

A Few Words with Mr Herbert Spencer*

Paul Lafargue, *To-Day*, January-June 1884

Mr. Herbert Spencer, the English philosopher, of world-wide celebrity, has contributed to the April number of the *Contemporary Review* an article entitled "The Coming Slavery¹," which commends itself to the attention of English Socialists, because he predicates therein that the Social "changes made, the changes in progress, and the changes urged, are carrying us to the desired ideal of the Socialists" that even the Liberals, the worst enemies of Socialists, "are diligently preparing the way for them," and that nationalisation of land, banks, railways, mines, factories, and other private instruments of production will be realised in the near future: and because this hopeful idea, entertained by so profound a philosopher, will put fresh courage into the hearts of militant Socialists, and will encourage them to pursue with renewed ardour their propaganda of Communistic theories.

But the article has other claims to our attention. It professes to be a powerful and conclusive criticism of Socialism, while it is, in effect, a mere summary of all the commonplace arguments habitually brought against Socialism.. That so illustrious a man as Mr. Spencer should fail to find more serious arguments against it, is a very conclusive demonstration, if that were wanted, of the soundness of Socialism. That a thinker, like Mr. Spencer, one of the lights of the *bourgeoisie*, — should think it worth his while to bring forward such arguments, makes it incumbent on his opponents to refute them, how trivial and unworthy soever they may be.

I

Mr. Spencer concludes his article by this wise axiom, intended to deal us a very ugly blow indeed: "No political alchemy will get golden conduct out of leaden instincts; ... no well-working institution will be framed by an ill-working humanity" — hence mankind must abandon all hope of bettering our present system of society and of doing away with the wrongs and miseries of it.

It was generally presumed that Mr. Spencer had understood the Darwinian theory, of which he had volunteered to be the propounder. The anti-Socialist axiom cited above inclines us to think that the presumption was erroneous. For, according to the evolution theory, the organs of animals, their habits and their instincts are not spontaneous growths, but the necessary results of "the struggle for life under the conditions to which the animals have been exposed." The sharp teeth and ferocity of the tiger, the swiftness and timidity of the antelope have, no more than the wisdom of Mr. H. Spencer, sprung up spontaneously, but have been evolved more or less gradually by the actions and reactions of their *milieu*.

Different conditions of life must consequently produce different instincts and habits in animals and men. For instance, one of the most powerful instincts met with in the whole animal kingdom, and without which the rearing of the young had

* Transcribed: by Ted Crawford.

¹ Herbert Spencer, « [The coming slavery](#) », *Contemporary Review*, May 1884. Traduction française : « [L'esclavage futur](#) »

been impossible, the maternal instinct, is utterly obliterated in certain insects living in communities: "the queen bees kill their daughter queens; the desire to destroy instead of loving their nearest relations having been of service to the community."²

Another instinct, perhaps still more important for the preservation of life, the instinct of self preservation, is deadened in animals living in troops; the males are always ready to face danger and to give their lives in defence of the females, the young and the weak of the collectivity. These unmotherly and unselfish instincts, so unnatural, are like Mr. H. Spencer's pessimism, produced by the conditions of life to which their bearers have been exposed.

A man, who in order to account for the creation of the world requires a God, maker of all things, may well believe that the cheating instincts of the shopkeepers, the lying habits of the diplomatist, the humbugging practices of the bubble company starters, the flunkeyism of the literary and philosophical defenders of the capitalist class are of divine origin; but for the Communist of the materialistic school of Karl Marx, these bourgeois qualities are the necessary products of the bourgeois social milieu. These precious instincts will, as mildew forms on organic matter in decomposition, continue to make part and parcel of the bourgeois nature, so long as the economical milieu which gave them birth is not transformed.

The history of mankind shows us that these bourgeois virtues have not always adorned human nature. In the early village communities of India where private property in land does not exist, we never meet with the parasitism which disgraces civilised England; good-for-nothing aristocrats and capitalists ministered to by a host of flunkeys and. prostitutes do not live on the good-for-somethings; there, every man is not the foe of his fellow-man; he does not lay financial traps, nor lie and cheat to come into another man's property. The private interests of every member of these village communities are merged in the general interest of the community; so much so that "a person aggrieved," writes H. S. Maine, "complains not of an individual wrong, but of the disturbance of the order of the entire little society³." This merging of private in public interest, evolved out of the communal form of property, leads the Indian villager to sacrifice his private welfare to the general good.

But under the system of private property the welfare of the community and of the individual are at war; and the instincts generated by the antagonism of interests leads every bourgeois to sacrifice the common good to his private ends.

Mr. Holloway, the distinguished philanthropist and pill manufacturer, would have inflicted bowel complaints on the whole human race, not even excepting his own great philosopher, Herbert Spencer, with an eye to business. There is never a cotton spinner but would hail the fire that should burn to ashes all the factories of Lancashire and make him lord of the cotton market. There is never an English merchant who, in order to turn an honest penny, would not sell guns and powder to the Soudanese and Basutos fighting against his countrymen. There is not a financial man of the city who would not lend money to Russia — of course on good security and given large profits — for the organizing and arming of the soldiers that should invade India.

² Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.

³ H.S. Maine, *Village Communities in the East and the West*.

The ground out of which spring the leaden instincts of the *man bourgeois*, in England, as well as on the Continent and in America, is private property. Selfishness, deceit, hypocrisy, and quackery are the indispensable qualities of the bourgeois; it is they that make him flush of money, and it is money that gives him all the joys of the earth, fat meats, fruity wines, finery, and respectability, the smiles of the fair, the blessings of priests and the flattery of philosophers; hence he develops these qualities.

In savage tribes, courage, strength and stoicism under pain are developed because these qualities are required in the long and continuous fight which is their life. The habits and instincts of man are shaped by the social milieu in which he lives — private property perverts human nature. One of the most infamous of all crimes, branded by all mankind since it has come out of savagery, parricide, flourishes in countries wherein the system of peasant proprietary prevails. It is his fiendish love for land, his mad desire to inherit the small plot of ground of his parents, which arms the parricide's hands. Private property is the mother of the lowest and most sordid instincts, which no amount of virtuous and tedious preaching and no amount of brutal penalties will avail to eradicate.

The leaden instincts deplored by — the too-evolutionist-by half — Mr. Spencer, are not the cause of the ill-working institutions which Socialists seek to change; but so long as the social institutions shall continue to work ill, the instincts of man will be leaden; so long as private property shall stand, the capitalist will go on being the narrow minded, selfish, and heartless brute he is.

Cellular confinement, the tread-wheel and the lash patronised by the "great philosopher," and applied so largely under our system will never get golden conduct out of man's leaden instincts, so long as misery and insecurity remain the lot of the hard working masses, so long as they are surrounded and allured by the temptations of life and the luxuries of the good-for-nothing capitalists. Quetelet, one of the fathers of the science of statistics, has shown in his *Physique Sociale* that from 1826 to 1844 the number of criminals has varied in France with the price of wheat. Because the great philosopher has overlooked the causes of the leaden instincts which he observes in the hearts of his fellow bourgeois and friends, because he misunderstands the evolution theory, he predicates that these instincts, the products of the private-property system will continue the same in the common-property system. The great philosopher is as logical as a man who should maintain, on seeing a field covered with weeds and thistles, that no corn would grow on it, once the ground was overturned and sown with wheat.

II.

Mr. Herbert Spencer has been mistaken for an evolutionist because he is in the habit of classifying natural and social phenomena according to their external appearances and coarsest features, without analysing their internal properties and their external causes, without studying the action of the milieu on the phenomena and the reaction of the phenomena on the milieu. The great philosopher piles up his facts in evolutive series, much like a shopkeeper piles up his goods upon the shelves of his shop, according to their most obvious qualities; he puts pants with pants, socks with socks, shirts with shirts, etc., never caring one straw to know what materials his goods are made of, and how and where they were manufactured.

In his "Coming Slavery" Mr. Spencer gives an excellent example of his shopkeeper-like evolutionism, which, let it be said in passing, is the only kind of evolutionism known and practised by a large number of Darwinian evolutionists.

Mr. Spencer says, Slavery, which is characterised by "how much the slave is compelled to labour for other benefit than his own and how much he can labour for his own benefit," has been on the decrease since the time when the prisoner of war was made a slave, was converted into a serf attached to the soil, paying a fixed amount of labour and produce and then allowed to detach himself from the soil, as in Russia, but nevertheless bound to give the *obrock* or a certain amount of money. Because the *obrock* does not exist in England, and because the labourer is not fastened to the soil, Mr. Spencer concludes triumphantly that slavery is abolished, and that no Englishman is compelled to labour for other benefit than his own⁴.

I cannot here stop to show how childish is this account of the evolution of compulsory labour, but I may say that the amount of labour extracted from the producing masses (slaves or serfs) does not depend upon the mode in which it is extracted, but upon the mode of production of the age and of the country under consideration. For instance, while the slave-holders and the feudal lords remained their life long on their lands, they claimed from their slaves and serfs a small amount of compulsory labour; but when instead of requiring agricultural and industrial produce for the maintenance of their families and retinue, they wanted marketable goods for bartering, the amount of compulsory labour increased considerably. This increase of compulsory labour marked, not the initial but the last stage of slavery. This method of connecting the social phenomena with their economical causes cannot commend itself to the metaphysical mind of Mr. Spencer, who prefers to soar above the clouds, pouncing upon whatever random facts come within his range of vision. His method has great advantages of its own; it is an easy one, does not necessitate much thinking, and allows a philosopher to prove anything he pleases. Thus, Mr. Spencer after having shown, to his own satisfaction, that slavery, characterized by compulsory labour, does not exist in our capitalist society, demonstrates with equal ease that it *will* exist in the communistic society of the future.

⁴ Mr. Spencer's deplorable and inveterate habit of recording facts without studying them leads him to think that the *obrock* was an alleviation instead of an aggravation of serfdom. The *obrock* was not a constant feature of Russian bondage; it was introduced when the serf-holder could not profitably apply the labour of his serfs. Outside of the crown dominions it was principally in usage in unfertile countries and near industrial centres. The *obrock* was paid by men only from the age of 18 to the age of 55 and amounted to an average of from 20 to 50 shillings according to the skill of the serf. In order to satisfy this *direct tax* the peasant was, as a rule, obliged to leave his home for a part of the year, and often for years, in search of employment in the towns and thus have to condemn himself to the horrors of Russian factories. To the hardships of serfdom, then, the *obrock* superadded the miseries of proletarian life. The interest of the English debt, called national, because paid by the nation, amounted in 1881 to £29,275,263; according to the census of 1881 the population numbered 34,788,814 souls; so that every English person, young or old, male or female was bound to pay under the name of taxes and imports, direct and indirect, an *obrock* of 17 shillings to support the Money-lords in idleness; the *obrock* for an English family of five persons (parents and 3 children) amounted to 85 shillings. Thus the family of the free born Englishman paid a superior *obrock* to the capitalist classes than did the family of a Russian serf to his master. This is how — "slavery which is characterised by how much one labours for other benefit than his own" — has been on the decrease in Great Britain, "the land of the free."

The capitalists are well advised in making a great philosopher of Mr. Herbert Spencer, for he is ready at any time to demonstrate by learnedly scientific and deeply philosophical reasonings, that if employers condemn men, women and children to hard labour in mines and factories, they do so not for the extorting of compulsory labour, but from mere philanthropy; it is to prevent the poor from being idle; for they know that idleness is the mother of vices, and that he who works prays. Of course this giving of labour to the poor means profit for the capitalists, but the millions of pounds they pocket annually are the reward of their "golden conduct." This Christian feeling impelled Mr. Bright and other leaders of the Liberal and Radical parties to oppose the ten hours' bill and impels Mr. Spencer to denounce the factory laws which protect women and children against the pitiless greed of their employers. These laws are compulsory laws, they prevent capitalists from extorting from their hands as much free labour as they would wish. These laws are a scandal and a shame; a blot on Liberal England; an outrage to capitalist liberty!

If slavery is characterised (on that point we are at one) by compulsory labour for the benefit of others; in no society whatever, or at any time, whether in the feudal ages or in times of slavery, has a greater amount of compulsory labour been extracted from the producing classes. The slave-holder, even in the worst time of slavery, did not overwork his slave when young, because the slave was valuable cattle to him, not to be used up too quickly; the pious Brights have no such fear; the enquiry on "Children's Employment," has shown that before passing the factory laws, it was customary with manufacturers to keep children of seven and eight years old, during twelve, fourteen and more hours at work, resorting to the lash, to dippings into cold water and other such amenities. to prevent them from sleeping. These children being free-born Britons and not the property of any Bright or Cobden, it mattered little whether they lived or died.

Slavery is a very rude system of extorting compulsory labour, which ceases to pay, when great industry makes its appearance. Whether the slave be young or old, in or out of work, his master is compelled to feed him; the capitalist is under no such compulsion. When work is slack he sends his hands into the streets to beg and fill their bellies with staring at the ribs of beef and legs of mutton in the butchers' shops.

Although the philanthropists of our century have invented and applied the cellular system of imprisonment, copied just now from civilised Europe by barbarous Russia: although great philosophers like Mr. Herbert Spencer, patronise the lash and tread wheels, nevertheless, we may boast of living in a humane age: working men, unlike slaves, are no longer compelled to work under the lash. This worn-out instrument of torture has been replaced by a more efficacious and refined one — by hunger, that cat-o'-nine-tails, which drives men, women, and children into the factories and mines. It is because Mr. Spencer belongs to the happy few who are not doomed to compulsory labour for the maintenance of the idle classes in luxury that he is so blind to the *present* slavery and so wide awake with regard to the "Coming Slavery."

Mr. Herbert Spencer denounces Communism not only as the future restorer of slavery but as the inventor and introducer of Bureaucracy. Is the great philosopher so hopelessly blind that when he cashes a cheque or takes a railway ticket he fails to catch sight of whole armies of clerks or bureaucrats? Does he believe that banks,

railways and other commercial and industrial enterprises can dispense with clerks and officials any more than the post, the telegraph, the naval and military establishments, and other industrial enterprises already carried on by the State? As far as bureaucracy is concerned, what is the difference between the enterprises of the State and those of limited companies? In both, part of the work is done by clerks, officials, or bureaucrats (the name will not alter the function), they are salaried workers equally with the carpenters, postmen, engineers, skilled and unskilled labourers employed in them; no more than the manual workers do they reap all the fruits of their exertions; they have to divide the same with the State or with the shareholders, whose duty does not consist in working but in confiscating the produce of others' work.

What characterises capitalistic production, whether done under the control of the State or of private capitalists, is that the producer (manual or intellectual, skilled or unskilled) has no interest in the prosperity of the enterprise in which he is employed. What interest has the engineer or ticket clerk of any railway that the expenses should be covered twice or thrice by the receipts? What benefit do the compositor and the penny-a-liner reap when the *Daily Telegraph* increases its sale from one to ten thousand? When their salaries are paid, the employer thinks that nothing more is due to the employee. The capitalist system leaves to the producer one only interest in the production, his wages: so long as they are paid him he does not care whether the business thrives or barely makes a shift to live. But if all the shareholders, landlords and other drones of society were suppressed, then the producer would share the profits with no useless giver of work; no longer working as paid hands, but as joint-partners, they would have an interest in the success of the undertaking. Even a bourgeois philosopher will understand that any enterprise is more likely to succeed when it is worked by its owners than by wage-slaves. At present the producer works in a devil-may-care way and he is right in doing so; but in a communistic society, his own interest will make him do his best; self-interest, not to speak of nobler sentiments, ignored by bourgeois philosophers, will replace hunger and the lash employed till now for extorting compulsory labour. Self-interest is the alchemy that will get golden conduct out of the producing classes.

Mr. Spencer complains of the expensiveness of maintaining the necessary officials and clerks when land, banks, factories and other instruments of production shall be nationalised, but our present directors, managers and other officials of banks, railways, &c., are they not maintained by us notwithstanding that the instruments of production are not yet nationalised? But if the great philosopher is so bent on economy why does he not complain of the cost of the ever growing domestic class?

Karl Marx, in his great work, *Das Kapital*, called attention to the importance of that class analysing the figures given by the Census of 1861, he finds in Wales and in England, that:

The domestic class numbered	1,208,648	individuals
The agricultural class	1,098,261	
Working men employed in textile factories	642,607	
in mines 565,835	total industry	1,605,440
in metal works		396,998

Thus in 1861 the domestic class in England and Wales, that is the class doing no productive work but maintained for ministering to the private wants of the capitalist classes was greater than the agricultural class and three fourths of the number of the workers employed in three of the most important industries. Since 1861 the domestic class has been always on the increase. The following figures are for Great Britain.

Classes	1861	1871	1881	Rate of Increase In 10 years	% Decrease In 20 years
Domestic	1,367,782	1,633,514	1,803,810	+10.4	+31.9
Agricultural	2,010,454	1,657,138	1,383,184	-15.9	-31.2
Industrial	5,184,201	5,940,028	6,373,367	+7.3	+22.9

In the twenty years from 1861 to 1881, the agricultural class decreased in the same ratio that the domestic class increased. This evil, the increase of the domestic class, is the magnificent result of the development of capitalist civilisation. These figures ought to reassure the "great philosopher," for no communistic society will have to maintain so numerous a body of officials as the present non-producing domestic class.

In the mutual admiration society founded by the Darwinians, Mr. Herbert Spencer is lauded as a "great philosopher;" all things being relative, he may be such for the evolutionists. The Socialists neither purpose nor wish to disturb them in their Pickwickian performances: but if Mr. Herbert Spencer desires to have his philosophical merits uncontested, let him keep from meddling with scientific Socialism and social questions, let him confine himself to the compiling of confused, ponderous and unreadable books, surcharged with unimportant facts, ill-studied and selected without discrimination. Socialists at all events, he may be sure, will not interfere with his *self-imposed labour*; on the contrary they owe him all thanks for the services he has rendered and renders to the world at large in cudgelling the dull heads of his addle-brained friends and admirers, the middle-class men.