousand of his books reprinted in this country, and upon every volume of which he has been paid as if he had been an American author."—Professor E. L. Youmans, *Herbert Spencer on the Americans and the Americans on Herbert Spencer*.

swim for himself in crossing a river, ignoring the fact that some had been artificially provided with corks and others artificially loaded with lead. He is like the preachers who thundered to slaves, "Thou shalt not steal!" but had no whisper against the theft involved in their enslavement.

The burden of these essays is, "If any would not work, neither should he eat!" This is declared to be a tenet of the Christian religion, justified by science, as indeed, though much ignored by Christians and by scientists, it is.

To whom does Mr. Spencer refer as the idlers who yet eat?

"Why, of course," the reader of *Social Statics* would say, "he refers to Sir John and his Grace, and to the landholding dukes to whom in *Social Statics* he refers by name—to them and their class, pre-eminently. For they never work, and take pride that their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers never worked. Yet they eat, whoever else goes hungry, and that of the best."

But the reader of *Social Statics* would be wrong. Mr. Spencer does not refer to them, nor allude to them, nor seem to think of them. The people on whom he would enforce the command "If any would not work, neither should he eat!" are not the fashionable idlers, whose only occupation is to kill time and "get an appetite," but the poor idlers who say they have no work. "Say, rather, that they either refuse work or quickly turn themselves out of it!" cries the indignant philosopher, regardless now of what he once insisted on—that these men are disinherited; robbed by unjust law of their birthright, of their rightful share in the element without which no man can work; dependent, therefore, on others for leave to work, and often not getting that leave.

In 1850, while condemning the socialistic palliatives for poverty, Mr. Spencer at the same time recognized the truth that prompts them. He was not content to show the futility of such attempts to assuage the evils of undeserved poverty without pointing out the giant wrong from which undeserved poverty springs. He began his enumeration of the evils of over-government, not as now, by merely denouncing what is done in kindly though misplaced efforts to help the down-trodden, but by recognizing the primary wrong. Beginning this enumeration (page 293, *Social Statics*) he says:

As the first item on the list there stands that gigantic injustice inflicted on nineteen-twentieths of the community by the usurpation of the soil—by the breach of their rights to the use of the earth. For this the civil power is responsible—has itself been a party to the aggression—has made it legal, and still defends it as right.

And of the moral truth involved in theories that in "The Man versus the State" he unreservedly denounces, he says (*Social Statics*, pp. 345-346):

Erroneous as are these poor-law and communist theories—these assertions of a man's right to a maintenance and of his right to have work provided for him—they are, nevertheless, nearly related to a truth. They are unsuccessful efforts to express the fact, that whoso is born on this planet of ours thereby obtains some interest in it— may not be summarily dismissed again—may not have his existence ignored by those in possession. In other words, they are attempts to embody that thought which finds its legitimate utterance in the law—all men have equal rights to the use of the Earth. The prevalence of these crude ideas is natural enough. A vague perception that there is something wrong about the relationship in which the great mass of mankind stand to the soil and to life, was sure eventually to grow up. After getting from under the grosser injustice of slavery men could not help beginning, in course of time, to feel what a monstrous thing it was that nine people out of ten should live in the world on sufferance, not having even standing room, save by allowance of those who claimed the earth's surface. Could it be right that all these human beings should not only be without claim to the necessaries of life—should not only be denied the use of those elements from which such necessaries are obtainable—but should further be unable to exchange their labor for such necessaries, except by leave of their more fortunate fellows? Could it be that the majority had thus no better title to existence than one based upon the good will or convenience of the minority? Could it be that these landless men had "been mis-sent to this earth, where all the seats were already taken"? Surely not. And if not, how ought matters to stand? To all which questions, now forced upon men's minds in more or less definite shapes, there come, amongst other answers, these theories of a right to a maintenance and a right of labor. Whilst, therefore, they must be rejected as untenable, we may still recognize in them the imperfect utterance of the moral sense in its efforts to express equity.

The wrong done to the people at large, by robbing them of their birth-right—their heritage in the earth—is, indeed, thought by some a sufficient excuse for a poor-law, which is regarded by such as an instrumentality for distributing compensation. There is much plausibility in this construction of the matter. But ... why organize a diseased state? Sometime or other this

morbid constitution of things, under which the greater part of the body politic is cut off from direct access to the source of life, must be changed.

Of anything like this there is in "The Man versus the State" no word. Mr. Spencer again takes up his parable against government interference; but he takes it up with every reference to the gigantic injustice inflicted upon nineteen-twentieths of his countrymen omitted; with everything excluded that might be offensive to the rich and powerful.

Nor does he shrink from misrepresenting those who stand for the truth he has now virtually, though not openly, abandoned. In his letter to the *St. James's Gazette* he declared that he had not read my work; but in "The Coming Slavery" occurs this:

Communitistic theories, partially indorsed by one Act of Parliament after another, and tacitly if not avowedly favored by numerous public men seeking supporters, are being advocated more and more vociferously by popular leaders, and urged on by organized societies. There is the movement for land nationalization which, aiming at a system of land tenure, equitable in the abstract, is, as all the world knows, pressed by Mr. George and his friends with avowed disregard for the just claims of existing owners, and as the basis of a scheme going more than half-way to state socialism.

And in *The Sins of Legislators* this:

And now this doctrine (that society as a whole has an absolute right over the possessions of each member), which has been tacitly assumed, is being openly proclaimed. Mr. George and his friends, Mr. Hyndman and his supporters, are pushing the theory to its logical issue. They have been instructed by examples, yearly increasing in number, that the individual has no rights but what the community may equitably override; and they are now saying—"It shall go hard, but we will better the instruction, and abolish individual rights altogether."

Charity requires the assumption that when Mr. Spencer wrote these passages he had not read anything I had written; and that up to the present time when he has again reprinted them he has not done so.

For in nothing I have ever written or spoken is there any justification for such a characterization. I am not even a land nationalizationist, as the English and German and Australian land nationalizationists well know. I have never advocated the taking of land by the state or the holding of land by the state, further than needed for public use; still less the working of land by the state. From my first word on the

subject I have advocated what has come to be widely known as "the single tax;" i.e., the raising of public revenues by taxation on the value of land irrespective of the improvements on it—taxation which, as fast as possible and as far as practicable, should be made to absorb economic rent and take the place of all other taxes. And among the reasons I have always urged for this has been the simplification of government and the doing away of the injustice of which governments are guilty in taking from individuals property that rightfully belongs to the individual. I have not gone so far as Mr. Spencer in limiting the functions of government, for I believe that whatever becomes a necessary monopoly becomes a function of the state; and that the sphere of government begins where the freedom of competition ends, since in no other way can equal liberty be assured. But within this line I have always opposed governmental interference. I have been an active, consistent and absolute free trader, and an opponent of all schemes that would limit the freedom of the individual. I have been a stancher denier of the assumption of the right of society to the possessions of each member, and a clearer and more resolute upholder of the rights of property than has Mr. Spencer. I have opposed every proposition to help the poor at the expense of the rich. I have always insisted that no man should be taxed because of his wealth and that no matter how many millions a man might rightfully get, society should leave to him every penny of them.

All this would have been evident to Mr. Spencer if he had read any one of my books before writing about me. But he evidently prefers the easier method which Parson Wilbur, in Lowell's "Biglow Papers," was accustomed to take with "a print called the Liberator, whose heresies," he said, "I take every proper opportunity of combating, and of which, I thank God, I have never read a single line."

To do him justice, I do not think Mr. Spencer had any desire to misrepresent me. He was prompted to it by the impulse that always drives men to abuse those who adhere to a cause they have betrayed, as the readiest way of assuring Sir John and his Grace that no proposal to disturb their rentals would in the future come from him.

Another thing, however, is to be noticed here—the admission that the movement for land nationalization is "aiming at a system of land tenure equitable in the abstract." Mr. Spencer has not reached the

point of utterly denying the truth he had seen. The abolition of private property in land he still admits is equitable in the abstract.

Now, what is meant by equitable in the abstract? Let *Social Statics*, page 64, tell us:

For what does a man really mean by saying of a thing that it is "theoretically just," or "true in principle," or "abstractedly right"? Simply that it accords with what he, in some way or other, perceives to be the established arrangements of Divine rule. When he admits that an act is "theoretically just," he admits it to be that which, in strict duty, should be done. By "true in principle," he means in harmony with the conduct decreed for us. The course which he calls "abstractedly right," he believes to be the appointed way to human happiness. There is no escape. The expressions mean this, or they mean nothing.