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HERBERT SPENCER AND THE "SOCIAL ORGANISM"

BY WALTER M. SIMON

The conception of society as an organism is of ancient vintage; at least since the time of Plato the 'organic theory of society' has served time and again as the theoretical foundation for advocating paternalistic and authoritarian government.¹ Herbert Spencer, as everyone knows, was one of the most extreme defenders of liberalism, individualism, and *laissez faire* (although he repudiated the latter phrase); yet he also used the 'biological analogy' and was convinced that society is an organism, subject to universal laws applicable to all organisms, and therefore susceptible of analysis by scientific methods—in short, that there is such a thing as 'social science' or 'sociology.' The question therefore suggests itself whether the premise of a 'social organism' can lend itself logically to both of these diametrically opposite political conclusions. This question has, indeed, been raised in the past, most cogently, perhaps, in Sir Ernest Barker's little book in the Home University Library;² but it has not, to my knowledge, been treated to an extent commensurate with its importance. It is a problem that involves not only the coherence of Spencer's thinking, but also, directly, the nature and value of the intellectual and scientific bases of "Social Darwinism" as a whole; and, conversely, the degree of justification of Hayek's important charge in his *Counter-Revolution of Science* that natural science, *via* social science, generally gives aid and comfort to authoritarian forms of government (or did so, at least, in the nineteenth century).

Let us be clear, first of all, what exactly Spencer had in mind when he employed a biological analogy for society and referred to a 'social organism.'³ Not everyone who uses such a term necessarily means the same thing; Spencer, in fact, meant a number of things. Basically, of course, his conception of a 'social organism' depended on the continuity of all phenomena, on the universality of the evolutionary process; and, more specifically, on the similarity of the relationships prevailing between a man and his constituent biological elements on the one hand, and between a society and *its* constituent elements—human beings—on the other.⁴ In both cases the rela-

¹ See, for example, T. D. Weldon, *States and Morals* (N. Y. and London, 1947).

² *Political Thought in England 1848 to 1914* (London, 1928), Chap. IV.

³ It should be understood that I am not concerned, in this paper, either with Spencer's evolutionary views in general, where they do not refer to society, or on the other hand with those many arguments for political liberalism in which he did not draw on the premise of a 'social organism.'

⁴ For statements of this general point of view dating from various periods of Spencer's career, see *Social Statics* (N. Y., 1954), 32, 40, 56, 402–403; *Essays: Scientific, Political & Speculative* (London and Edinburgh, 1891), I, 19; *The Study of Sociology* (N. Y., 1906), 300–301, 305, 350; *The Principles of Sociology* (N. Y., 1898), I, 7; *Autobiography* (N. Y., 1904), II, 442.

tionship, according to Spencer, is an 'organic' one: society, he wrote, "is a growth and not a manufacture, and has its laws of evolution."⁵ These laws are inexorable and impose an inescapable determinism.⁶ Yet Spencer remained loyal, even after the publication of the *Origin of Species*, to his original Lamarckian view of evolution, and therefore saw in society, as in all other organisms, a "self-adjusting principle," a capacity for adaptive metamorphoses.⁷ In virtue of this capacity social evolution is predominantly progressive.⁸ On the other hand, Spencer was careful to deny any belief in constant or necessary progress; indeed, like any other organism, a well-developed society is by definition conservative and offers resistance to change, having, so to speak, a vested interest in the *status quo*.⁹ Only by having to meet competition from its rivals—by being involved in the 'struggle for existence'—can a society, in fact, overcome this obstacle.¹⁰ And this will be the appropriate place to note an important weakness in Spencer's argument, in that he begged the question of the definition of a society. He tended to speak indifferently of 'society' and 'a society.' Now, we may grant, for the sake of argument, that human society as a whole, or mankind, is an organism, and that various parts of it, also confusingly called societies, may likewise be organisms. But Spencer, who scorned the study of history, tacitly equated the highly unnatural units called states with the natural organisms or species called societies which carried on, at its highest level, the universal struggle for existence. He was also guilty, incidentally, of other pieces of semantic sleight of hand; in his statement, for example, that morality is "a species of transcendental physiology."¹¹

To give him his due, on the other hand, Spencer was not content to state the case for the biological analogy merely in general terms. He drew up long lists of similarities, many of which he explored in considerable detail.¹² Most of these need not detain us, but one group of them is of particular interest. "The development of society," Spencer says, "as well as the development of man and the development of life generally, may be described as a tendency to individuate—to become a thing."¹³ Now, we are entitled to ask, if a society as well as its component individuals are tending to 'become things'—'acquire personalities,' we might perhaps say for the sake of clarity—can their relationship be a wholly harmonious one? Which of the two has priority? Which one, if we may so put it, has the stronger person-

⁵ *Principles of Sociology*, III, 321. ⁶ See, particularly, *Social Statics*, 388; also *Principles of Sociology*, III, 323-4. ⁷ "The Proper Sphere of Government," quoted *Autobiography*, I, 239; *Principles of Sociology*, I, 587.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 588-590; III, 331, 609-610. ⁹ See particularly *ibid.*, II, 254.

¹⁰ See particularly *ibid.*, II, 257-258, 263-264, 268. ¹¹ *Social Statics*, 391.

¹² See *Essays*, I, 272, 277-306; "The Filiation of Ideas," in David Duncan, *Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer* (N. Y., 1908), II, 359; and, above all, *Principles of Sociology*, I, 449-457, 463-587. ¹³ *Social Statics*, 408.

ality? ¹⁴ Society, Spencer answers, is 'created by its units.' Although there is reciprocal action and reaction, the nature of a social organization is determined by the nature of its units. "The conception of the social organism necessarily implies this. The units out of which an individual organism builds itself up, will not build up into an organism of another kind. . . . So, too, is it in large measure with a society."¹⁵ Spencer placed an unusually heavy emphasis, obviously, on the *elements* of an organism at the expense of the organism as such. Indeed, at times he abandoned the biological in favor of a mechanical analogy and employed the terminology of physics rather than of biology.¹⁶

Moreover, Spencer also quite consciously and specifically placed certain restrictions on the validity of the biological analogy and of the conception of a 'social organism.' He could even be quite touchy if it was alleged that he maintained them without reservation, and he sometimes insisted that they held true only as to 'fundamental principles of organization,' 'general principles of development and structure.'¹⁷ "The structures and functions of the social organism," he conceded, "are obviously far less specific, far more modifiable, far more dependent on conditions that are variable" than an individual organism. But in both cases "there lie underneath the phenomena of conduct, not forming subject-matter for science, certain vital phenomena, which do form subject-matter for science."¹⁸ Most important of all, he came to admit 'transcendent differences' between the two orders of phenomena which earlier he had either ignored or minimized. "One cardinal difference," he was writing by 1871, "is that, while in the individual organism there is but one centre of consciousness . . . , there are, in the social organism, as many such centres as there are individuals, and the aggregate of them has no consciousness . . . —a difference which entirely changes the ends to be pursued."¹⁹ Indeed it does; but does it not do more? Does it not, together with the other reservations just mentioned (and some not mentioned) constitute an abandonment of the biological analogy as a valid premise for argument? Does it not even cut the ground from under Spencer's entire case for the possibility of 'social science'? Despite an occasional doubt, Spencer himself, of course, thought not;²⁰ and he proceeded to elabo-

¹⁴ Spencer did, in fact, entertain an anthropomorphic view of society: see *Principles of Sociology*, III, 331. ¹⁵ *Autobiography*, II, 543; cf. *Social Statics*, 17.

¹⁶ *Study of Sociology*, 5–6; *Essays*, III, 246; *First Principles* (N. Y., 1958), 223, 244.

¹⁷ *Principles of Sociology*, I, 592; *Essays*, I, 101. ¹⁸ *Study of Sociology*, 52.

¹⁹ *Essays*, III, 411; cf. *Principles of Sociology*, I, 457–461. Contrast *Essays*, I, 273–276 (dating from 1860).

²⁰ See, for example, *Social Statics*, 54: "whether it is possible to develop scientifically a Moral Pathology and a Moral Therapeutics—seems very doubtful." This despite the assertion later in the same work (p. 413) that "moral truth proves to be a development of physical truth. . . ." Cf. also, for his "orthodox" defense of sociology, *Study of Sociology*, 297, 306, 350.

rate a political and social system based, in considerable part, on these same premises.

In the most general terms, as everyone knows, Spencer argued that the process of evolution spontaneously led to social betterment and must not be interfered with if the best results were to be achieved. The laws of evolution were universal and inescapable; society participated in the process of evolution, although it was the scene of evolution "in its most complex form."²¹ The law of equal freedom for all individuals, and also for all societies, was "not figuratively, the vital law of the social organism," "a law of nature."²² To attempt to obstruct this law in its operation was not merely useless, but harmful. Society, being an organism, must be allowed to "grow gradually from a germ" instead of being tinkered with by officious legislators: "until spontaneously fulfilled a public want should not be fulfilled at all."²³ The built-in mechanism which guaranteed that spontaneous evolution would be beneficial was the struggle for existence, applicable to the social as to all other organisms, and resulting, in the phrase coined by Spencer, in the 'survival of the fittest.' Any attempt to mitigate the harshness of the struggle was short-sighted and in the long run inevitably harmful. Moreover, those societies in which only the fittest *individuals* survive will be the fittest *societies*, too.²⁴ Very specifically, for our purposes: "regarding society as an organism, we may say that it is impossible artificially to use up social vitality for the more active performance of one function without diminishing the activity with which other functions are performed. So long as society is let alone, its various organs will go on developing in due subordination to each other. . . . To interfere with this process by producing premature development in any particular direction is inevitably to disturb the true balance of organization by causing somewhere else a corresponding atrophy." A state which wasted its energies on attempting internal improvements would not only weaken its population, but would also not be able to attend adequately to its proper function of external defense: "At any given time the amount of a society's vital force is fixed." Or, again: "Society in its corporate capacity, cannot without immediate or remoter disaster interfere with the play of . . . [the] principles under which every species has reached such fitness for its mode of life as it possesses. . . ." The cooperative ethics of the family had no place in the relations between states.²⁵ Spencer also appears to have believed that, while the outcome of the spontaneous evolutionary process was predictable, the results of interference with 'the order of Nature' were unpredictable, uncontrollable, and therefore dangerous.²⁶

²¹ *Ibid.*, 350. ²² *Social Statics*, 413-414. ²³ *Essays*, III, 242-243, 255, 265.

²⁴ Perhaps the classic statement of Spencer's "Social Darwinism" (or, strictly speaking, "Social Lamarckism") is in *Social Statics*, 288-289; see also *Study of Sociology*, 318, 322-323; *Principles of Sociology*, II, 608.

²⁵ *Social Statics*, 349-350; *The Man Versus the State* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1940), 106; *Principles of Sociology*, II, 610, 720-721.

²⁶ *Essays*, III, 456, 460; *Man Versus the State*, 104.

Yet, in another series of observations, Spencer imposed severe limitations on his prescription of non-interference with the process of evolution, and modified his position of doctrinaire liberalism.²⁷ Spencer became pessimistic about human nature and about the amount of liberty of which men were, in fact, capable;²⁸ and at times the welfare of society was given distinct priority over the welfare of individuals.²⁹ He suggested that the scope of the struggle for survival was not unbounded; that among men, as distinct from inferior creatures, competition might come to take a non-aggressive form; that "in the course of social evolution, the human mind is disciplined into that form which itself puts a check upon that part of the cosmic process which consists in the unqualified struggle for existence."³⁰

Conversely, just as his adherence to the concept of a 'social organism' led Spencer at times to attenuate his political doctrine, so he could maintain that doctrine intact only by infringing on the integrity of the biological analogy. His friend T. H. Huxley had, in fact, put his finger very precisely on the weakness of Spencer's argument: "if the resemblances between the body physiological and the body politic are any indication, not only of what the latter is, and how it has become what it is, but of what it ought to be, and what it is tending to become, . . . the real force of the analogy is totally opposed to the negative view of State function."³¹ Spencer could make only a weak attempt at rebutting this charge, in the course of which, in fact, he admitted the 'cardinal difference' between the individual and the social organism about which we have already learned;³² and, both earlier and later, it was on this difference that he relied for his political teaching. It is because the living units of a society always have individual consciousness, whereas the community as a whole has no corporate consciousness, that "the welfares of citizens cannot rightly be sacrificed to some supposed benefit of the State," and that, on the other hand, "the State is to be maintained solely for the benefit of citizens. The corporate life must here be subservient to the lives of the parts. . . ." ³³ Again, it is because there is no "social sensorium" or collective consciousness (that is, because society is different from other organisms) that "the welfare of the aggregate, considered apart from that of the units, is not an end to be sought. The society exists for the benefit of its members. . . . Great as may be the efforts made for the prosperity of the body politic, yet the claims of the body politic are nothing in themselves, and become something only in so far as they embody the claims of its component individuals."³⁴

²⁷ Sir Ernest Barker even goes so far as to say that his concept of the 'social organism' had got so far out of hand that it was leading him to justify socialism (*Political Thought*, 106-118).

²⁸ Letter to Auberon Herbert, 22 October, 1890, in Duncan, *Life*, I, 403.

²⁹ *Principles of Sociology*, II, 233. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 240-242; "Filiation of Ideas," in Duncan, *Life*, II, 364-365; letter to J. A. Skilton, 29 June 1893, *ibid.*, II, 35-36.

³¹ Huxley in the *Fortnightly Review*, XVI (1871), 534.

³² *Essays*, III, 417-444, 411.

³³ *Essays*, I, 276-277.

³⁴ *Principles of Sociology*, I, 461-462.

I conclude, then, that Spencer was able to maintain the doctrine which we may, for short, call 'Social Darwinism' only by driving a horse and carriage through the breach that he had made in the biological analogy; that that analogy, when pursued consistently, led him in the direction of collectivism; that, moreover, he wanted his legislators to be social scientists, infallible experts, philosopher-kings—except that in his case social science would teach the legislators, most of the time, to refrain from legislating;³⁵ and that Spencer, at any rate, offers little ammunition for any attack on Hayek's thesis.

Spencer's dilemma seems likely to be by no means uncommon. Spencer became aware that his political doctrines were not deducible from his philosophical premises; therefore he adjusted the premises sufficiently to allow the conclusions to follow. The result was an improvement in logical coherence across disciplines at the expense of consistency within one of them. Elsewhere I have attempted to show that a similar, though even more complicated, situation held true in the case of John Locke,³⁶ and I strongly suspect that this greater concern for congruence than for consistency will be found to prevail with many social and political thinkers whose doctrines purport to be based on consciously developed philosophical premises.

³⁵ Cf. *Essays*, III, 304.

³⁶ See my article "John Locke: Philosophy and Political Theory," *American Political Science Review*, XLV (1951), 386–399. With Locke, both his philosophy and his political theory were internally inconsistent, but the inconsistencies were matching or congruent. I think it is more fruitful to acknowledge and to analyze the inconsistencies even of eminent thinkers than to try to torture them into consistency.

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