



The Man Versus the State: With Six Essays on Government, Society, and Freedom

Herbert Spencer

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The Man Versus the State: With Six Essays on Government, Society, and Freedom Herbert Spencer
Spencer develops various specific disastrous ramifications of the wholesale substitution of the principle of compulsory cooperation—the statist principle—for the individualist principle of voluntary cooperation. His theme is that “there is in society . . . that beautiful self-adjusting principle which will keep all its elements in equilibrium. . . . The attempt to regulate all the actions of a community by legislation will entail little else but misery and compulsion.”

Herbert Spencer joined the staff of the London and Birmingham Railway as an engineer in 1837 and in 1848 took a position as editor of *The Economist*.

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The Man Versus the State: With Six Essays on Government, Society, and Freedom Details

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Greg says

Introduction by Donald MacRae
Palo Alto, California, 1968

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This is an extract from The Man versus the State, written by Herbert Spencer (1820 - 1903), published in
1884, long before he could have been aware of Climate Change.

THE MAN VERSUS THE STATE

The Sins of Legislators

[But leaving out the greater part of the large topic comprehended under the title of this article, I propose
here to deal only with a comparatively small remaining part - those sins of legislators which are not
generated by their personal ambitions or class interests, but result from lack of the study by which they are
morally bound to prepare themselves.

A druggist's assistant who, after listening to the description of pains which he mistakes for those of colic,
but which are really caused by inflammation of the caecum, prescribes a sharp purgative and kills the patient,
is found guilty of manslaughter. He is not allowed to excuse himself on the ground that he did not intend
harm but hoped for good. The plea that he simply made a mistake in his diagnosis is not entertained. He is
told that he had no right to risk disastrous consequences by meddling in a matter concerned which his
knowledge was so inadequate. The fact that he was ignorant how great was his ignorance is not accepted in
bar of judgement. It is tacitly assumed that the experience common to all should have taught him that even

the skilled, and much more the unskilled, make mistakes in the identification of disorders and in the appropriate treatment; and that having disregarded the warning derivable from common experience, he was answerable for the consequences.

We measure the responsibilities of legislators for mischiefs they may do, in a much more lenient fashion. In most cases, so far from thinking of them as deserving punishment for causing disasters by laws ignorantly enacted, we scarcely think of them as deserving reprobation. It is held that common experience should have taught the druggist's assistant, untrained as he is, not to interfere; but it is not held that common experience should have taught the legislator not to interfere till he has trained himself. Though multitudinous facts are before him in the recorded legislation of our own country and of other countries, which should impress on him the immense evils caused by wrong treatment, against rash meddling. Contrariwise, it is thought meritorious in him when - perhaps lately from college, perhaps fresh from keeping a pack of hounds which made him popular in his country, perhaps emerging from a provincial town where he acquired a fortune, perhaps rising from the bar at which he has gained a name as an advocate - he enters parliament; and forthwith, in quite a light-hearted way, begins to aid or hinder this or that means of operating on the body politic. In this case there is no occasion even to make for him the excuse that he does not know how little he knows; for the public at large agrees with him in thinking it needless that he should know anything more than what the debates on the proposed measures tell him.

And yet the mischiefs wrought by uninstructed lawmaking, enormous in their amount as compared with those caused by uninstructed medical treatment, are conspicuous to all who do but glance over history.]

Otto Lehto says

Only pedophiles, alas, are more hated than the so-called "social darwinists" - whose granddaddy Herbert Spencer (who coined the term "survival of the fittest") is. This is rather unfair, and sad.

Spencer was a great intellectual and an important thinker. He was, contrary to the cold and selfish image with which he is treated, a passionate believer in human progress and the virtues of voluntary human cooperation. He simply opposed all forms of COERCED cooperation under what he called a "militant" society - i.e. a society that put the interests of the collective over the individual.

He was a proto-libertarian, or a true classical liberal, who believed in limited government, or even a minimal government - a nightwatchman state. Many of his arguments are typical liberal arguments.

The fact that he was a classical liberal who happened to live in an age of declining belief in the power of the free market as the necessary foundation of a good society; and the fact that he combined classical liberalism with an "organistic", social-darwinian worldview; together meant that he became, and still remains, one of the most hated and misunderstood thinkers of the modern era.

He provided an evolutionary account of society's progress through the elimination of the unsuccessful and the prospering of the successful, which many considered callous and cruel - in an age of rising socialism. But, contrary to the eugenicists, he did not believe the GOVERNMENT ought to eliminate or hinder anybody. He believed unfit and unsuccessful forms of life would get weeded out by themselves in the natural progress of things. His judge of things was the impersonal spontaneous order of society, where free men were free to pursue their own ends in peace.

What was his relationship to the government? He argued for a small government which maximized human liberty. He was opposed to the rising welfare state. He believed the government ought neither help (provide support) nor hinder (discriminate against) anybody. The government should do little beyond taking care of the stability of the society, by maintaining law and order.

He was also an excellent essayist, and he could forge excellent prose at the flick of a hand.

I wish to focus on one essay, because I think it encapsulates the greatness of Spencer and the reason why his work is so relevant for us today. THE NEW TORYISM is a great essay that argues that the "new Whigs", the new liberals (of social democratic persuasion), by straying so far from the "old Whigs" (of classical liberalism), are, in fact, becoming the "new Tories": the proponents of a new "status society": a misguided regime of oppressive laws and government control of the economy.

The context behind this (true) allegation is the fact that, during the latter half of the 19th Century, the liberals in England moved leftward towards socialism (before the socialist parties were born). He lived to see (and condemn) the transition. He calls the bleeding-heart liberals on their intellectual mistake. He argues, convincingly, that arguing for extensive proactive legislation constitutes an abandonment of old liberal principles. He, in fact, accuses the new liberals, of turncoatism of the worst kind: they argue, out of well-meaning philanthropic concerns, for the introduction of new restrictions on human liberty, without even knowing they are acting like the Tories of old: destroying human progress and individual liberty.

This essay - and the collection in general - should be mandatory reading for anybody frustrated with the sophistry and self-deception of the "new liberals" of our own time - who, by accusing capitalism of causing all our misery, have instituted new slavery on earth - all in the name of helping the poor and needy, of course usually with results contrary to those intended.

Other great essays in the collection include:

THE COMING SLAVERY - a potent critique of central planning and communist fantasy, which anticipates, chillingly, the horrors of Soviet communism - by 50 years!

& THE GREAT POLITICAL SUPERSTITION, which argues, with great force and persuasion, that while "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."

...

This collection of essays is one of the greatest libertarian/liberal reservoirs of wisdom. It should be read by ANYBODY with an interest in a free society and faith in free human progress. It is like a "sceptre of infinite power" in the hands of anybody with a healthy suspicion of the well-meaning but morally repugnant - and society-retarding - legislative acts of greedy humanitarian lawmakers.

Social Darwinism, despite the reputation, should be revitalized, into a new, if eternal, political force; the true monsters today are the left-leaning, well-meaning collectivists in state control.

Nick says

Solid 4. Each essay in this is a winner. However, I fear that reading them might be nyquil in book format, and listening to some of them on audio was a good idea.

He draws from a huge wealth of knowledge ranging from biology, to sociology/anthropology of various native cultures, british legislative history, ancient european history, physics, etc.

This was written as the shift from classical liberalism to "progressivism" was taking place within the liberal

movement, and Spencer seems potently aware of this fact (the entire essay "the new toryism" is about it). He is clearly a libertarian, although its equally clear where his "class interests" lie (see Benajamin Tucker on Spencer: <http://fair-use.org/benjamin-tucker/i...> although this is unduly harsh.)

Also interesting was the early observations of the coordination problem, and of a morally nihilistic justification for natural rights (or emergent natural rights as it seems to be called these days). In this, and all regards his clear, precise, reductionistic reasoning rings true. This makes him a man after my own heart.

Some of you will be bothered by his knocks on welfare recipients. The historical injustices against lower income groups in medieval england seems to be the only possible counterpoint to his arguments (points also raised by Spencer in other sections of the book). He also brings up a slew of other theories colored with social darwinism which were new to my eyes. For example, he posits that the "militant" phase of society (from ancient times up until the early industrial period) was necessary in order to naturally select for compliant, obedient humans. After the military phase, a sort of "free industrial phase" (by words, not his) may be entered into where compliant, obedient humans submit to industrial hierarchy voluntarily and create good economic outcomes.

Anyway it was good.

Craig Bolton says

The man versus the state: With four essays on politics and society; (The Pelican classics) by Herbert Spencer (1969)

Andrew says

A collection of Herbert Spencer's essays, the most prominent 19th century English philosopher. There is a section on his ideas comparing social organization to the biology of organisms, but I didn't find it very useful so I skipped most of it. However the common sense arguments against oppressive governments are very good.

Important points in audio clips on my youtube channel soon.

Mad Russian the Traveller says

Though this collection encompasses essays from 150 to 130 years ago concerning the consequences of State interference in society, the parallels in the loss of liberty for the individual and the growth of the over-weening State in 19th century England are eerily similar to what has happened to us in the 20th century (and continuing in the early 21st) in America. Miseries are compounded and progress in technical and social development was slowed and stopped then and now by that great evil called the State, thus this book is still relevant to all of us today who value liberty.

Karl says

Spencer gets an "A" for effort and being informative of the times he lives in (the redeeming social value), and I also deplore these conditions he portrays about losing rights and freedoms--but I come to a different conclusion. He believes in throwing out the baby with the bathwater. An imperfect welfare system is not the reason to abolish it because its still better than having none at all. He is very constricting in his definition of state powers and legitimate authorities. It is true that the more power the "nanny state" has the less freedom the citizenry has. Doesn't he realize that God is interested in justice for the poor, alien, afflicted and victimized? (Ps. 82:3; Jer. 24:26; Amos 2:6,7). God will plead the case of the widow and orphan. I don't know where he gets his definition of government but the way I understand from the Bible there is no "Christian form of government per se." Christ said, "My kingdom is not of this world." I am not Utopian and believe the Christian's duty on earth is to evangelize and save people, not to convert to a political philosophy.

His perfect society would have no public education--I could see that in his day and time period but is unrealistic today. We must change with the times though, and possibly invest in internet classrooms for our nation that would eventually replace our public school system. When we say, "Justice for all" we are establishing equal opportunity as much as possible. There is such a thing as "social justice." I don't believe the government is "them" but "we the people." If you hate and despise the "powers that be" it is God's order that you are resisting, unless it directly contradicts Scripture, like telling you that you can't spread the gospel.

He refers to the "Almighty" several times but his faith is a sham as he popularized agnosticism (according to Wikipedia). If he wants to refer to the Bible, it says to revere all authority and people in positions of authority and to give honor to whom honor is due. He prophetically says the state shouldn't be involved in health care and I concede this point against socializing medicine. His point about England laying down its arms and "turning swords into plowshares" per Micah 4:3 is ludicrous. Doesn't he know that Joel 3:9 says to "prepare for war" and 3:10 says to turn "plowshares into swords." His pacifist philosophy will only work in Christ's millennial kingdom.

Clifton Knox says

A primary source of modern libertarian philosophy.

You can see forerunners to the ideas expressed by Rothbard and other Austrian economists nestled within these pages. Though many claim Spencer became a proponent of the state in his later years there is nothing here to indicate that. Having just finished *Social Statics* I can attest that Spencer, by and large, changed little in his positions on land ownership or government. If you are a Libertarian then you are doing yourself a disservice by not reading Spencer. Not only was Spencer an influence on the Austrians but *The 'Man Versus The State'* was one of the few books in Ayn Rands possession when she died. It is listed in the manifest at her estate sale. There is no substitute for Spencer. He stands apart from all the rest and with the exception of Rothbard is the clearest enunciation of modern Libertarian ideology.
