

FRANCIS, MARK. *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life*. Acumen, Stocksfield 2007. xiv, 434 pp. £25.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859009990113

Of all the great Victorian thinkers who achieved in a hero-worshipping age near-immortal stature, Herbert Spencer's reputation has now indisputably fallen the furthest. Darwin and Mill retain their lofty positions; even Carlyle clings on to a semblance of his former glory. Not only is Spencer's oeuvre unread; even his definitive locus, sociology, is often perceived to have lost its moorings as a subject. The reasons for Spencer's own decline are not hard to find. His reputation from the mid-1880s onwards was as a vehement opponent of socialism and collectivism, as the quintessential individualist, and, as the inventor of the phrase, "survival of the fittest", an exponent of what the later twentieth century would view as amongst the more offensive forms of Social Darwinism. A few recent studies have tried to redress the resulting prejudices by placing Spencer more firmly in historical context, notably in M.W. Taylor's *Men Versus the State: Herbert Spencer and Late Victorian Individualism* (Oxford, 1992). Mark Francis's painstaking study goes behind the thought to the man, in a further effort to rescue Spencer from his reputation.

The task is not an easy one; Spencer destroyed all correspondence deemed not to shed a favourable light on his aspirations. He practically constructed the authorized biography, *The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer*, notionally written by a secretary, David Duncan. The prose style of his longer works has not aged well. What we still read of the man also often seems archaic. His shorter works still adverted to, notably *The Man versus the State* (1884), reinforce most closely his individualist political reputation. He left no ready statement of evolutionary theory that has proven appealing to those engaged in the continuous recreation of Charles Darwin. His personal life was eccentric and easily mocked. (Like Mill, he probably died a virgin, and modern readers are as sceptical of such prototypes as universalizable human nature as Mill was of Bentham.) Obsessively hypochondriacal even by contemporary standards, his day revolved around the taking of his pulse, which might occur wherever he happened to be. He has remained perhaps least known for what he aspired most to be known as, a great psychologist. His own psychology, spread bare enough here, revealed a painfully sensitive man who feared women (like Ruskin and Lewis Carroll, he affected an intense devotion to young girls later in life) and was prone to depression and despair. He detested irrationality and feared passion. It was not a recipe for a happy life, for encounters with others invariably involved one or both.

There is not a personality to be rescued by posterity, here, then, in the manner in which Mill was to be rescued by self-scrutiny after the "mental crisis", and by his subsequent devotion to Harriet Taylor. From the viewpoint of social and political thought, Francis's central contention is that Spencer's "individualism" is a misconception. Not only is there a Spencer of the "Left". Spencer shared with Saint-Simon and Comte (though this is disputed by Francis, p. 294), most notably, the confidence that industrial civilization was essentially pacifistic, and in his 1882 *Political Institutions* (vol. 2 of *The Principles of Sociology*) he appeared at his most anti-militarist. Near the very end of his life he would enter public debate as an opponent of the Boer War. Spencer's views on the land, too, merit comparison with those of J.S. Mill and Alfred Russell Wallace, for the supposed great individualist was, somewhat surprisingly, also an advocate of land nationalization. He was also a feminist, rejecting in *Social Statics* (1851) any argument favouring the mental inferiority of women, and advocating full political and legal rights for women several years before Mill and Taylor made such a position marginally more respectable.

(By 1867 he would, however, urge the delaying of the extension of the franchise to women.) He contributed to radical democratic papers like *The Leader*, and took up the cause of religious reform, if unable to venture as far as secularism.

When *First Principles* appeared in 1862 he could thus widely be expected to reinforce the radical and evolutionary drift of many progressive mid-Victorian intellectuals. Yet Spencer could not utterly abandon religion: his faith in the “unknown” prevented the ultimate embrace of the scientific world-view. Nor was his theory of evolution Darwinian, if it is often mistaken as such, for he was uninterested in explaining biological evolution in terms of variation of species, and much more interested in displaying evidence of the progress of nature towards perfection, which sustained his religious principles. He was also much more interested than Darwin in social evolution, profound changes in which he suggested could occur over relatively brief periods of time. (Here, where one would have expected a much more focused account on Comte, Francis fails to provide one.)

Spencer’s politics are, for Francis, nonetheless not the consequence of his religious and scientific system, but often reflected momentary reactions to passing events and trends rather than an exposition of high liberal theory. The politics of *The Man versus the State* are not for Francis those of a conservative-minded libertarian whose prophecy of “the coming slavery” fairly fulfils the role of proto-totalitarian critic. It is true that some contemporaries accused Spencer of being some sort of anarchist. But Spencer was also keen on seeing an expanded state promoting higher ideals of justice, such as the prevention of cruelty to children and animals.

His advocacy of land nationalization as a first principle, before any just possession of property could take place (“abridged” out of some later editions of *Social Statics*), clearly sits very awkwardly beside his libertarian reputation. In fact for Francis this is no anomaly, but formed part of Spencer’s “core liberal values” (p. 254). One of his most long-standing biases was anti-aristocratic. Spencer overtly rejected Lockean accounts of property by which the mixing of labour conferred entitlement to ownership, preferring to see all land as essentially unoccupied common property and “God’s bequest to mankind”. This was not an unfamiliar ideal by any means; Thomas Spence (curiously not mentioned here) had bequeathed it to a variety of later Victorian land reformers. He also rejected “community of goods” (erroneously identified by Francis with Fourier here, p. 255). But in Spencer’s hands a doctrine did emerge of collective ownership of the land with community supervision of leases and popular bidding for farms (a scheme indeed very reminiscent of Spence’s).

Unfortunately for Francis’s account these proposals are not even remotely adequately contextualized here, and are treated essentially as an embarrassment. No adequate intellectual pedigree of such ideals is provided. There is no analysis of the aims and origins of the Land Nationalization Society, formed in 1881, whose president was Alfred Russell Wallace, even though Wallace later wrote that he first studied the question in response to Spencer’s *Social Statics*. Wallace even invited Spencer to join the Society (he refused, citing problems surrounding “anything like a specific scheme for resumption by the State”; Wallace, *My Life* (London, 1908), p. 242). There is no comparison of Spencer’s views on this vitally distinctive aspect of his thought with the development (equally paradoxical to many modern commentators) of J.S. Mill’s ideas on the subject. Nor are the agrarian programmes of Bronterre O’Brien or other earlier or later Chartists described or even alluded to. Kant, Rousseau, Hobbes and other great men are invited to participate in comparisons with Spencer, but not his own plebeian contemporaries.

Nor is there any sense of Spencer's contribution to popular debate over his principles; no mention is made, for instance, of H.M. Hyndman's response to the "socialism and slavery" hypothesis in *Socialism and Slavery*, 3rd edn (London, 1892), though Francis notes Spencer's attack on Hyndman (p. 325). Indeed, a complete lack of confrontation with anything approaching the left of the late-Victorian political and economic spectrum mars an otherwise interesting and useful discussion. Spencer's "radicalism" is provided an essentially internalist account drawing chiefly on high political theory and equally ignoring much of the recent secondary literature on Victorian radicalism. An admittedly awkward man who had difficulty fitting into most company, he seems here equally awkwardly excluded from a variety of frameworks which would obviously have shed further light on his more eccentric ideas.

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FISCHER, LARS. *The Socialist Response to Antisemitism in Imperial Germany*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2007. xix, 252 pp. £45.00; \$80.00; doi:10.1017/S002085900990125

The Social Democratic Party, the SPD, in imperial Germany exhibited an ambivalent attitude in relation to anti-Semitism and the Jewish emancipation. On the ideological level, German socialists interpreted Marxism as a positive science of society. The idea of a natural, necessary, and linear direction of historical development towards socialism inevitably had a profound influence on their attitude toward the "Jewish question". The notion of the disappearance of anti-Semitism and of the growth of Jewish assimilation were seen as two aspects of the "natural evolution of society". In contrast to this over-optimistic belief, German anti-Semitism did not disappear, but transformed itself from religious-based anti-Judaism to modern chauvinism and racism. While colonialist ideologies that also became increasingly popular at this time, were directed against so-called "underdeveloped and primitive peoples" outside Europe, modern-anti-Semitism tried to stop and to reverse the political and cultural emancipation of a part of the population that shared the cultural standard of its environment.

In his book, Lars Fischer, lecturer in the German Department of the University of London, goes beyond these generally accepted attitudes. He argues that social democracy in imperial Germany did more to consolidate than subvert the generally accepted notions regarding the Jews. Fischer asks to what extent "both self-avowed antisemites and those opposed to political antisemitism in Imperial Germany subscribed to many of the same anti-Jewish stereotypes" (xii). He examines to what extent leading social democrats tended to identify Jews with capitalism. Fischer criticizes Franz Mehring, who could never free himself from anti-Jewish prejudices. He discusses Bernstein's, and even Kautsky's, underestimation of the problem during the 1890s. But both Kautsky and Bernstein came to much more nuanced interpretations after 1900. Fischer exposes numerous anti-Semitic remarks that can be found in the private letters of a number of SPD politicians. He points out that social democratic attacks against "Jewish capitalists" kept among the workers the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as money-makers. Some German social democrats even contributed to anti-Semitism, such as in their negotiations with anti-Semitic parliamentary deputy, Hermann Ahlwardt, who was mistakenly seen as