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Charles Darwin

2009 will be the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin; this occasion will no doubt spawn many commentaries and plaudits for the man who gave substance to, and generated wide acceptance of, the theory of evolution. His achievement is up there with that of Copernicus for changing human beings' perception of the world and their place in it. Darwin's belief that variation, struggle for existence and natural selection, together create the motor for evolution, is backed by the extensive evidence gathered on his trip around the world on the *Beagle*, and there is no doubt that the weight of evidence in support of his theory has continued to mount since his death in 1882.

Almost everyone, the scientists as well as the educated public, with the notable exception of some religious fundamentalists, accept evolution as fact; it has now become the prevailing wisdom. Even Pope John Paul II declared in 1996 that evolution was compatible with Christian faith. More recently the Church of England, in anticipation of the bicentenary of Darwin's birth in 2009, has issued an apology on its website:

Charles Darwin: 200 years from your birth, the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still.¹

Darwin and Spencer Compared

But this essay is not about Charles Darwin. It is about a contemporary of his, Herbert Spencer, who was developing a theory of evolution before Darwin and is credited with coining the phrase 'the survival of the fittest'. His books sold in huge numbers during his lifetime and he was almost certainly the most famous philosopher of the Victorian age. Charles Darwin referred to him as, 'Our great philosopher'.²

While most philosophers fail to achieve much of a following outside the academy or their professional peers by the 1870s and 1880s Spencer had achieved unparalleled popularity as the sheer volume of his sales indicate. He was probably the first, and possibly the only, philosopher in history to sell over a million copies of his works during his lifetime.³

The only other English philosopher to have achieved anything like such widespread popularity was Bertrand Russell and that was in the 20th century.

In the mid to late 1800s Herbert Spencer was as famous as Darwin and was acquainted with many of the leading intellectuals of his day; John Stuart Mill, Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot), Thomas Henry Huxley (Darwin's Bulldog) and George Henry Lewes to name just a few.

Darwin's theory was primarily biology-

centred, concentrating on flora and fauna, and expressing his original idea of the mechanism by which evolution operates, namely natural selection; whereas Spencer's work was much wider ranging covering biology, psychology, sociology, ethics and politics as well as philosophy.

So I think it is interesting to look at why, more than 100 years on, Charles Darwin is so much better known than his illustrious contemporary, Herbert Spencer, who is almost forgotten today.

The reason Herbert Spencer has fallen from grace is largely due to the label that has been attached to him, a label that oddly enough bears Darwin's name, and that is 'Social Darwinist'. The implication is that Spencer took Darwin's theory and applied it to social evolution in human societies.

A Social Darwinist?

The responsibility for the besmirching and virtual destruction of the reputation of Herbert Spencer can be laid the door of one man, the author of *Social Darwinism in American Thought 1860-1915*, Richard Hofstadter. His book, a hostile critique of Spencer's work, published in 1944, sold in large numbers and was very influential, especially in academic circles. It claimed that Spencer had used evolution to justify economic and social inequality, and to support a political stance of extreme conservatism, which led, amongst other things, to the Eugenics movement. In simple terms, it is as if Spencer's phrase, 'the survival of the fittest' had been claimed by him as the basis of a political doctrine.

But there's a problem with Hofstadter's celebrated work: His claims

bear almost no resemblance to the real Herbert Spencer. In fact, as Princeton University economist Tim Leonard argues in a provocative new title 'Origins of the Myth of Social Darwinism' which is forthcoming from the Journal of Economics Behavior and Organization, Hofstadter is guilty of distorting Spencer's free market views and smearing them with the taint of racist Darwinian collectivism.⁴

And yet Hofstadter's influence remains pervasive. His view of Spencer is often repeated in academic books as Roderick T. Long points out:

Textbooks summarize Spencer in a few lines as a "Social Darwinist" who preached "might makes right" and advocated letting the poor die of starvation in order to weed out the unfit—a description unlikely to win him readers.⁵

These comments are grossly unjust as Roderick T. Long explains:

*The textbook summary is absurd, of course. Far from being a proponent of "might makes right," Spencer wrote that the "desire to command is essentially a barbarous desire" because it "implies an appeal to force," which is "inconsistent with the first law of morality" and "radically wrong." While Spencer opposed tax-funded welfare programs, he strongly supported voluntary charity, and indeed devoted ten chapters of his *Principles of Ethics* to a discussion of the duty of "positive beneficence".⁵*

I think it is useful at this point to look at Hofstadter's background and bias. Hofstadter was born in 1916 in the USA, graduated at Buffalo University and went on to receive his PhD from Columbia University. He joined the Communist party in 1938 and although he became disillusioned with the Marxists he still continued to oppose the free market, saying, "I hate capitalism and everything that goes with it".⁶ He was an historian very much in sympathy with the American left during the New Deal era of American politics. Subsequently many left liberal writers have quoted Hofstadter's references to Spencer without troubling to study Spencer's original work, thus perpetuating the misrepresentation.

As George H. Smith points out:

*Probably no intellectual has suffered more distortion and abuse than Spencer. He is continually condemned for things he never said—indeed, he is taken to task for things he explicitly denied. The target of academic criticism is usually the mythical Spencer rather than the real Spencer; and although some critics may derive immense satisfaction from their devastating refutations of a Spencer who never existed, these treatments hinder rather than advance the cause of knowledge.*⁷

The most frequently quoted passage of Spencer's work, by Hofstadter and others wishing to smear Spencer's reputation, is:

*If they are sufficiently complete to live, they do live, and it is well they should live. If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die.*⁸

This does sound harsh but what the Spencer-knockers fail to quote is the first sentence of the very next paragraph which transforms its meaning:

*Of course, in so far as the severity of this process is mitigated by the spontaneous sympathy of men for each other, it is proper that it should be mitigated.*⁸

Thus his argument is that the mitigation of natural selection by human benevolence trumps the benefit resulting from the death of the unfit. In other words it is better to respond to our natural sympathy and save the unfit rather than let them die. This then conveys quite a different meaning from the original sentence when quoted on its own.

It is not surprising then that since the tarnishing of Spencer's reputation (unjustly in my view), he is not regarded with the same respect as he was in his own day, and indeed is rarely studied in Universities today. The most damning criticism of all is that his ideas led to the Eugenics movement, which again is absolutely untrue.

As Damon W. Root explains:

*Eugenics, which is based on racism, coercion, and collectivism, was alien to everything Spencer believed.*⁴

Internet sites too, often give Herbert Spencer a bad name. On a website devoted to explaining evolution, and described by Richard Dawkins as "deeply impressive", names Herbert Spencer as the "father of Social Darwinism as an ethical theory".⁸ It goes on to describe the applications of Social Darwinism:

Social Darwinism was used to justify numerous exploits which we classify as of dubious moral value today. Colonialism was seen as natural and inevitable, and given justification through Social Darwinian ethics—people saw natives as being weaker and more unfit to survive, and therefore felt justified in seizing land and resources. Social Darwinism applied to military action as well; the argument went that the strongest military would win, and would therefore be the most fit. Casualties on the losing side, of course, were written off as the natural result of their unfit status. Finally it gave the ethical nod to brutal colonial governments who used oppressive tactics against their subjects.⁹

This is what Herbert Spencer has to say about Colonialism:

Moreover, colonial government, properly so called, cannot be carried on without transgressing the rights of the colonists. For if, as generally happens, the colonists are dictated to by authorities sent out from the mother country, then the law of equal freedom is broken in their persons, as much as by any other kind of autocratic rule.¹⁰

It is clear from this statement that Spencer is opposed to colonialism.

He also compares the militant type of society (based on war) and the industrial type of society (based on trade), criticising the former for its emphasis on authoritarianism and praising the latter because it is conducive to individual freedom.

This is what Spencer has to say about militant type of society:

Briefly, then, under the militant type the individual is owned by the state. While preservation of the society is the primary end, preservation of each member is a secondary end—an end cared for chiefly as subserving the primary end.¹¹

And this is how Spencer compares the two types of society:

In a society organised for militant action, the individuality of each member has to be subordinated in life, liberty and property, that he is largely, or completely, owned by the state; but in a society industrially organised, no such subordination of the individual is called for.¹²

These are not the words of a man promoting military action on the basis of “might makes right”. What he is concerned about is individual rights and he sees colonialism and the militant society as conditions which undermine individual rights.

The website referred to above is yet another example of the often repeated claim that Herbert Spencer was a Social Darwinist, which on the basis of their definition, is completely false.

Libertarian Prophet?

Despite the fact that in Herbert Spencer’s day the term Libertarian did not exist, I think Spencer can be classified as an early spokesperson and visionary of the Libertarian movement or, to use Roderick T. Long’s expression, he can be described as a

“Libertarian Prophet”. I believe that Spencer not only expressed libertarian ideas succinctly but also presented a libertarian vision for the future. I will give some examples.

In ethics Spencer derived a *Law of Equal Freedom* which states that:

*Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.*¹³

This is pure libertarianism. Roderick T. Long elaborates:

Spencer proceeded to deduce, from the Law of Equal Freedom, the existence of rights to freedom of speech, press, and religion; bodily integrity; private property; and commercial exchange—virtually the entire policy menu of today’s libertarians.¹⁴

Spencer’s view on taxation is also very libertarian as this passage demonstrates:

*For the implied address accompanying every additional exaction is—“Hitherto you have been free to spend this portion of your earnings in any way which pleased you; hereafter you shall not be free so to spend it, but we will spend it for the general benefit.” Thus, either directly or indirectly, and in most cases both at once, the citizen is at each further stage in the growth of this compulsory legislation, deprived of some liberty which he previously had.*¹⁵

When considering the proper sphere of gov-

ernment, Spencer asks, what are the requirements of a community for a naturally formed government?

*What, then, do they want a government for? Not to regulate commerce; not to educate the people; not to teach religion; not to administer charity; not to make roads or railways; but simply to defend the natural rights of man—to protect person and property—to prevent the aggressions of the powerful upon the weak—in a word, to administer justice. This is the natural, the original, office of a government. It was not intended to do less: it ought not to be allowed to do more.*¹⁶

This coincides with the view of many present day minimal statist/minarchist libertarians.

Another interesting fact is that Spencer argued in favour of women’s rights long before they became legally established. For example, in his *Principles of Ethics*, with its chapter on ‘The Rights of Women’, he stated that:

*Hence, if men and women are severally regarded as independent members of society, each one of whom has to do the best for himself or herself, it results that no restraints can equitably be placed upon women in respect of the occupations, professions, or other careers which they may wish to adopt. They must have like freedom to prepare themselves, and like freedom to profit by such information and skill as they acquire.*¹⁷

This again accords with the libertarian

view.

Herbert Spencer's significance to Libertarianism has been recognised by Tibor R. Machan:

What Spencer did for libertarianism is what Marx did for communism—provide it with what was to be a full-blown scientific justification, on the model of proper science prominent in his day.¹⁸

But he reflects that:

Neither thinker succeeded. But while Marx is hailed everywhere as a messiah (in secular garb)—even as his theories are being patched up desperately to fit the facts—Herbert Spencer, a better scientist, and in his moral and political theory more astute than Marx, is widely dismissed as a foolhardy fellow or crude Darwinian.¹⁸

What Spencer did recognise was that many Liberals in his day were abandoning their principles—so much so that he called them the 'New Tories'. He noted that:

They have lost sight of the truth that in past times Liberalism habitually stood for individual freedom versus State-coercion.¹⁹

Little did he know that these 'New Tories' would become the new 'Liberals', and that the original or classical Liberals would need a new name to identify them—that name was to be 'Libertarians'.

Spencer was prophetic in that he saw the coming of a militant era of governments which would lead to war and collectivism.

The advent of Nazism and Communism in the 20th century proved his fears to be well founded.

However, Spencer's long term optimism for the future, in which he believed that the industrial society, one based on voluntary cooperation and peaceful exchange, would eventually prevail, still provides hope, and indeed a positive vision for the future, to inspire Libertarians today.

Conclusion

Herbert Spencer is often misrepresented in text books and websites as a 'Social Darwinist', but these claims describe a mythical Spencer that never existed. The real Spencer was quite different. The real Spencer often expressed views quite similar to modern day libertarians and indeed his long term optimism for the future of the world based on voluntary cooperation justifies his epithet of 'Libertarian Prophet'.

Notes

(1) <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/darwin/malcolmbrown.html>.

(2) Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, John Murray, London, 1882, p. 123.

(3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Spencer.

(4) <http://reason.com/news/show/127794.html>, Damon W. Root, *The Unfortunate Case of Herbert Spencer*, July 29, 2008.

(5) <http://praxeology.net/herbertspencerlibertarianprophet.pdf>,

Roderick T. Long, *Herbert Spencer: Libertarian Prophet*, July/August, 2004.

(6) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Hofstadter.

(7) George H. Smith (*Atheism, Ayn Rand, and other Heresies*, p. 293) cited in Roderick T. Long, *Too Awful to Read? Susan Jacoby on Herbert Spencer*, July, 2004, at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/long/long10.html>.

(8) Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or The Conditions essential to Happiness Specified and the First of them Developed*, John Chapman, London, 1851, Part III, Chapter XXVIII, 4, available online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org>.

(9) <http://library.thinkquest.org/C004367/eh4.shtml>.

(10) Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or The Conditions essential to Happiness Specified and the First of them Developed*, John Chapman, London, 1851, Part III, Chapter XXVII, 1, available online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org>.

(11) Herbert Spencer, *Political Institutions: being PART V of the Principles of Sociology (the concluding Portion of Vol. II)*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1882, Chapter XVII, 551, available online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org>.

(12) *Ibid*, Chapter XVIII, 564.

(13) Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or The Conditions essential to Happiness Specified and the First of them Developed*, John Chapman, London, 1851, Part II, Chapter VI, 1, available online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org>. This Law is prominently featured on the back cover of every

issue of *The Individual*, the journal of the Society for Individual Freedom.

(14) <http://praxeology.net/herbertspencerlibertarianprophet.pdf>, Roderick T. Long, *Herbert Spencer: Libertarian Prophet*, July/August, 2004.

(15) Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State*, Liberty Classics, Indianapolis, 1981, pp. 23-24.

(16) *Ibid*, p. 187.

(17) Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1978, Vol. II, pp. 177-178.

(18) *Ibid*, Vol I, *Introduction* by Tibor R. Machan, p. 9.

(19) Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State*, Liberty Classics, Indianapolis, 1981, p. 10.