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## HERBERT SPENCER'S DRIFT TO CONSERVATISM

William L. Miller

### Introduction

Does Herbert Spencer become politically more conservative as he grows older? Not so, earlier critics reply. They say that, while he modifies his views on minor topics, he holds determinedly to the main ideas of his youth and rejects all others.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, some contemporary authors report that he does become more conservative and in support of this position assert that, as he ages, he reverses certain positions he takes in *Social Statics*.<sup>2</sup> Because their case rests partly upon misunderstanding of this book, its general nature is the subject of the next section. There follow discussions of the positions taken in *Social Statics*, about which Spencer's thinking did change or may appear to have done so. These are (1) the right to ignore the state, (2) the right to the use of the earth, and (3) political rights of workers and women.

### *Social Statics* and Spencer's Ideal Society

*Social Statics* is too often read as if Spencer intends it to be a blueprint for immediate social reform—a serious mistake. While Spencer does not always help his reader as much as he might, late in this book he does explain that it is largely just what its complete title (*Social Statics or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified and the First of Them Developed*) indicates. Like political economy, says Spencer, the study of society as a whole may be divided into statics and dynamics. The major concern of eighty-six percent of the book is with statics, the equilibrium of a perfect society. The secondary concern, touched upon 'only occasionally for purposes of elucidation' in the first part of the book, is to analyze the factors which will prepare people for

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Barker, *Political Thought in England: 1848 to 1914*, 2nd edn. (London, 1928), p. 128; Ivor Brown, *English Political Theory* (London, 1920), p. 130; J.W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society* (Cambridge, 1966), p. 180; Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (New York and London, 1926), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Francis, 'Herbert Spencer and the Myth of Laissez-Faire', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXIX (1978), pp. 326–8; David Wiltshire, *The Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 100–31. Henry George could be associated with the more recent group, but he does not attribute the alleged change to Spencer's aging but charges that Spencer, being an intellectual prostitute, simply sells out. George, *A Perplexed Philosopher* (New York, 1904), p. 272. George applies to Spencer Browning's charge against Wordsworth:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,  
Just for a ribbon to stick in his coat [.]

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this ideal society, and these get special attention in the remaining fourteen per cent.<sup>3</sup> Failure to keep the nature of *Social Statics* in mind has been a major source of confusion about the development of Spencer's thought.

What are the main features of the perfect society? According to *Social Statics* and Spencer's subsequent works, this society is first of all a utopia of absolute ethics in which everyone has 'freedom to do what he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man'.<sup>4</sup> If this principle is to be the chief agency for control, some supporting conditions must be in effect. Ideally, citizens should have attained perfectibility. They should be self-reliant, farsighted, and altruistic. In Spencer's system, people can eventually approach this ideal but only if the power of the state and other coercive institutions declines continuously so as to allow that growing scope for individual decision, action, and responsibility by which people are trained in the virtues of the perfected.<sup>5</sup> Because perfectibility is an ideal that can only be approached but never achieved absolutely, attainable perfectibility must be supported by reduction of temptation and some use of relative ethics together with two supplementary devices for social control (competition and a vestigial state). The chief agency for reducing temptation and the need for relative ethics is the static society. Even though '[p]rogress is necessary to the well-being of the Anglo-Saxons',<sup>6</sup> the industrial society (Spencer's utopia) must be in static equilibrium.<sup>7</sup> The reason is simple. Change and development inevitably advantage some people but hurt others. In such situations absolute ethics is not helpful. Instead, 'social interests, or the welfare of the many, ought to over-ride regard for the welfare of individuals, or of the few'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (London, 1851; reprint) (New York, 1969), p. 409. Henry Sidgwick correctly understands that *Statics* is primarily concerned with the ideal society. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (Chicago, 1927), pp. 18–19 n. Actually the first part of *Statics* deals far more with less-than-perfect-societies and makes far greater use of relative ethics than Spencer and Sidgwick lead one to think.

<sup>4</sup> *Statics*, p. 103, also p. 78; G.D.Y. Peel, *Herbert Spencer: the Evolution of a Sociologist* (London, 1971), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Spencer, 'Over-Legislation', *Westminster Review* (1853), reprint in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, III (New York, 1910), pp. 276–80; *Principles of Ethics*, II (New York, 1893, 1910), p. 259; *Statics*, pp. 287, 435.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, 6th edn. (New York, 1900, 1910), pp. 466–9; *Statics*, p. 409.

<sup>8</sup> *Ethics*, II, pp. 278–9, 284–5, 298–9; *Principles of Sociology*, III (New York, 1896, 1910), p. 525; W.L. Miller, 'Herbert Spencer's Theory of Welfare and Public Policy', *History of Political Economy*, IV (1972), p. 218.

Pre-static libertarian societies must often resort to Benthamite ethics to select the least wrong. In these circumstances, utilitarianism gives the best results attainable if decisions are made by units without coercive power. Establishing a static state will eliminate many opportunities for some people to profit at the expense of others and greatly diminish the social usefulness of relative ethics. Unfortunately, according to Spencer, any realizable approximation to the ideal industrial society will still be troubled by some selfishness and crime. Two agencies of control will be available to deal with these. As in the present, competitive market forces will tend to compel individuals and firms to supply the largest quantity of the best quality at the lowest possible price. A vestigial police force will deal with the few who prove guilty of crime.

The utopian industrial society will come about as a result of evolution in an appropriate sequence of institutional settings. The main determinant of the direction of development has been and will continue to be the interaction between individuals and the state. The proper role of government is to support the social framework by protecting the society against aggression from other societies and individual members of a society from one another.<sup>9</sup> What this doctrine should mean and commonly has meant depends upon the stage of development of a society at a given time.

To facilitate discussion of changes in the individual-state relationship, Spencer distinguishes between the welfare or utility of a society as an entity and the aggregate of the welfares or utilities of its individual members hedonistically conceived, the latter hereinafter to be called 'social utility' after the manner of Pareto.<sup>10</sup> Early in human development, societies are threatened with extinction as a consequence of war, and individuals are in danger from assault by undisciplined and egoistic neighbours. In such circumstances it is the duty of the state and allied coercive institutions to subserve the welfare of society as an aggregate by maintaining and strengthening the social framework even though they reduce social utility.<sup>11</sup> By imposing subordination and cooperation, the military societies teach people to discipline themselves and to work over extended periods, valuable attributes in peace as well as in war, but militarism also fosters excessive egoism which impedes desirable long run development.

<sup>9</sup> *Essays*, III, pp. 228, 270–82, 324; *Ethics*, I (New York, 1892, 1902, 1910), pp. 238–9; II, pp. 222, 377; *Statics*, pp. 275–6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ethics*, I, pp. 133–5, 146–7, 151–4, 221; II, pp. 22, 102; *Sociology*, II (New York, 1896, 1910), p. 648; *Statics*, pp. 18, 425–36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ethics*, II, p. 23, 74; *Sociology*, II, pp. 241–2, 591–600, 644–6, 653–6; III, pp. 96–106, 141–9, 464–78; Miller, 'Herbert Spencer's Theory of Welfare and Public Policy', pp. 211–13.

Once people are properly conditioned by the military state, long-sustained diminution of the role of government is needed to allow scope for growth in individual formation of decisions that will eventually educate people in independence, responsibility, foresight, and altruism to a degree sufficient to support an almost stateless society.<sup>12</sup> Spencer has faith that progressive narrowing of the role of government causes desirable human types to evolve but acknowledges that empirical evidence of such an outcome is limited, being confined to 'inadequate and entangled data' found 'in the few simple societies which have been habitually peaceful, and in the advanced societies which, though once habitually militant, have become gradually less so'.<sup>13</sup> From its inception to its final statement, Spencer's theory of social evolution depends crucially upon decline in the role of government.

### The Right to Ignore the State

The first edition of *Social Statics* has a chapter entitled 'The Right to Ignore the State', deleted from the revised and abridged edition of 1892. This deletion may appear to support the hypothesis of Spencer's growing political conservatism, but the original chapter clearly explains that the right to ignore the state is for the ideal society only and underscores the fact that *Social Statics* is chiefly concerned with this utopia.

Spencer offers the right to ignore the state as a corollary to the principle that everyone has the right to do as he pleases so long as he does not interfere with the right of anyone else to do likewise, a principle that can have full sway only under utopian conditions.<sup>14</sup> In the first edition of *Social Statics* he explains that the practicality of the right to ignore the state 'varies directly as the social morality'.<sup>15</sup> Its introduction into a 'thoroughly vicious community' would

<sup>12</sup> *Ethics*, II, p. 257; *Sociology*, III, pp. 270–80; *Statics*, pp. 287, 420–6, 442. Contrary to common assumption, Spencer thinks from 1851 that human development is inevitable and unidirectional only when human nature and institutions are given and fixed. In the early development of mankind, 'only by giving us some utterly different mental constitution could the process of civilization have been altered'. *Ibid.*, p. 413. With man's nature and his institutions given, the course of past history could not have been different. *Ibid.*, p. 409. Unfortunately, this combination, useful in the past, has outlived its usefulness. *Ibid.*, p. 413. According to Spencer's system of thought, imperfections in the market do not matter when perfect men are involved because highly ethical men refuse to take advantage of them. Even when consumers are not good judges of some products, sellers will be too ethical to dilute their products. Ethical principles supplement competition.

<sup>13</sup> *Sociology*, I, p. 564.

<sup>14</sup> *Statics*, p. 206.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

produce chaotic anarchy. 'In a completely virtuous one its admission will be both innocuous and inevitable.'<sup>16</sup> As matters stood in 1851, a long time needed to pass 'before the right to ignore the state' would 'be generally admitted, even in theory'.<sup>17</sup>

Spencer drops the chapter in 1892 not because he has become more conservative but because it will be appropriate only in a utopian society in which the state has virtually withered away. In a society guided largely by market competition and absolute ethics the right to ignore the state will be largely redundant.

### Nationalization of Land

Spencer's major discussions of the land problem are in *Social Statics* and the second volume of the *Principles of Ethics*, and though there is a gap of four decades between the two, the second is a complement to and not a refutation of the first. Nevertheless, Spencer's treatment of the land question is a major source of needless confusion and is one of the chief supports for the thesis that, as Spencer grows older, he becomes more conservative.

Spencer follows the classical economists in distinguishing between land and other forms of property, but his approach is avowedly ethical.<sup>18</sup> He denies the right of the individual to own land, considers the right of the private owner to compensation, and argues for restricting the role of government.

From the law of equal freedom, the Kantian principle that everyone has the right to do as he wishes so long as he infringes not upon the right of anyone else to do the same, Spencer draws for the utopian industrial society the corollary that everyone has equal right to the use of the earth.<sup>19</sup> 'Equity,

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>18</sup> Land, it has been said, differs from other factors of production because it is a free gift of nature. Spencer begins a line of thought to the effect that, whatever the nature of land, labour is certainly a free gift of nature. Speaking of great men, Spencer argues that their accomplishments are possible only because of the capabilities and organization of the societies which produce them and provide the setting for their operations, and largely these are not of their making. *The Study of Sociology* (New York, 1873, 1910), pp. 31–2. Though Spencer does not make the point, what is true of great men is true of the lesser also. Furthermore, if the individual is the product of his biological and social inheritance and has nothing to do with the selection of his grandparents or where he is to be born and reared, he is as much a free gift of nature as land and is ethically no more entitled to his wage than a landowner to his rent.

<sup>19</sup> *Ethics*, II, p. 443; *Statics*, p. 114.

therefore, does not permit property in land' because private property in land means that each owner 'has sole use and benefit' of his land.<sup>20</sup> Any permanent distribution, however equitable as regards the present generation, will prove unfair to a part of posterity.<sup>21</sup>

Just what Spencer means by the statement that the landlord has sole use of his land is not clear. In very exceptional cases the classical economists might supply a meaning, and in these instances they might well agree that his point is well-taken. J.S. Mill reports such a case: 'The pretension of two Dukes to shut up a part of the Highlands, and exclude the rest of mankind from many square miles of mountain scenery to prevent disturbance of wild animals, is an abuse; it exceeds the legitimate bounds of the right of landed property.'<sup>22</sup> The case of the particular action by the two dukes is exceptional because it is largely outside the market economy. The greater the role of markets, the less will the landlord have exclusive use of his land. Assume that in a given set of institutions, factor and product prices, and technological knowledge, a landlord has more land than he can use to his maximum advantage with the labour and other resources he and other members of his family can provide. In some way this landlord must make land available to others. He can do so by hiring additional hands, through some form of rental contract, or by sale. The position of those who buy the services of land will be better when there is an abundance of good land and other natural resources, technological change and imports have reduced dependence upon domestic resources, natural increase and immigration have not unduly depressed wages, individual landlords lack market power and must accept whatever prices markets yield, and economic development is increasing the demand for labour and capital and opening up new opportunities for employment within and outside agriculture. At any rate, there is not much to Spencer's idea that the landlord has exclusive use of his land.

Spencer maintains in *Social Statics* that the right of everyone to the use of the soil requires social appropriation of it regardless of the way in which titles have been acquired, but in *Social Statics* and later works he qualifies this position almost to the point of withdrawal. First, there is the question whether or not confiscation without compensation would be just. Most titles in England can be traced to some form of usurpation.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup> J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 2 vols. (London and Toronto, 1965), p. 232.



Violence, fraud, the prerogative of force, the claims of superior cunning—these are the sources to which those titles may be traced. The original deeds were written with the sword, rather than with the pen: not lawyers, but soldiers, were the conveyancers: blows were the current coin given in payment; and for seals, blood was used in preference to wax.<sup>23</sup>

It is true, thinks Spencer, that occupancy for a given time legally validates a title regardless of the origin of the claim, but Spencer confronts this principle with the ethical question: 'How long does it take for what was originally a *wrong* to grow into a *right*?'<sup>24</sup> Especially if one inherits land from a usurper, or even if one buys, with honestly acquired wealth, land once acquired by usurpation, one's title is flawed. Absolute or relative ethics, however, cannot justify confiscation of most land without compensation. Political and economic evolution have changed the nature of society since the last wholesale usurpation of land that was based on military conquest.<sup>25</sup> Organization by status decayed and was largely replaced by a system of comparatively free contract. Safety of property, particularly that acquired through the non-military efforts of individuals, improved. Economic development opened new careers and opportunities for accumulation. There resulted a great turnover of landed property, so that increasingly individuals acquired land in exchange for other forms of wealth honestly acquired. According to Spencer of *Social Statics*,

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.<sup>26</sup>

Private property in land based on contract clearly stands on a different footing from ownership established by force.

A more important ethical entitlement of landlords to compensation, according to *Social Statics* and later works, is the great improvements they have

<sup>23</sup> *Statics*, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>25</sup> *Sociology*, II, pp. 550–2.

<sup>26</sup> *Statics*, p. 124.



made since the last usurpation.<sup>27</sup> the importance of improvements is indicated by J.S. Mill's judgment that while 'land is not the produce of industry, most of its valuable qualities are so'.<sup>28</sup> Spencer agrees that accumulation accounts for nearly all the value of land and adds that this value, created by personal labour, ancestral labour, or by labour bought with legitimately earned money, belongs to the landlords and 'cannot without a gigantic robbery be taken from them'.<sup>29</sup> Finally, Spencer explains that landlords have already paid for the largely unimproved land which was seized during the last usurpation. By the poor law the English government has collected through the land tax at least £500,000,000 and parcelled it out among the poor.<sup>30</sup> In other words, it has already appropriated more than the value of the land at the last usurpation. Reflection convinced Spencer that a landlord not entitled to compensation would be a rare exception.

What Spencer has in mind in *Social Statics* by social ownership of land is not clear. It is not his practice to be vague about matters he has thought through. Brief attention should have convinced him that social ownership conflicts with his consistently held doctrine that the role of the state should in the long run be minimized. Nevertheless, Spencer never abandons the belief that socialization of land is the correct solution in the abstract.<sup>31</sup> It simply ceases to have empirical significance. As a representative of a long line of English gradualists, he never advocates drastic and sudden reform of existing institutions because he thinks that changes imposed before people reach the stage of development appropriate for them do far more harm than good.<sup>32</sup> When the only alternative is drastic and sudden reform, existing institutions are in the interest of maximum liberty. Accordingly, he does not think it necessary to explain, as he does later, that the land question is 'discussed in *Social Statics* in the belief that it was not likely to come to the front for many generations'.<sup>33</sup> The main change in Spencer's thinking on the land problem is that he eventually gives up the idea that socialization will be possible in prospective empirical circum-

<sup>27</sup> *Ethics*, II, p. 444; *Statics*, p. 119, cf. Wiltshire, *The Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer*, p. 129, where the author reports erroneously that Spencer develops his case for compensation only after 1851 and omits two arguments by which Spencer supports his position.

<sup>28</sup> Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, p. 227; also Spencer, *Ethics*, II, p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 443.

<sup>31</sup> *Statics*, pp. 122–3; *Ethics*, II, pp. 442–4.

<sup>32</sup> *Statics*, especially pp. 467–8.

<sup>33</sup> David Duncan, *Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer* (New York, 1908), II, p. 26.

stances. His general system of thought should have prevented him from entertaining it in the first place. Because appropriation would have to be carried on by the state and the lands administered by it, it is preferable to leave land in private hands.<sup>34</sup> Private enterprise is more efficient than governments, and improvement of the human race depends upon reducing, not increasing, the role of government. Instead of drifting toward conservatism, Spencer's thinking on the land problem moves toward integration with the rest of his system. Unfortunately and unlike Alfred Marshall, he never explicitly states that in a utopian industrial society ownership of land by perfected men would bring all the benefits which he once hoped would be achieved by nationalization.<sup>35</sup>

Henry George is partly responsible for the widespread misinterpretation of Spencer's position on land. George first misunderstands Spencer to advocate drastic and immediate reform of land tenure. When Spencer tries to clarify his position, George charges at book length that he is guilty of an about-face.<sup>36</sup> In subsequent discussion Spencer is at some disadvantage because George has a vested interest in his position of which misrepresentation of Spencer is a part, because many people fail to realize that *Social Statics* is concerned primarily with an ideal society, and because Spencer is somewhat erroneously held to be unsympathetic toward the poor while George is counted among their champions. At least one socialist attempts to use Spencer as a propaganda tool, but to his credit he does not argue that Spencer changes his position on the land question.<sup>37</sup>

### Suffrage for Workers and Women

Many twentieth century readers of Spencer will not find Spencer's ideas on suffrage congenial, but they will be surprised by their consistency. According to Spencer, conception of the industrial and military societies as ideal types clarifies the nature of this right. 'Were the moral law universally obeyed, government would not exist.'<sup>38</sup> Without government there would be no

<sup>34</sup> *Ethics*, II, p. 444.

<sup>35</sup> According to Marshall, '[i]f we can educate this chivalry, the country will flourish under private enterprise'. *Memorials of Alfred Marshall*, ed. A.C. Pigou (New York, 1956), p. 346.

<sup>36</sup> George, *A Perplexed Philosopher; Progress and Poverty* (New York, 1904). To George's credit he knows that even in *Social Statics* Spencer argues that most landlords are entitled to compensation when their lands are nationalized though George thinks compensation to be a 'careless concession'. *Progress and Poverty*, pp. 357–62, 402.

<sup>37</sup> W.C. Owen, *The Economics of Herbert Spencer* (New York, 1891).

<sup>38</sup> *Statics*, p. 191.

question of enfranchisement. Likewise in a perfect military society there would be no right to vote because nothing in the political sphere would be left for citizens to decide. The question of suffrage relates primarily to states between the limiting cases and is largely a matter of relative ethics.

Spencer knows that the central goal of liberalism has been not to give people the right to vote but to limit the power of government. 'The function of Liberalism in the past was that of putting a limit to the powers of kings. The function of true Liberalism in the future will be that of putting a limit to the powers of Parliaments.'<sup>39</sup> The chief reason for extension of suffrage is to reduce or prevent expansion of the role of government.<sup>40</sup> When this goal is threatened, the law of equal freedom may be compromised less, according to *Social Statics*, by restraints on suffrage than by their repeal.<sup>41</sup> Always 'the aspiration after things as they should be, needs restraining by attachment to things as they are'.<sup>42</sup> In line with these principles Spencer discusses the franchise rights of workers and women.

**Suffrage for Labourers.** Should labourers be allowed to vote? In 1851 Spencer answers affirmatively. Men being at best little better than 'barbarians in broadcloth', 'the claim deducible from the law of equal freedom—the claim possessed by each citizen to like political power with the rest—is not counter-balanced by any of those prudential considerations commonly urged against it'.<sup>43</sup> Some particular questions are raised against granting political power to workers. Are not labourers ignorant? Labourers are not alone in their ignorance, for do not voters in other classes, though complaining of high taxes, send large numbers of army and navy officers to Parliament? Are workers more addicted to vice than other people? No, were it not for differences in temptation, crime ratios would be almost identical for all groups. To a great extent, people in various classes are simply guilty of different crimes. 'Men who, by legal chicanery, cheat others out of their property, or who refuse to discharge the claims justly made upon them until forced by law, are men who, in a lower walk of life, would have picked pockets or robbed hen-roosts.'<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Spencer, 'The Great Political Superstition', *Social Statics* (revised edition) together with *Man versus the State* (New York, 1910), p. 411.

<sup>40</sup> *Essays*, III, p. 382; *Ethics*, II, pp. 191–4; *Statics*, p. 220.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 467–8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 469.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 199, 248.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225–6.

If workmen are given the right to vote, will not they simply try to displace those hitherto in power? Probably so, but if government is to be run by a class, it should be the largest class, and workers do make up the major class. 'Surely, if one of the two parties must submit to injustice, it ought to be the rich hundreds, and not the poor thousands.'<sup>45</sup> Anticipation of a take-over by labour may be exaggerated. First, the power of labour is less, according to Spencer, than the number of workmen suggests because of the superior organization of other groups. Second, in 1851 it was hoped that universal suffrage would put an end to class legislation and secure the interests of the whole society.<sup>46</sup>

Soon after 1851 Spencer's thinking about suffrage began to change. At least as early as 1859 he doubted the wisdom of an immediate grant of franchise to labourers.<sup>47</sup> In 1860 he stressed anew that an extension of suffrage is justified only when it is used to maintain or extend individual liberty.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Spencer confessed that even in 1867 he approved the great extension of suffrage brought about by the Reform Bill of that year, a good example, said he, of the victory of feeling over the intellect.<sup>49</sup>

Later experience showed that workers had not used voting rights to protect people's freedom but to encourage governmental intrusion into private affairs.<sup>50</sup> Labourers and trade unions had equalled employers and their combinations in the pursuit of class interests.<sup>51</sup> Workmen in one group had shown a disregard for the interests of those in other groups, and the working class as a whole had developed a dominant enmity toward the capitalistic classes involving a desire to regulate the length of the workweek, to fix wages, and to regulate the introduction of machinery.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>47</sup> Letter to J.S. Mill in David Duncan, *Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer*, I, p. 121.

<sup>48</sup> Spencer, 'Parliamentary Reform: the Dangers and the Safeguards', *Westminster Review* (1860), reprinted in *Essays*, III, p. 382; see also *Ethics*, II, pp. 191-4.

<sup>49</sup> Spencer, *Autobiography*, II, p. 432.

<sup>50</sup> *Ethics*, II, p. 178.

<sup>51</sup> Spencer, 'From Freedom to Bondage' (1896), *Essays*, III, pp. 465-8. A common myth has it that Spencer is without a concept of class.

<sup>52</sup> 'Parliamentary Reform', *Essays*, III, pp. 362-80.

Workers should not have the right to vote in elections to select officials because they will throw their votes to those promising them power to gain their ends. To incorporate labourers into the electorate will be to invite socialism.

**The Political Role of Women.** Spencer's thinking on women's suffrage parallels his ideas on permitting workmen to vote. In *Social Statics* Spencer asks unrestricted political equality for women.<sup>53</sup> In this book Spencer represents women as generally inferior mentally and physically to men though history demonstrates that some women are the equals of men in both respects. Despite institutional restrictions upon them, women have excelled as rulers, scientists, authors, and artists.<sup>54</sup> If many women are inferior, so are large numbers of men. In either case, the inferior should not be denied opportunity to exercise what faculties they possess.<sup>55</sup>

By 1892 Spencer had concluded that women cannot be trusted with unrestricted franchise.<sup>56</sup> His reasoning was as follows: in general women are less capable of thinking abstractly than men and are more swayed by emotional appeals. They see short term but not long term effects of state intervention. More than men they are given to hero-worship. With the power to vote, they would be prone to favour extension of state activities, particularly expansion of poor relief. Nevertheless, Spencer is optimistic for the long run. As society advances toward the industrial state, women should advance toward equality with men 'until there remain only such [disabilities] as differences of constitution entail'.<sup>57</sup>

### Conclusion

Those who argue that Spencer grows more conservative politically as he ages have at best an uneasy case. Their evidence is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of *Social Statics* and specific misinterpretations of Spencer's positions on the right to ignore the state, the right of individuals to own land, and the right of labourers and women to vote.

<sup>53</sup> *Statics*, pp. 155–60.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> *Ethics*, II, pp. 194–8.

<sup>57</sup> *Sociology*, I (New York, 1910), p. 767.

Unless there is clear reason for thinking otherwise in a particular instance, Spencer's characterization of *Social Statics* as a book devoted largely to a utopian society should be taken seriously. Instead of reporting that Spencer is a radical in 1851 but becomes a conservative later, the investigator should study his distinction between conservatism and radicalism: 'Conservatism defends those coercive arrangements which a still lingering savageness makes requisite. Radicalism endeavors to realize a state more in harmony with the character of the ideal man.'<sup>58</sup> According to Spencer's definitions, most of his contemporaries advocating an extension of the role of government are neither conservative nor radical, but Spencer himself is throughout his career as an author both conservative and radical.

Much more than appears at first reading, most of Spencer's work represents the development of ideas set forth in *Social Statics*. His ethical system remains highly stable. Like most people interested in ethics he is a utilitarian though he thinks the utilitarian systems of his forerunners are in need of modification. In *Social Statics* he stresses his differences with other utilitarians but waits until later to explain that he has always been a utilitarian. Though in *Social Statics* he employs both relative and absolute ethics, he does not generally label them as such until publication of the *Principles of Ethics*. What he often calls development in *Social Statics* is consistently called evolution in subsequent works. As in subsequent works, *Social Statics* lays it down that a civilization-producing evolution does not follow a blueprint but 'seems a development of man's latent capabilities under the action of favourable circumstances'.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout Spencer's work the crucial role in social evolution is played by changes in the pattern of interrelations between the individual and the state. In early history a comprehensive role for the state is essential. Societies are commonly of suboptimal size and their inhabitants are undisciplined. Warring states can eliminate societies that are too small or are otherwise unfit for success and can train citizens to cooperate and to sustain effort over a long period. Once these goals have been attained, the role of government must contract to allow scope for decision-making that will train people in responsibility, individuality, self-reliance, altruism, and respect for one another's rights. The ideal society will be guided largely by ethical principles and market competition. Temptation to transgress against one another and the need for relative ethics will be minimized by the static nature of the ideal society, only partly identified in *Social Statics* but further described in subsequent works, especially in *First Principles*.

<sup>58</sup> *Statics*, p. 469.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

Spencer believes that the key to optimal social evolution in the future lies in the gradual decline in the role of government until it becomes vestigial. This item of faith he cannot abandon in *Social Statics* or anywhere else without destroying his theory of social development, the outlines of which are clear in Spencer's first book though in it he uses the term evolution but sparingly. From beginning to end he is a liberal who looks forward with favour to a quasi-anarchical industrial society guided largely by ethical principles and market competition. If the secular trend in the role of government is downward, it may be still possible to gain a positive social benefit by enlarging the scope of government temporarily in national emergencies like war or in certain directions, for example, further regulation of transactions involving corporate stock and legislation in the interest of children.<sup>60</sup> Spencer's concepts of a utopia and the path that will lead to it are relevant for discussion of specific evidence for Spencer's supposed tendency to conservatism.

Because Spencer realizes that the right to ignore the state will be redundant in his ideal society, he simply omits the chapter devoted to it in the first edition of *Social Statics* from the revised edition of this work.

Spencer thinks correctly that he changes his ideas on the land problem much less than many argue. In *Social Statics* and later works absolute ethics requires ownership by the community provided all owners who are not usurpers or heirs of such are properly compensated. He never has in mind that land will be nationalized for a long time to come though this fact is not clear to many who read *Social Statics* without realizing that Spencer is writing of land ownership in an ideal society. Unfortunately one of these who misread was Henry George. Somehow in 1851 Spencer seems to think that community ownership and management of land can be effected without state intervention. When he realizes that this intervention is required, he gives up the notion of public ownership of land as empirically desirable and realizable. Had Spencer thought through the land problem at the time of the composition of *Social Statics* he would have seen that public ownership is inconsistent with his vision of the eventually withered state.

Spencer acknowledges that by age sixty his political opinions differ from those of his earlier days and asks whether the conservatism of advancing age, growth in knowledge, or both operated to cause 'the change from a sanguine to a desponding view'. He leaves no doubt that he thinks that substantially the transformation resulted from experience, thought, and the growth in knowledge.<sup>61</sup> That Spencer begins by advocating extension of suffrage to workmen

<sup>60</sup> *Autobiography*, I, p. 333; *Sociology*, I, pp. 770–3.

<sup>61</sup> *Autobiography*, II, pp. 431–6.



and women and ends by supporting the opposite does not mean that he grows more conservative with age. He simply becomes convinced that extending the electorate to include these groups will enlarge, not prevent growth of, the government control. He then opts for the opposite policy. Wiltshire accurately concludes that Spencer in associating himself with the opponents of electoral reform is not 'straying far from the Liberal concensus' but fails to point out that Spencer earlier supports extension of suffrage primarily as a device to attain the same liberal goal of limiting the role of government.<sup>62</sup> Spencer's end is equally conservative in both cases.

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<sup>62</sup> Wiltshire, *Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer*, pp. 118–19.