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Herbert Spencer's Evolutionary Individualism[1]

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I. Introduction

Conventional wisdom typically holds that social evolutionary views are committed to the positive treatment of interdependent relations and related advancement of various social members. The social group advances because its constituent parts (individual persons) advance in some sort of symbiotic fashion. Accordingly, many prominent social evolutionary theorists advocate various sorts of communitarian-style sociopolitical arrangements. For instance, Karl Marx's communist ideal (a social evolutionary notion) nicely illustrates the manner in which an assumption of socially evolving interdependent relations can manifest itself into an endorsement of communitarian sociopolitical arrangements. Alternatively, late nineteenth century British thinker Herbert Spencer challenges this conventional wisdom by arguing that social evolutionary advancement necessarily involves the freedom and action of individual persons acting in autonomous

[1] This paper is an outgrowth of my Masters thesis (*The Rich Get Richer: Social Evolutionary Thinking In the Operation of Redistribution Programs*, 2003). I would like to thank Professors Woodman, Waggoner and Hollinger for their guidance and support on that project.

(as opposed to relationally interdependent) individual capacities. Spencer advocates, consistent with his social evolutionary theoretical synthesis, a scheme of individualistic conservative[2] ethics that disdains almost all governmental interference into the lives and workings of persons.

The purpose of this paper is to present and consider Spencer's often neglected blending of (social) evolutionary analysis with a conservative individualistically minded ethical scheme. My approach in this examination will be largely descriptive, however when appropriate I do offer critical comment of Spencer's thought. This paper is not written to endorse Spencer's proposed blending (at many times my critical evaluation raises specific problems with Spencer's thought). Nonetheless, Spencer's thought is extremely valuable and is worthy of much more attention than it has been afforded as yet. I suggest the reader consider the following questions as I present and evaluate Spencer's thought. 1) How convincing was Spencer at challenging the communitarian-style conventional wisdom of most social evolutionary arguments, does he actually offer a viable alternative to conventional wisdom or does he mistakenly assign an individualistic ethical scheme when none is warranted? 2) Why do contemporary conservatives (those most likely to support Spencer's ethical stance) often neglect Spencer?

II. The Bias Against and Neglect of Spencer

Herbert Spencer's eclectic and conservative social and political thought, while having considerable influence near the turn of the twentieth century, exists in near obscurity at

[2] Here I use the notion of conservatism in a modern, more individualistic, sense. Classical conservatives are, of course, prone to stress communitarian values. Spencer, interestingly, often refutes a communitarian ethic. This hints to a difficulty of using the language of conservative and liberal. Spencer, for instance, is likely to be labeled as a conservative – but the contemporary notion of conservative is better matched with classical liberalism than classical conservatism. This is important to note as one may refer to Spencer in a broadly accurate way as either a classical liberal, modern conservative, or libertarian.

the outset of the twenty-first.[3] Most contemporary social and political thinkers have found more agreeable, i.e., more liberal and communitarian, targets of analysis. Nonetheless, Jonathan Turner, like myself, sees little substantive reason why the thought of Herbert Spencer has undergone neglect and largely fallen out of favor. As Turner (1985:7) notes,

> At a time when social theorists genuflect at the sacred works of St. Marx, St. Durkheim, and St. Weber, we spit on the grave of Spencer because he held a moral philosophy repugnant to the political biases of many contemporary theorists. … One finds far less moralizing in Spencer's sociology than that of either Durkheim or Marx; and yet we continue to ignore Spencer.

Spencer is neglected because his conservative individualistic politics are disliked on a normative level, not because he extrapolated political implications from his theories. As Turner suggested, if we were to dismiss social and political theorists who noted the political implications from their theories then we would have very few thinkers to consider.

One might suggest that the quality of other's thought, *i.e.*, Marx and Durkheim is just more impressive than Spencer's contributions. But without engaging in a long comparative analysis, it suffices to say that this explanation is overly simplistic and likely not defensible. To note just one instance that will resurface as this paper moves along consider the contemporary emphasis placed on Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. Spencer offered a nearly identical distinction that he labeled as militant and industrial society decades before Durkheim's oft-referenced distinction. Why neglect Spencer and reference Durkheim's later formulated version of the same idea?

[3] Spencer's theoretical influence began to decline as early as the 1930's. Consider the opening line to Talcott Parsons influential, *The Structure of Social Action*, "Who now reads Spencer?" The question, for Parsons, was rhetorical. No one reads Spencer, because Spencer was an evolutionist, and evolutionism was

Turner contends that when ethical thought and sociopolitical theory are meshed the true value of Spencer's work, namely his evolutionary synthesis and functionalist social analysis, is often neglected because of the bias directed against his conservative individualistic ethical stance. Thus, in order to appropriately consider Spencer's valuable contributions, we should focus on his social theory or ethical thought, but not both simultaneously if we wish to fully "appreciate" his work. While Turner's argument is well taken it is important to consider that expressions of theory are made "real" through the piggybacking thoughts that flow, according to the theorist, from the theory.[4] After all, Spencer himself took many opportunities (*Social Statistics, Principles of Sociology, Man Versus the State)* to explain why it was that his philosophical evolutionary synthesis led logically to an individualistic ethical position.

Turner's solution toward dealing with the oft neglected Spencer unfortunately cannot help us address one of the more interesting aspects of Spencer's thought, namely, how did Spencer brilliantly blend social evolutionism with an exceptionally harsh treatment of governmental intervention? The answer, as will be explored, is dependent upon the individualistic telos of Spencer's social evolutionary system. It is important to remember as suggested by Hofstadter (1992:35-6) that, "His (Spencer's) social ideas are intelligible only in the setting of his philosophy; his social laws were but special cases of his general principles." As valiantly as it might be attempted, the breach of Spencer's evolutionary synthesis with his social thought is a battle to be waged in frustration. Spencer's ethical conservatism exists only because of his larger evolutionary synthesis, or

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to be rejected in favor of Parsons's analysis of social action. Parsons refused to give Spencer his fair due as the first sociologist to offer a compelling account of functionalism.

[4] Social theory and social philosophy can be roughly distinguished by noting that the later is largely concerned with creating a system of "what ought to be," while social theory offers a conceptual image of

visa-versa, but in either event they are separable only at the risk of misunderstanding both integral components of Spencer's complete thought. Turner is right to suggest that the bias exhibited toward Spencer is directly related with his conservatism, but he is wrong to suggest that an amenable solution is to narrowly focus on Spencer's work and act as if Spencer did not mention the conservative particulars of his general evolutionary account. We should hold out the possibility that Spencer's evolutionary synthesis is theoretically valuable while perhaps his application of his own theory in specific instances is less satisfactory. But this is not to neglect or ignore either the general principles or the specific ethical instantiations in Spencer's thought.

III. Spencer and the Communitarian

Herbert Spencer's brand of evolutionism greatly altered the manner in which the relation between social evolution and ethics is understood.[5] Most notably his thought served to include individualistic sentiment as a potential correlate of social evolutionism. Notable social evolutionists, such as Marx, Veblen, Ward, and Kropotkin, were quick to emphasize the collectivist implications of evolutionary arguments, *i.e.* that species evolve and progress through collective, as opposed to individualistic, mechanisms. Kropotkin, for instance, would stress that the mechanism driving social evolution was cooperation (mutual aid) as opposed to competition. Kropotkin (1902: 75) diligently advocated the evolutionary virtue of cooperation as he noted:

> Don't compete! Competition is always injurious to the species, and you have plenty of resources to avoid it. That is the tendency of nature, not always realized in full, but always present. That is the watchword which comes to us from the bush, the forest, the river, the ocean. Therefore, combine practice mutual aid! That is the surest means for giving to each and to all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of existence and progress, bodily, intellectual, moral. That is what nature teaches us.

"what is." Sociological theory is *not* a normative endeavor, but instead a task largely concerned with matching (describing) abstract thoughts that best (in a descriptive sense) match reality.

[5] For instance, Spencer's thought stimulated the very influential Social Darwinist movement.

Spencer, on the other hand, used his notion of social evolutionism to support: individualism, laissez faire economics, the abolishment of "poor laws," and the general restriction of most governmental intervention. Does social evolution occur because individuals cooperate with one another or because they compete against one another? This question expresses one of the most pressing concerns of social evolutionary thought. I do not propose to answer the question here, or suggest that any one social evolutionary thinker has offered an adequate answer. But it is worth noting that a full and satisfying answer to the question would likely be quite complex and stress instances of healthy cooperation and healthy competition. The answers provided by Spencer and Kropotkin represent polarized extremes.

The late nineteenth century American thinker Oliver Wendell Holmes placed Spencer's intellectual influence second only to Darwin when he expressed his doubt that, "Any writer of English except Darwin has done so much to affect our whole way of thinking about the universe (Hofstadter, 1992; 32)." The respect afforded Spencer's evolutionary synthesis allowed him to credibly lambaste the liberal communitarian. As Spencer (1868: 354) argued:

> Spurious philanthropists who, to prevent present, would entail greater misery on future generations. Blind to the fact that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating faithless members … in their eagerness to prevent the really-salutary sufferings that surround us, these sigh-wise and groan-foolish people bequeath to posterity a continually-increasing curse.

Spencer's idea here is that by thwarting competition and "preventing the present," we actually cause more suffering in the long run. Why then do we try to "prevent the present?" The answer might be, because it pains us to observe suffering, and thus we co-opt nature so that we can express sympathy and compassion and thereby alleviate our

own psychological discomfort. The vicious cycle resulting from this co-opting of nature, for Spencer, is that it actually creates (via evolutionary processes) more suffering than would have occurred if the "do-gooder" had only suppressed their desire to interfere with the competitive aspects of human society. We should care about the whole of Spencer's thought because he came as close to representing evolutionary ethical conservative as any thinker ever has. Now, I would like to turn toward offer an account of Spencer's basic evolutionary view.

IV. Spencer's Basic Evolutionary View

Spencer viewed the evolutionary processes governing the universe, including the social order, as a systems process involving: aggregation or evolution, differentiation and integration of elements, a state of equilibrium, and finally dissolution. Thus, the breakdown (dissolution) of an evolutionary trend is necessarily built into the process. As Spencer (1880: 414) explained, there is

> a process toward equilibrium. That universal co-existence of antagonistic forces which, as we before saw, necessitates the universality of rhythm, and which, as we before saw, necessitates decomposition of every force into divergent forces, at the same time necessitates the ultimate establishment of a balance. Every motion being a motion under resistance is continually suffering deductions, and these unceasing deductions finally result in the cessation of motion.

While it might be possible to objectively evaluate the evolutionary trajectories of various sociopolitical systems, in terms of desirability and survivability it would be a mistake to imagine that *any* evolutionary trajectory was immune from eventual balance and dissolution. There can be no finish line, in history or elsewhere, if the processes governing advancement are inherently devised so that a pendulum-like equilibrium *must* occur.[6]

[6] For this reason Spencer often used the word equilibration to describe what most biologists refer to as adaptation.

Spencer, like his predecessor Hegel, desired to create a complete philosophical evolutionary social synthesis, but unlike Hegel his approach was grounded in British empiricism rather than German idealism (as such his system was much more in tune with the "realistic" pragmatic disposition of most Americans). Spencer maintained that societies begin with very simple forms of organization then advance to the stage of doubly compound societies, and then finally advanced towards a trebly compound form of social organization. Spencer's primary goal in his evolutionary synthesis is to explain the change from homogenous to heterogeneous social structure. As Spencer (1891: 10) argued:

> It is settled beyond dispute that organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous. Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of life upon its surface, in the development of society, of government, of manufactures, of commerce, of language, literature, sciences, art, this same evolution from the simple to the complex, through successive differentiations. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, is that in which progress essentially consists.

If Spencer was such an influential and impressive evolutionary thinker, why do we hear about Darwinism as opposed to Spencerianism? The answer is not that Darwin was dealing with the biological while Spencer was dealing with the social. Recall that Spencer's social application of his evolutionary synthesis to human social order was but the application toward specific instances of his general evolutionary synthesis. Spencer's evolutionism was meant to be useful in explaining the change of *all* natural systems, human social order is just one specific instance. The likely answer is that Spencer was intellectually committed to grounding his evolutionism in Lamarckian evolutionary principles, and as we will see in the next section this commitment cost Spencer intellectual prevalence as the "father of evolutionary theory."

V. Lamarckianism, Darwinism and Spencer

One reason can explain why Charles Darwin, rather than Jean Baptiste de Lamarck, has come to be recognized as the force behind most contemporary understandings of evolutionary theory, Darwin's pivotal reliance upon natural selection as the mechanism by which to explain the evolutionary process.[7] Lamarck, writing in the late eighteenth century, maintained in his treatise on the law of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, that evolutionary change occurred via "the transmission to offspring of all changes undergone by the parent generation."[8] Offspring are thus viewed as biological expressions of both parental genes and actions *i.e.*, if a parent developed the skill to be a talented musician then their children would inherent this "trait." Likewise, if a parent developed the trait of having a "criminal mind," their child would inherit this same trait as well.[9]

Writing about the effect of Lamarckian evolutionary theory and social evolutionism in American thought George Stocking (1962: 241) discussed the profound effect the doctrine had upon Comte, Morgan, Spencer, and social evolutionism in general:

> The Lamarckianism of American social science also had sources within the tradition of nineteenth century American social thought. A number of its major figures – Auguste Comte, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Herbert Spencer – were either implicitly or avowed believers in the heritabilty of acquired characteristics. Comte spoke of the doctrine as an "incontestable principle"; Morgan if

[7] Darwin never argued that Lamarck's notion of evolution was *wrong* in every micro case. Instead, Darwin argued that on a specific individual level Lamarckian emphasis towards acquired characteristics could mean a great deal, but on a universal macro level the notion of natural selection must take precedence.
[8] It would be inaccurate to assess the scientific and cultural shift from Lamarckian evolutionary theory to Darwinism as a "smooth" transition. While some remnants of Lamarckian theory still exist today, Darwinism is the much more scientifically accepted interpretation of the evolutionary process. This shift in scientific opinion was neither universal nor widespread with the publication of Darwin's primary evolutionary treatise. It took nearly seventy-five years for Darwinism to replace Lamarckianism as the accepted scientific evolutionary paradigm. And even today Stephen Gould's notion of punctuated equilibrium has challenged Darwinism as the evolutionary paradigm.
[9] A strict reading of Lamarckian theory tends to suggest that Eugenics (social programs designed to control and direct procreation) might be very useful in *designing* society. Eugenics can be thought of in two different senses. 1) Positive eugenics which suggests encouraging the "fit" to reproduce at higher rates than the "unfit," and 2) negative eugenics which suggests preventive measures so that the "unfit" either reproduce at lesser rates than the "fit," or do not reproduce at all.

> he did not specifically embrace the belief, made statements which can be given meaning only in its terms; Spencer was the father of Neo-Lamarckian biology, and defended the inheritance of acquired characteristics is long winded controversy with August Weismann in 1893. Like many other nineteenth century social theorists, each of these men embraced some form of unilateral social evolution; each felt that the normal evolution of human societies proceeded through a single progressive sequence of social or intellectual stages.

Stocking (Ibid.) continued this line of reasoning by proposing two major outcomes from such a dependence on Lamarckian thought:

> Although by no means central to social evolutionary theory, the inheritance of acquired characteristics was able to play at least two roles in such a framework. Comte used the idea to explain the origin of racial differences, which in turn helped to explain deviations from the normal unilateral sequence of development. And for writers whose evolutionism, unlike Comte's, was biological as well as social, it provided a link between social and intellectual progress and organic mental evolution; indeed, for some writers it was the major mechanism of the evolution of the mind.

This thoughtful treatment of Lamarckian evolutionary influence towards social thought should serve as a reminder that evolution is a vast notion with many different modes of interpretation.

Charles Darwin, however, grew skeptical with Lamarck's evolutionary design, *i.e.* the notion of "artificial selection" based upon the *complete* inheritability of traits from one generation to the next. This skepticism led him to reason that something beyond merely a genetic generational inheritance must account for long-term macro evolutionary changes. Darwin's five-year South American journey on the Beagle, in particular his experiments with finches, led him to affirm his belief that something much more than generational inheritance was, at least on a macro scale, working toward the *physical* development of all animal species, humans included. Darwin (1868: 10), while writing nine years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), recalls how his South American travels focused his attention towards the,

> Inexplicable problem (of) how the necessary degree of modification could have been effected (for evolution to occur), and it would have thus remained forever, had I not studied domestic productions, and thus acquired a just idea of the power of selection. As soon as I had fully realized this idea, I saw, on reading Malthus on *Population*, that natural selection was the

> inevitable result of the rapid increase of all organic beings; for I was prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence by having long studied the habits of animals.

Some mechanism, other than artificial selection (simple single-generation reproduction), had to explain such wide scale adaptations in the human population; thus, from this concern Darwin developed the ideas surrounding the "struggle for existence" and "natural selection."

Writing in the *Origin of Species*, Darwin (1859:115) clearly presented the conception of natural selection in the following fashion[10]:

> Owing to this struggle for life, any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to any other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving, for, of the many individuals which are periodically born, but a small number can survive. I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term natural selection.

Peter Bowler (1976:631-2) described the process of natural selection in the following way:

> The essence of natural selection lies in the differential rates of reproduction which result from the success or failure of the variations occurring within a species. Animals with a favorable variation, i.e., one that helps to adjust to a changing environment, will get more food and be healthier than the average, and will thus tend to produce more offspring sharing their particular character. Conversely, animals with an unfavorable variation will get less food, they will be less healthy and have fewer offspring, and in harsh circumstances will be eliminated altogether.

Darwin was not the first thinker to toil with the mechanism of natural selection as underpinning human evolutionary development. Compare, for instance, just how similar Darwin's explanation of natural selection is with Spencer's evolutionary thought. Writing just seven years before the publication of the *Origin of Species* Spencer (1852:499-500) noted:

> All mankind in turn subject themselves more or less to the discipline described; they may or may not advance under it, but in the nature of things, only those who do advance under it eventually

[10] Darwin's intellectual creation and development of "natural selection" was not a product of serendipity. Darwin, in fact, began developing the idea of natural selection sometime in early 1838 – nearly twenty years before he published the *Origin of Species*. Natural selection was a secret idea, which Darwin highly guarded from all but his most trusted friends.

> survive … for as those prematurely carried off must, in the average of cases, be those in whom the power of self- preservation is least, it unavoidably follows that those left behind to continue the race are those in whom the power of self-preservation is greatest –are the selected of their generation.

Spencer offered the idea of natural selection in his writing prior to Darwin's very similar conception; his blunder came in not carrying his idea to fruition. Spencer himself was to heavily wed with Lamarckian evolutionary thought to enable his appreciation of the revolutionary notion of natural selection, which Darwin would soon capitalize upon. Robert Young (1969: 137) maintained that Spencer's refusal to adopt "natural section" as the mechanism of evolution was a product of the ease at which a Lamarckian view could be contorted with other areas of human inquiry:

> Spencer says in the preface to separately published edition of 1887 that the reason he had clung so tenaciously to the inheritance of acquired characteristics in biological theory was because it had such important implications for psychology, ethics and sociology.

Spencer, by not separating biological from social interests, was unwilling to see the force of his own best idea – natural selection. Darwin, on the other hand, would have little problem focusing strictly on biological issues. For instance, after Darwin's study was cleaned proceeding his death a copy of *Das Kapital*, personally given by Karl Marx, was found with the pages set and apparently unread. Darwin was a natural scientist, and worrying with an historical analysis of class conflict was irrelevant to his work. Spencer, on the other hand, could simply not avoid what he understood as an insatiable linkage between biological and social theory. What Darwin likely saw as human sociopolitical history largely detached from the processes of natural selection, Spencer understood as part of the same broad rubric of his more general evolutionary synthesis. While writing in his autobiography Spencer (1904: 389-90) recalled his most regretful oversight:

> It seems strange that, having long entertained a belief in the development of species through the operation of natural causes, I should have failed to see that the truth indicated in the above quoted passages, must hold, not of mankind only, but of all animals, and must everywhere be working

> changes among them. … Yet I completely overlooked this obvious corollary – was blind that here was a universally-operative factor in the development of species.

Aside from the idea of natural selection, the "struggle for existence" represents Darwin's second impacting contribution often cited as a linkage between biological evolutionism and social thought. The "struggle for existence" is often erroneously viewed as a simple way to suggest "raw tooth and claw struggle."[11] This simplistic view, however, as pointed out by Peter Bowler (1976: 632) misses the more complex dualistic nature of evolutionary *struggle*.

> The one (view of the struggle for existence) which represents Darwin's most significant insight relates to the competition between the different individuals of the same species to see which of them shall survive and reproduce. This is the real core of the idea of a struggle for existence; for natural selection to work at all, those individuals with favorable variations must compete with and supplant those which are not so favored. This crucially important element if intraspecies competition I shall call "struggle (a)." It is evident from Darwin, however, that "struggle (a)" is related to another concept, namely, that of the struggle of the species as a whole against its environment. This emerges as the struggle against challenges imposed by the changing nature and limited supply of the other species which serve as food. This concept of interspecies struggle I shall call "struggle (b)."

Spencer (1898: 530) suggested that the "struggle for existence" would better be understood if labeled the "survival of the fittest," an interpretation that Darwin subsequently accepted. The change in language here has important social and political implications. The distinction appears subtle enough, but a "struggle for existence" might be a battle to be waged in cooperative endeavor. The question seems open as to whether the struggle is cooperative or individualistic. Alternatively, a "survival of the fittest" sounds much more like an individualistic hierarchical battle. Along these lines, it is worth noting that interspecies struggle (struggle a) and intraspecies (struggle b) might warrant different expressions of natural selection. The type of struggle involved with competing over a scarce environmental niche with another species is most likely different

than that of a particular species struggling amongst itself to put forward its most fit members.

Bowler's dualistic treatment of struggle is especially important for human concerns, as much of "struggle (b)" would seem to be shaped by social policies socially settled to answer, various sociopolitical concerns. Given that evolutionary advance is seen as beneficial, then it does not seem far-fetched for governments to pursue policies that help along this advance by fostering cooperative mechanisms that aid the "struggle for existence." In fact, this seems to be exactly the type of notion that "struggle (b)" would endorse. But how is this advance helped along? By helping to ensure that the "fit" (however this is understood) prosper and have more fit children. Why, then, assist the unfit (however this is understood)? Spencer (and I suspect many contemporary conservatives) would use such a question to challenge governmental economic and social intervention. Here, one can say that we should assist the "unfit" so that they may become "fit." Humans are in the unique position (among animals) to use medical technologies to alter the status of the unfit. At this juncture the analysis largely turns empirical as opposed to theoretical. Either the unfit, however they are conceptualized, can become fit through governmental assistance or they cannot. One may, of course, reject the theoretical underpinnings of evolutionism as applied to persons through the processes of natural selection. But, even if the underpinnings are granted the empirical question noted above remains in contention.

Spencer is often erroneously labeled and thought to be a Social Darwinist. In fact, he was a "Social Darwinist" in name recognition only. Indeed, Spencer was not a

[11] I say erroneously because, as pointed out by Opler and Dobzhansky, often natural selection occurs because of geographic separation as opposed to struggle per se.

Darwinist at all. Spencer was a Lamarckian, consistently his biological and social evolutionary synthesis stressed Lamarckian –not Darwinian- evolutionary principles. Accordingly, if acquired characteristics are the primary mechanism of evolutionism, then it makes sense why Spencer would have been so inclined to have a detest for the "undeserving poor," or the "good for nothings" as he was prone to label them in his writing. One need only assume that the poor are responsible for the development of the characteristics that led to their plight, and that by having children their children would inherit the same disadvantageous traits. In the following section I provide some insight into the connection between Spencer's background and his strong individualistic sentiment. I hope that this connection will set the stage for better insight into understanding Spencer's conservative individualistic tendencies.

VI. Developing Spencer

Spencer's early childhood involved a strain of intellectual and religious influences. His mother, a devote Methodist, would regularly take young Spencer to Sunday religious service. Spencer's father, on the other hand, had decided to leave the Methodist church, and attend –less supernaturally inclined- Quaker meetings.[12] Instead of being absolutely pulled in one of these directions, Spencer was socialized into both, very different, spiritual settings. Later in his life while compiling his autobiography (1904) Spencer would speak glowingly about his father's influence, and give only scarce mention to his mother. For whatever else socialization agents produced in Spencer childhood, they certainly created an extremely individualistic and non-conformist young man. At age thirteen Spencer was sent to live with his Uncle. After three days, however, a disgruntled

Spencer decided to leave with no money and little food. After three days of near continuous walking he arrived home in Derby. This incident was to set the individualistic tone prominent in the whole of Spencer's thought.

Spencer's three-day march back towards Derby did not produce his desired effect. He was sent back to Somerset, were he would continue his study of: Euclid geometry, Latin, French, Greek, trigonometry, mechanics, chemistry, and political economy, until he was sixteen. At the age of sixteen Spencer would cease formal schooling, and take a job serving as an engineer for the railroad. When the voluminous quantity, quality, and breath of Spencer's work is considered, it is astounding that his formal schooling ended before his seventeenth birthday.

Spencer's lack of academic credentials produced both positive and negative consequences for the treatment of his work. While he gained a great deal of popular respect, large potions of his works were strenuously critiqued in academic circles, perhaps a greater deal of critique than a fellow *academic* colleague would have endured. In particular, the American pragmatist William James –professor at Harvard- would devote countless lectures to the thrashing of Spencer's work. Apparently Spencer's feeling towards academics was mutual. He rarely used academic sources in his writings, and when he did most were references to obscure thinkers. Further, when Spencer did read the thoughts of others he usually found them, as in his reading of Kant, to be "rubbish." Spencer's distance from academia, however, gave him a considerable amount of intellectual sway with those skeptical of academics and intellectualism generally. If a

[12] These meetings were often frequented by some of the most respected thinkers in England. For instance, Spencer, in his early adolescence, would meet and discussed issues of the day with Erasmus Darwin – Charles Darwin's grandfather.

profound social theorist such as Spencer had no need for higher education, then what good was it to anyone?

Spencer would rail against state involvement in education. He did not need the government for education, and he used his self-sufficient style of learning to argue against the intervention of government into the education of its citizens. Spencer (1868: 366-7), for instance, argued:

> Legislators exhibit to us the design and specification of a state-machine, made up of masters, ushers, inspectors, and councils, to be worked by a due proportion of taxes, and to be plentifully supplied with raw material in the shape of little boys and girls, out of which it is to grind a population of well-trained men and women who shall be useful members of society.

For Spencer, public education was little more than a device the government could easily use to thwart the individuality of its citizens in exchange for "useful tools." In many of his diatribes, stressing the "evils of government," Spencer could freely voice what he understood as the logical anti-governmental extensions of his evolutionism without being a hypocrite – Spencer never held any governmental post or academic position.

VII. Spencer's Tension

Tim Gray argues that there exists in Spencer's thought a tension between the organicist conception of social order, and (potentially) inconsistent views towards individualism.[13] Thus it is possible to read many portions of Spencer's thought, which sounds very much like the views of a liberal communitarian. As Kaldenburg (1977: 35) explained, Spencer's general evolutionary synthesis as applied to human society suggested that:

> Finally evolution occurs sociologically in human societies where instead of each man fulfilling all the roles need to survive, each man assumes one of the roles to the exclusion of the others. By assuming one role he becomes able to perform its tasks better and at the same time becomes dependent upon others in society in order to survive.

[13] Gray's book, *The Political Philosophy of Herbert Spencer* (1996), is a wonderful treatment of the tension between Spencer's adherence to both organicism and extreme individualism.

If one were to use, as Spencer did, an analogy wrapped in organicism to describe social order, how could one avoid relying heavily upon the notion of interdependence –the very notion that liberal communitarians argue represent the mechanism of natural selection as applied to social order(s)? Spencer, after all, in his *Principles of Sociology* asks his own rhetorical question, "what is society" with the quipped answer "society is an organism."[14] In addition, Spencer often supported the practice of certain types of governmental intervention. In regards to public sanitation, for instance, Spencer (1902:157) commented:

> Public control of individuals is needful in the sphere of hygiene as in other spheres … In a town, care of the roads and pavements must obviously be undertaken by a public authority, as also sewage.

How can such a position be reconciled with Spencer's general anti-interventionist stance? Such reconciliation might not exist, and if it could its examination would likely broach the trajectory of the scope here. It would be impossible to argue that Spencer was a consistent thinker as government intervention was concerned, he certainly was not. His arguments, nonetheless, can, when Spencer is in the individualist mood, form a very strong case for conservative evolutionism. Nonetheless, there is definitely a tension in Spencer's writing between the interdependence of social order and the individual nature of persons.

VIII. Spencer and Militant Social Order

Recall from the earlier discussion of Spencer's evolutionism that he viewed evolution to occur as a process wherein evolutionary change comes about with a shift from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, from the simple to the complex. In other words, social evolution is a result in change from the

[14] I found this reference to Spencer in, Kaldenburg (1977: 37)

similar to the dissimilar. This application of social evolution, Spencer reasons, takes place as society evolved from the militant to an industrial social stage. In describing the militant stage of social order (a stage that appears strikingly similar to Durkheim's notion of mechanical solidarity) Spencer (1882: 571-72) places heavy emphasis upon the lack of individuality:

> His life is not his own, but is at the disposal of society. So long as he is capable of bearing arms he has no alternative but to fight when called on … Of course, with this goes possession of such liberty only as military obligations allow. He is free to pursue his private ends only when the tribe or nation has no need for him; and when it has need of him, his actions from hour to hour must conform not to his will but to the public will. So, too, with his property … in the last resort he is obligated to surrender whatever is demanded from the communities use.

For Spencer such a way to live, condemned to serving as little more than a tool for public defense, represents a lesser evolved social order. Certainly such circumstances might not (and probably will not) make for happy people, but it is not clear that they do not allow for social evolution. Interdependence, for Spencer, does not get more complicated; instead (if society is to evolve) it withers away.[15] Thus, for Spencer, the more homogeneous and interdependent the social order under review, then the more we can tend to expect a correspondingly lower level of social evolution. Life in militant society was and is a hindrance to the full capacities of people, for social evolution to occur society must evolve beyond this stage. Spencer (1900: 375-6) makes his disgust for militant society expressly clear as he wrote:

> Advance to man and higher forms of society essentially depend on the decline of the militancy and growth of industrialism. This I hold to be a political truth in comparison with which all other political truths are insignificant.

A perpetually militaristic society disallows social evolution (differentiation). If the state can order its people to kill and die, then accordingly the individuality and differentiation

[15] In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that for Spencer the perfectly evolved society would be one in which all persons were differentiated from one another in relations that do not require dependent relationships.

of people is in a position of constant jeopardy and wholly at the mercy of governmental planners. This is an interesting observation, as the potential or actual military draft (understood in a broad sense) continues to persist in every contemporary nation-state.[16] Such an empirical observation tends to suggest that what we label "complex modern societies" might not be all that dissimilar in a social evolutionary sense (using Spencer's evolutionary analysis) than their "primitive" origins. Certainly, technology has dramatically advanced throughout human history, but it is not clear at all that social evolution has significantly advanced from the militant (homogeneous) toward the industrial (heterogeneous).

Earlier I asked why modern conservatives neglect Spencer. Spencer's critical eye toward the military begins to provide some answers. Typically modern conservatives who stress the individuality and self-reliance of persons also stress a need for a strong military (even if such strength necessitates military conscription). Spencer suggests that these tandem goals (for the standpoint of social evolution) are self-defeating. As Spencer might ask, how is it possible to respect the autonomy and individuality of persons, while at the same time insisting that they owe their very lives to their political community whenever such service is deemed necessary? Modern conservatives can offer answers to this question, but it is not surprising that they shy away from the thinker that presses it.

Towards the end of his life, Spencer became an increasingly indignant anti-war activist. War, for Spencer, was the path of devolution, the path that paved the way for the state to dominate the interests and advancement of people. A sure way to co-opt the change from the similar to the dissimilar. Spencer, for instance, was horrified with

[16] I do not mean to imply here that persons *must* live in social orders organized under the rubric of a nation-state. Nonetheless, for whatever reasons, the prevalence of the nation-state has only become reinforced

British involvement in the Boer war, so much so that he would publicly announce that he was "ashamed of his country."

IX. The Law of Equal Freedom and Evolutionary Individualism

Consistent with a shift to the industrial Spencer formed the "law of equal freedom." That being, everyone has freedom to do as he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.[17] In a perfectly evolved Spencerian evolutionary social synthesis it would be this law that would mark the pathway of human behavior. It is the adherence to this law that best allows society to move from the homogenous to the heterogeneous. Thus if Spencer's evolutionary stage of industrialism is carried to its logical conclusion it is clear why he placed such an importance upon individualism, and at almost every turn found fault in government intervention. Any form of government intervention, which interfered with Spencer's "law of equal freedom," was bound to face his challenge. Only when the individual[18] is free to live under a law of equal freedom can social evolution reach its highest apex.

Spencer (1981: 100) would note that all *progress* is a derivative of individual aspiration and ingenuity,

> That abundant crops now grow were once only wild berries could be gathered, is due to the pursuit of individual satisfactions through many centuries. The progress from wigwams to good houses

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over the past three hundred years, and does not appear to be in danger of extinction any time soon.

[17] Spencer's "law of equal freedom" is almost identical in substance with John Stuart Mill's "harm principle." Interestingly, when Spencer was running low on funds Mill (in an act of academic cooperation) lent Spencer a sizable amount of money. Interesting to note is that both Spencer's law of equal freedom and Mill's harm principle sound like something that the contemporary political libertarian will purport as a basic political principle.

[18] Spencer, for all his emphasis toward the individual, never actually offered a clear definition of individuality. Instead he explained (1898: 249); "there is … no definition of individuality that is not unobjectionable. All we can do is make the best practicable compromise." Spencer offers the compromise of considering the individual to be independently self-sufficient, a few pages latter he writes, "to consider as an individual any organized mass which is capable of independently carrying on." These passages present an interesting question; that is, do individual humans exist? Americans are socialized to believe, of course, that the answer must be a resounding yes. This answer, however, ought to be open to more discussion than it is usually afforded.

> has resulted from wishes to increase personal welfare; and towns have arisen under like promptings. Beginning with traffic at gatherings on occasions of religious festivals, the trading organization, now so extensive and complex, has been produced entirely by men's efforts to achieve their private ends. Perpetually, governments have thwarted and deranged the growth, but have in no way furthered it; save by partially discharging their proper function and maintaining social order.[19]

Thus it is through the actions of individual interests that offer force to positive social evolution. Spencer's interpretation of evolutionism would have garnered no less than a grin from Adam Smith. What is to be said, however, of a collective community driven conscious in the process of social evolution? Spencer's (1950: 397) answer to this question, which was asked by both Marx and Durkheim, was to deny the existence of any conscious other than that of "individual conscious."

> It is well that the lives of all parts of an animal should be merged into the life of the whole, because the whole has a corporate consciousness. But it is not so with a society; since its living units do not and cannot lose individual consciousness, and since the community as a whole has no corporate consciousness. This is an everlasting reason why the welfare of citizens cannot rightly be sacrificed to some supposed benefit of the state, and why, on the other hand, the state is to be maintained solely for the benefit of its citizens.

This passage points to an important difference of thought generally separating the individualist from the communitarian. The communitarian understands the individual as an abstraction and the community as real, while the individualist (typically a conservative) taking an almost opposite view treats the individual as real and the community as the abstraction.[20]

Whenever a government (sociopolitical community) attempts to intervene in the interests of one group they will, for Spencer, axiomatically disrupt the law of equal freedom for others. Spencer is right to be concerned that a sociopolitical community could violate the law of equal freedom, but what Spencer did not take seriously enough is

[19] C.f. Ashley and Orenstein pp.121

[20] The idea here is that for the communitarian it is a community of persons that give *content* to an individual person. Individuals detached from social life are real in some trivial sense, but without communities that provide the basis of social norms, social roles, custom, tradition, etc., the individual is not real in any content driven sense that could be understood by social persons.

the consideration that individuals (not necessarily governments or collectives) can also disrupt the law of equal freedom for others. An individual can (and in our world it is often the case does) unjustly harm another individual. In such cases it seems as if governmental intervention is warranted to ensure a return to the law of equal freedom. Further, ensuring this return might necessarily mean some type of governmental intervention. A paradigm case of this might include a criminal and civil court system. Surely governmental intervention in such cases is occurring, but it is occurring so that those wronged by others are compensated and those wronging others punished. A *fair* treatment of the law of equal freedom seems to necessitate *some* governmental intervention.[21]

Spencer argued that taking from one and giving to another, *i.e.*, playing Robin Hood, because such action is considered a "social good," does nothing except make society weaker (the body grows weak if "harmful" agents persist within). Thus, in describing government intervention, Spencer (1868: 366) suggested:

> And yet strange to say, now the truth is recognized by most cultivated people … now more than ever in the history of the world, are they (interventionist) doing all they can to further the survival of the unfittest!

Spencer absolutely despised the state deciding, "who deserves what;" by making any such decision the government was doing nothing more than ensuring that "survival of the

[21] I take this last statement to be intuitively obvious (only the anarchist would deny such a claim). Even the staunchest political libertarian accepts some very limited minimal state responsible for punishing egregious violations of rights. The interesting question, using Spencer's own conceptual analysis, becomes how much governmental intervention is actually necessary to ensure the law of equal freedom? One interesting contemporary position is that of left-libertarianism. This particular political philosophy argues that all persons have some sort of entitlement stake (the interpretations here diverge greatly) in natural resources, while at the same time have full self-ownership in their physical bodies. This view while striving for egalitarian ends, is not consequentalist in nature. Political liberals often speak of redistributing economic and natural resources, taking from one to give to another. The virtue of left-libertarianism is that redistribution as such does not occur. Instead, people are entitled to a share of natural resources, and are not "taking" or having shares "redistributed" as they gain control of *their* natural resources. Understood in

unfittest" would occur. State intervention breeds a sort of paternalism at odds with Spencer's "law of equal freedom." Even as health care is concerned, Spencer (1843: 35) argued that any state intervention is ill advised and insulting to the autonomous person.

> No one has a claim upon the legislature to take that care of his health which he will not take himself … It (health legislation) treats them as so many children. It puts the people into leading strings. Poor things! If we do not look after them they will be going to ignorant quacks for advice, and perhaps get poisoned!

While Spencer did not coin the phrase "big brother" to describe government action, he was astutely aware and extremely mistrustful of the paternalistic implications attached with overly interested governments. If the state insists on continually looking after your "best interests," then the implication for Spencer quickly becomes that individuals will never do this "looking" for themselves. For this reason Spencer (1868: 230) could remark, "Government is essentially immoral … the offspring of evil, bearing about it all the marks of its parentage." Spencer (1868: 234) was not through with his tyrant, he would continue, "even its most equitable form it is impossible for government to dissociate itself from evil." These comments, along with Spencer's stance toward the militant, imply that his conception of ideal (progressively evolved) social life would look quite anarchical. The government, for Spencer, is little more than a collective that inevitably co-opts the law of equal freedom. The dissolution of government along with an adherence by individuals to the law of equal freedom marks the pathway of social evolution.

X. Spencer and the Poor

Spencer is perhaps most ambivalent as he wrote about English "poor laws," legislative attempts to alleviate poverty. Spencer gives mixed messages as to whether he

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this context, ensuring Spencer's law of equal freedom might require a greatly expanded account of governmental intervention.

opposed "poor laws" because he wanted to help the poor (as a class) in the "long run," or because he opposed such legislation because of his detest with the poor in general. For whatever reason, Spencer contended that such legislation is necessarily at odds with his first social law of "equal freedom." Assuming the former explanation, Spencer (1868: 358) argued, "to the extent that a poor-law mitigates distress in one place, it unavoidably produces distress in another." Consistently, Spencer argued that the working-class poor would bear the heaviest burden of supporting the "undeserving poor." Thus by eliminating poverty welfare the poor were actually, as a collective, better off.[22] In addition, Spencer argued that by *giving* extra money to the poor they would likewise be encouraged to have more children than they could support absent the monetary assistance. Spencer, likewise, often claimed in his writings that his position towards "poor laws" were compassionate to future generations of potentially avoidable "poor births" that, if welfare was withheld, could avoid the pains of poverty.

Nonetheless the potentially compassionate aspects of Spencer's rejection of poverty welfare are eclipsed by the greater possibility that, he simply had no room for the poor in his developing evolutionary synthesis. In clear language Spencer (1868: 414) leaves no acceptable social space for those who cannot sustain self-sufficiency.

> 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.[23]

The troublesome aspect of Spencer language here is that being "sufficiently complete to live" is a highly contextual notion. Medical technologies and other environmental factors determine the content of what it means to be "sufficiently complete to live." Spencer is

[22] Even if we grant Spencer's notion of the undeserving poor or "good-for-nothings," it does not follow that the deserving or working poor *must* bear the brunt of their support. It could well be the case that governments tax the rich or middle class (as opposed to the working poor) to support the poor. For this reason I am skeptical that Spencer opposed poor laws because of his concern for the working poor.

hinting at some vague objective standard that should determine who *should* live and who should not. But such a standard seems misplaced. As the abilities of people to expand the class of persons able to survive improve, why not think that such abilities should be used to their full extent to help ensure more surviving persons?

In describing the "idle poor" Spencer (1950: 22) maintained:

> They have no work, you say. Say rather that they either refuse work or quickly turn themselves out of it. They are simply good-for-nothings who in one way or another live on the good-for-somethings vagrants and sots, criminals and those on the way to crime.

Why should, as Spencer would ask, the working-poor be stripped of some earnings in order to feed the idle poor? Spencer did not dislike the poor per se, only the "idle poor" who refused to work. (Spencer reserves comment on persons unable to work because of disability.) Interestingly, this condemnation did not extent to a critique of the "idle rich," a group that if they knew the meaning of industriousness had practiced such an art only once at birth. This assessment of the "idle well-to-do" likely hits to close to home for Spencer who himself received a sizable inheritance from his uncle. Spencer (1904: 394) captures an aspect of Nietzschian thought as he suggested that suffering might be the only way the poor can escape their social position.

> The mass of effete humanity to be dealt with is so large as to make one despair: the problem seems insolvable. … Certainly, if solvable, it is to be solved only through suffering.

Spencer reasons that the problem of poverty appears unanswerable not because of a flaw in nature or his evolutionary synthesis, but because do-gooders have attempted to corrupt, with advancements of poverty welfare, the "survival of the fittest."

XI. Deterministic Spencer

The irony in the above assessment is that Spencer was quick to use deterministic (anti-action) arguments when they suited both the purposes of his evolutionary synthesis and

[23] C.f. Hofstadter pp. 41

his individualistic anti-governmental implications thereof. Spencer (1868:170), for instance, argued:

> One would have thought it sufficiently clear to everybody that the great changes taking place in the world of ours are uniformly slow. Continents are upheaved at the rate of a foot or two a century. The deposition of a delta is the work of tens of thousands of years. The transformation of barren rock into life supporting soil takes countless ages. If any think society advances under a different law, let them read.

This gradualist (conservative) position is optimistically extended to an examination of social order as Spencer (1868:454) later in the same work concluded:

> The seeds of civilization existing in the aboriginal man, and distributed over the earth by his multiplication, were certain in the laps of time to fall here and there into circumstances fit for their development; and in spite of all blightings and uprootings, were certain, by sufficient repetition of these occurrence, ultimately to originate a civilization which would outlive all disaster and arrive at perfection.

The oddity here is that Spencer is advocating both a *destiny* of social perfection, and the position that "poor laws" (and other aspects of government interference) are a detestable hindrance to social evolution. Spencer's dual positions are at odds for two reasons.

First, if Spencer's brand of social evolution leads inevitably to a specific telos, then poverty welfare could not ultimately thwart this end. It might well be the case that government intervention is a necessary stage in an unfolding evolutionary scheme.[24] If such action does thwart Spencer's preferred "social end," the burden is his to demonstrate why intervention to help the poor harms this end, while intervention for public sanitation (for instance) assists this "end." Spencer does not offer any principled reason that accounts for why certain types of governmental intervention are advantageous to his social evolutionary system and why others are disadvantageous. The closest he gets is asserting that "poor laws" assure the "survival of the unfittest."

[24] Marx, for instance, held capitalism as a necessary stage of social evolution. Marx's ideal of communism is quite impossible to achieve if not for (the failures of) capitalism.

Second, the notion of governmental intervention could occur in at least two distinct ways. Spencer viewed "active" governmental intervention as seemingly the only type of socially destructive intervention; however, restricting a sociopolitical community from deciding "who deserves what" in a manner consistent with poverty welfare could also be viewed as a type of intervention. What could be more intervening than insisting that a sociopolitical community cannot justly decide to pass "poor laws?" If "who deserves what" is an unavoidable fundamental sociopolitical question, then it seems that intervention of one type or another is unavoidable. Spencer simply wants the intervention to come in the form of disallowing poverty welfare, but he does endorse this type of intervention. He does not view such a *disallowing* as an act of intervention, but he is wrong on this point. Restricting the scope and latitude of a sociopolitical community (whatever else it may be) is *prima facie* an act of intervention. Those, like Spencer, advocating a type of minimal political state cannot consistently argue that they are opposed to governmental intervention, their stance necessarily suggests politically interfering in the decision of a community to construct a system of poverty welfare.

XII. Conclusion

Spencer, at the time of his death (1903), lived long enough to see Darwin credited as the father of evolutionary theory (a title Spencer should have had if he would have simply abandoned his Lamarckianism) as well as the increased implementation of governmentally mandated social programs. Throughout his life Spencer witnessed society moving away from, not striving toward, his evolutionary synthesis. This observation helps explain the gradualism explicit in Spencer's thought. If society did not always (or even usually) conform to his conservative ethical model during his life, this

could be explained as a temporary glitch to be gradually moved beyond. Gradualism afforded Spencer this much solace.

The headstone of Spencer's grave in London's Highgate Cemetery overlooks Karl Marx's tomb. Marx's tomb is tended to by an attendant who must sort and organize the barrage of messages to the departed father of communist political theory. The flora that tends to tangle itself around the mass of forgotten dead, on the other hand, often overruns Spencer's grave. Spencer was no less the thinker than Marx, and ironically they wished for the same end to social evolutionism. They both desired, and foresaw, the "inevitable" withering away of the state. The difference is that whereas Marx (and other communitarian social evolutionary theorists) foresaw cooperative and interdependent social relations as the apex of social evolutionism, Spencer was much more comfortable in viewing this apex as paving the way for the solitary, free, and independent individual.

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