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The Coming Slavery: The Determinism of Herbert Spencer*

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Abstract. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) believed that Victorian Britain was moving toward a society of total regimentation ("slavery"). This movement was part of a cosmic process of evolution and dissolution. While the long-run (but not ultimate) destination of society was a "higher" form of social organization based on voluntary and complex interpersonal relationships, the immediate tendency was retrograde—a movement *away* from the liberation of mankind from the bondage of previous eras. This Article explores (1) the reasons for the retrograde movement, (2) its "inevitability," and (3) the role of ideas in the process. The general conclusion is that in an effort to explain the general movement of social institutions and practices, Spencer develops a mechanical and deterministic approach which undermines his ability to pass normative judgements on changes in society.

1. Prologue

Herbert Spencer, who was more radical than any radical and, yet, more conservative than any conservative, has asked me to give you three sets of messages this evening. The first is a happy one: "There is a good time coming!" But, less happily, "it is very far distant" (Spencer 1904:436). Secondly, he also wants me to assure you that "the evolution of ... society [to this good time] cannot in any essential way be diverted from its general course." But, on the other hand, "though the process of social evolution is in its general character so ... predetermined that its successive stages cannot be ante-dated ... yet it is quite possible to perturb, to retard, or to disorder the process [by bad policies]" (Spencer 1886:401). Finally, he is happy that "[m]en within these few generations have become emancipated from the restraints which a strong social organization had over them" (Spencer 1908:vol. 2, 78–79). Yet, unhappily, there is a growth on the body-politic of "an administrative system [that is] becoming ever more powerful and peremptory—a new governing agency which the emancipated people are unawares elaborating for themselves, while thinking only of gaining the promised benefits." "While the old coercive arrangements are being relaxed, new coercive arrangements are being unobtrusively established" (Spencer 1904:434).

While the above quotations obviously refer to a different time and a different place—nineteenth-century Victorian England—they have an eerie applicability to our own place and time. They also exhibit an irrepressible optimism, a belief in the ultimate "perfectibility" of human kind, assured not by a benevolent deity (for whether one exists belongs to the realm of the "Unknowable"), but by a sometimes harsh process of social and moral evolution. This process, unfortunately, is subject both to progressive and to retrograde movements.

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The natural "rhythm of motion" is such that the movement of mankind from a social state based on commands and the ethics of enmity does not give way to a social state based on voluntary cooperation and the ethics of amity in a continuous fashion. There are frequent, but perhaps increasingly less severe as time goes on, retrograde movements away from a state of voluntary cooperation to a state of relative militancy and coercive regulation. Herbert Spencer saw the return of the command society in an article called, "The Coming Slavery."

In this Article of the same title, I would like to explore in a fairly condensed way Spencer's ideas on social evolution and, in particular, on the possibility or even probability of backwards movements toward "slavery." This will take us through a thicket a complex ideas on slippery slopes, the relation of social systems to ethics, and the possibility of a normative evaluation of social evolution. My purpose in discussing all of this is to draw the reader's attention to those parts of Spencer's system relevant to current political, economic and even methodological controversies. A subsidiary purpose is to show that there can be a deep tension between our attempts to explain the world and our seemingly-perennial desire to judge it.

2. The slippery slope

In order to understand Herbert Spencer's prediction that Victorian England was moving away from social organization based on voluntary cooperation to a regimented, coercive form of social organization, we must appreciate the intellectual context in which this prediction was made. Spencer grappled with the problems raised by what he called the "empirical utilitarianism" of John Stuart Mill. This form of utilitarianism manifested itself in a posture of evaluating each possible government intervention on its own merits. Mill had argued that there should be a presumption in favor of laissez-faire but that this presumption could be effectively rebutted by an empirical method which would determine whether the proposed intervention satisfied the greatest happiness principle better than an unhampered market. The question of the "agenda" and "non-agenda" of government, made famous by Jeremy Bentham, was, according to Mill (1987:941–942) "a question which does not ... admit of any universal solution." Mill's conclusion that "laissez-faire, in short, should be the general practice" (Mill 1987:950) proved to be far less important than his method of analyzing the question of the role of government. Mill's "limits" to the laissez-faire principle were inherently open-ended and his arguments for state intervention had an expansionary tendency. At bottom, this was due to difficulties, both in practice and in principle, in determining the balance of social utilities. The general thrust of Mill's exceptions to the laissez-faire principle was to overwhelm the presumption in favor of non-intervention. If, for example, lack of knowledge, capacity or judgment on the part of actors could annul the case for free exchange (Mill 1987:957), it is unclear where the limits should be since these are always imperfect relative to the "ideal." Furthermore, if in the absence of desire for a good, say education, compulsory consumption can be justified (Mill 1987:953), then the standpoint of the agent is being replaced by that of the putatively more informed paternalist. Again, the limits of this exception are unclear since there is always a more informed person "out there."

Spencer understood that the case-by-case approach in a utilitarian framework did not have well-defined limits as a conceptual matter. His emphasis, however, was on the political and economic dynamics that generated increased government intervention. This was a behavioral issue primarily, and not an intellectual or conceptual one. Much of his article, "The Coming Slavery," is devoted to an analysis of the political and ethical "momenta" by which one intervention leads to another. The first is based on the unintended negative or ineffectual consequences of government policy. Spencer speaks of "the necessity which arises for supplementing ineffective measures, and for dealing with the artificial evils continually caused" (Spencer 1982a:45). In itself, the mere failure of intervention would not give rise to the "necessity" of further intervention. It is because "failure does not destroy faith in the agencies employed, but merely suggests more stringent use of such agencies or wider ramifications of them" (Spencer 1982a:45–46) that the expansionary dynamic comes into existence. The conjunction of unintended consequences and the assumption that further intervention is curative generates a process toward increasingly coercive social arrangements.

A second factor in building the momentum toward "slavery" is derived from what are, in part, the intended consequences of intervention. The intended result of "compulsory charity" (i.e., the Poor-Law) was to relieve the suffering of the poor. And this it did, at least to a certain extent. The proponents of especially the old Poor-Law failed to realize, however, that not all suffering is an evil which should be eliminated. Some suffering is beneficial in the sense that it provides strong incentives to change ill-adapted behavior. "To separate pain from ill-doing is to fight against the constitution of things, and will be followed by more pain" (Spencer 1982a:32) and more poverty. Of course, this will raise tax rates and the resentments of the working or provident poor. "Habits of improvidence having for generations been cultivated by the Poor-Law, and the improvident enabled to multiply, the evils produced by compulsory charity are now proposed to be met by compulsory insurance" (Spencer 1982a:46). From the taxpayers point of view, it would be better if the potential recipients of "charity" were to pay a tax that would finance their own subsidization in times of unemployment. So proposals for unemployment "insurance" were made. The tax, however, could not be levied only on those who are unemployed but on all of those who might be unemployed. Consequently, the failure of society to allow beneficial suffering results in the coercion of all its productive members into a system of "insurance." Once again, an enlargement of the role of the state is the ultimate result.

Spencer presents many other factors which contribute to the dynamics of interventionism; these are interesting in their own right. For our purposes here, however, the thrust of his argument is clear: Mill's empirical (or direct) utilitarianism is a mirage. When interventions are examined and evaluated on a case-by-case basis, there is a series of processes—both conceptual and behavioral—that drive the system to a high level of regimentation or toward what he often called the "militant society." Thus, for Spencer, the operative social choice is not this program or that program, but the general form of social organization: voluntary or coerced. The "practical politician" thinks "only of proximate results [and] never naturally thinks of results still more remote, still more general, and still more important" (Spencer 1982a:43) than those intended or immediately seen. Spencer suggests that the "question of questions for the politician should ever be—'What type of social structure am I tending to produce?' But this is a question he never entertains" (Spencer 1982a:44).

It is important to recognize that Spencer's method of social analysis, in this case, differs from Mill's in that the former is concerned with "tendencies" rather than concrete and immediate consequences. The consequences that are relevant in Spencer's "rational utilitarianism" are not only more remote in time but more abstract. They cannot be directly perceived; they must be rationally constructed on the basis of a theoretical understanding of social consequences and relationships. It may well be that in the present state of human evolution the vast numbers of humanity are not capable of consistently applying such abstract reasoning to their circumstances (Taylor 1992:115–130).

Spencer suggested a way of dealing with the tendency toward slavery inherent in the growth of government beyond its minimal functions of protecting person and property. This reveals his youthful radicalism: a strict adherence to the Law of Equal Freedom. "Every man is free to do that which he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man" (Spencer 1978:vol. 2, 62). From this "law" or ethical principle he derived normative implications against direct and indirect aggression. Direct aggression comprises physical trespasses or the threat of such against any person or his legitimate property. Indirect aggression is the breach of contractual promise. These restrictions on an individual's complete liberty of action are required to make possible the pursuit of life and happiness in the "associated" or social state. It is the means by which one individual's life-promoting activities are prevented from interfering with the life-promoting activities of others. The political manifestation of the Law of Equal Freedom is the classical liberal state. Strict application of this law means that the laissez-faire policy would be upheld even in those cases where either it appeared that an intervention could improve things or where, in fact, an intervention could produce benefits. In this approach, the phenomenon of the slippery slope could be avoided only by a mandatory rule excluding government intervention into the economic and social spheres. This is far from the simple presumption of laissez-faire embodied in Stuart Mill's empirical utilitarianism. Spencer's policy is not a rough rule of thumb which can be overcome by sufficient empirical evidence of the balance of utilities and disutilities. It is, in the individual case, a bulwark against considerations of social utility. Such considerations unfortunately set in motion powerful tendencies toward regimentation and the "militant society."

In a society in which man is fully adapted to the associated or "industrial" state, the Law of Equal Freedom would be followed spontaneously (Taylor 1992:205). Each person would be so constituted that his individual interests would be coordinated with the interests of the rest of society. There would be a melding of egoistic and altruistic sentiments. Each individual would obtain egoistic pleasure from respecting the rights of others; and, conversely, would experience pain at their violation. Such a state of affairs, if ever actually achievable, was not the state of Victorian Britain. The character of individuals was not completely molded to the requirements of a fully voluntary or "industrial" form of human association. They sought, either through the law or outside of it, to gain advantage at the expense of others—that is, by violating their rights.

In such an imperfect society, it would be impossible to ensure strict adherence to the Law of Equal Freedom. This is because of a tension between the secondary political implications of the Law and its primary moral implications. Spencer reasons thus:

> What forms of governmental organization must be the outcome of voluntary cooperation carried to its limit? We have already seen that in the absence of those appliances for coercion which accompany the militant type [of social organization], whatever legislative and administrative structures exist, must be, in general and in detail, of directly or indirectly representative origin. The presence in them of functionaries not deriving their powers from the aggregate will, and not changeable by the aggregate will, would imply a partial continuance of that regime of status which the regime of contract has, by the hypothesis, entirely replaced (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 649).

The Law of Equal Freedom implies equal "freedom" or representation of all in the legislative and executive functions of the minimal state. No one rules as a matter of status as, presumably, in the divine right of kings, but as a matter of the consent of equally-free individuals. In this sense, then, the minimal state is consistent with a fully voluntary society. It is hard to see, therefore, how one can advocate strict adherence to the Law of Equal Freedom without simultaneously advocating universal suffrage. But Spencer did not advocate universal suffrage, and was enormously troubled by those extensions of the suffrage that occurred in nineteenth-century Britain.

Spencer was not, in the final analysis, inconsistent. The Law of Equal Freedom and its political corollary, universal suffrage, apply only to the perfect man in the perfect society. This is the domain of "absolute ethics" (Spencer 1978:vol. 1, 287–308). In the perfect or fully voluntary society all ethical injunctions have only pleasure and no pain, anywhere in the system, as the outcome of adherence to them. This is why conformity to them is "spontaneous." In fact, in such a social state man's choices become fully mechanical; they are as automatic as feelings of hunger and satiation. In an imperfect society—one in which man's character has not been completely molded to the system of contract and voluntary cooperation, such as in Victorian Britain—ethical behavior takes on a "relative" character. It does not produce pleasure unalloyed with pain and, as such, is partially wrong. It can only be right relative to the other available choices. The "relatively right" is the course of action that produces the greatest surplus of pleasure over pain. It is, in other words, the "least wrong." For the imperfect man in an imperfect society adherence to the absolutely right will not be the best course because the absolutely right presupposes that all other actors in the system are behaving in accordance with its injunctions.

Let us now use this analysis to uncover the tension between the primary implications of Equal Freedom and universal suffrage. Spencer's position was clear: "[I]n the absence of a duly adapted character, liberty given in one direction is lost in another" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 662). In a world in which people do not appreciate the social imperative of the Law—perhaps because they do not understand its causal relation to their happiness or because they seek to derive some advantage at the expense of their neighbors—they will use their political freedom to abridge their fundamental freedom. "[T]he diffusion of political power unaccompanied by the limitation of political functions, issues in communism" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 663). As the many seek to exploit the few (presumably the most productive members of society), freedom is increasingly abrogated for all. The political momentum toward "slavery," previously discussed, takes hold.

Thus attempts rigidly to apply the Law of Equal Freedom in circumstances in which the individual's character is imperfectly molded to the associated—that is, contractually-

based—state will produce unintended consequences. They will not generate the least wrong or relatively right outcome, but one which is highly inferior. In fact, extension of the suffrage under the conditions of Victorian Britain was both a symptom and a cause of the retrograde movement away from relatively free society of mid-century to the increasingly regimented society of the late nineteenth century.

We are faced with a paradox: the Law of Equal Freedom can be maintained only by violating its political corollary, universal suffrage. This means that the "least wrong" or "relatively right" course of action is a modified Equal Freedom. What is less important must give way to the more important. To see this, we must reconceptualize the Law as consisting of two parts: an ultimate end and a means toward that end. In the perfect society, the relation of means to end within the moral law collapses as complete equal freedom can be attained. In an imperfect society, however, pain will be generated by either course of action: universal suffrage or suffrage limited to the upper and perhaps more industrious of the middle classes. Which course produces the greater pain? For Spencer the answer was obvious: extension of the suffrage will lead to the even-further breakdown of the minimal state and a cumulative process to regimented social life. It will result in increasing ownership of the individual by others (the "majority") and the resumption of a state of intersocietal hostilities characteristic of militant societies (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 605–607). This is the abridgment of equal freedom that is really important. Political rights are only useful insofar as they are effective means to ensuring more fundamental liberty and the development of a higher form of society. To the extent that they inhibit, retard, or reverse the process of social evolution, they can be limited and adjusted in any way that practically achieves the limitation of state action.

The form of state action that poses the greatest threat to a voluntary society is war. "[T]he possibility of a high social state, political as well as general, fundamentally depends on the cessation of war" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 663). War tends to centralize government, make it less accountable to voters, increase the burden of taxation, increase the relative social value of violence, reduce international trade, and restrict commerce at home. In the ethical sphere it replaces the ethics of amity with the ethics of enmity, and contractual cooperation with commands. It is true, however, that in the course of social evolution, war and its concomitant militant society had a progressive influence on the metamorphosis of human life from lower to higher (i.e., more complex) states. War produced the integration of different peoples under a single rule which promoted trade and amity within the larger political organization. But today, "[f]rom war has been gained all that it had to give" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 664). While past social evolution "had to be achieved through the conflicts of societies with one another" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 665), continued social evolution now requires a suppression of such conflict. The continuance of militancy, on the other hand, would have a subtle, but very definite, effect on equal freedom. "Liberty overtly gained in name and form will be unobtrusively taken away in fact" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 666). Under the facade of "emergency" and "temporary" powers people will become accustomed to a loss of personal liberty. "So long as they continue to conquer other peoples and hold them in subjection, they will readily merge their personal liberties in the power of the State, and hereafter as heretofore accept the slavery that goes along with Imperialism" (Spencer 1902:171). Spencer believed that during the second half of the nineteenth century the threat

to liberty from militancy was becoming greater. "In all places and in all ways there has been going on during the past fifty years a recrudescence of barbaric ambitions, ideas and sentiments and an unceasing culture of blood-thirst" (Spencer 1902:188).

Both war, with its concomitant social institutions, and the internal regulation of industry and social relations are manifestations of the militant type of social organization. "[H]aving observed this redevelopment of armed forces and revival of the predatory spirit, we may note that which chiefly concerns us—the return towards the militant type in our institutions generally—the extension of centralized administration and of compulsory regulation" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 1, 582). For Spencer war is the cause of much "overlegislation." The successes of military commanders and the authoritarian form of organization in combating hostile societies extends acceptance of this general type of social organization to the civil area as well. "Unlimited confidence in government agency is fostered" (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 598). People allow themselves to be molded into slaves of the state in order to attain what they perceive as their self-preservation. "All free men have to be made as much as may be into military machines, automatically obedient to orders ..." (Spencer 1978:vol. 2, 273).

The train of argument outlined above suggests a unidirectional causal relationship, viz., war and preparations for war lead to the growth of coercive domestic institutions. But the relationship is more complex. Each form of militancy inures the individual to political compulsion, trampling of his individuality, and violation of his rights. So there is a compounding of effects. Each prepares society for the other. In this precise sense, therefore, it would appear that the extension of the suffrage and consequent augmentation of state power actually make war and the recrudescence of barbarism more likely.

3. The central puzzle

Spencer's theory of social evolution contains a central puzzle: a temporary retrograde movement toward slavery is inevitable and, yet, it is to be condemned and resisted. His opposition to universal suffrage and to the imperialist ventures abroad are just two examples of resistance. But what sense does it make to resist the inevitable? Furthermore, such a retrograde movement is profoundly unsuited to man's life in the social state and therefore is absolutely wrong. So the inevitable is both wrong and to be resisted. Consider what Spencer says about those who advocate the "multiplication of political agencies" for the promotion of the "welfare" of the masses:

> Led by the prospect of immediate beneficial results, those swayed by this sympathy are unconscious that they are helping further to elaborate a social organization at variance with that required for a higher form of social life, and are, by so doing increasing the obstacles to attainment of that higher form (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 666).

The root of this social development lies in the deficient moral character of the individuals comprising current society. Thus,

> An entire loss of freedom will ... be the fate of those who do not deserve the freedom they possess. They have been weighed in the balances and found wanting: having neither the

> required idea nor the required sentiment. Only a nature which will sacrifice everything to defend personal liberty of action, and is eager to defend the like liberties of action of others, can permanently maintain free institutions (Spencer 1901b:vol. 3, 606).

The moral character of individuals comprising late Victorian society was not adapted to the requirements of a fully voluntary and contractual society. These individuals did not recognize the importance of strict adherence to the Law of Equal Freedom for the maintenance of a complex and integrated ("evolved") industrial society. The Law is abstract and its benefits remote, and thus is in need of theoretical construction for its apprehension: a task beyond the capacity of "inferior" individuals. Their deficient moral character produced increasing resistance to a more evolved social form. At some threshold, the forces generated by the inferior moral constitution overwhelm those moving toward a more complex society. A retrograde movement sets in—perpetuating and even enhancing the elements of militancy, coercion and cooperation within a system of status already present in Britain. And as the mixed social form moves increasingly in the direction of slavery, the ethical sentiments and ideas appropriate to the existing society grow more and more out of alignment with those of the ideal society Spencer so fervently desired. But since the moral character of individuals is simply that adapted to the mixed industrial-militant society in existence, how can Spencer, the evolutionary moralist, object to this moral inferiority?

4. The cosmic process of change

In order to clarify Spencer's view of the inevitability of the process of social evolution, we must examine more precisely the nature of this process and the role that ideas and moral sentiments play within it. Ideas, sentiments and instincts are, for Spencer, largely epiphenomena of behavior which directly or indirectly adjusts to its environment. The environment, in turn, is the outcome of mechanical cosmic processes of evolution and dissolution. These cosmic processes are in no way dependent on human choices. On the contrary, the choices that men make are largely, or perhaps even entirely, the causal outcomes of mechanical influences on the grand scale.

1. *The environment.* In Spencer's conception, the universe is a field of forces subject to complex, but mechanical, processes of cause and effect. There are two major transformations to which this field is subject. They are evolution and dissolution. Evolution involves "loss of motion and consequent integration" while dissolution is the "gain of motion and consequent disintegration" that follows evolution (Spencer 1888:285). While most of Spencer's attention was devoted to an analysis of the evolutionary forces, we cannot understand his ideas on retrograde movements in society without recognizing that forces of dissolution are also part of the mechanical transformations to which the universe is subject.

   Consider first the process of evolution. Evolution produces more complex structures. These are characterized by increases in integration, heterogeneity and definiteness of the constituent parts. In the social context, this results from the concentration of population through biological increase in a fixed area and the conquest of peoples through

militancy and aggression. Later this concentration takes place through the voluntary association of people for mutual advantage through trade. The concentrating aggregate develops not simply into an unorganized mass but into a true, complex integration of people, as is evidenced by structures such as the division of labor. This is because all aggregates, whether social or physical, are subject to different incident forces. Thus a mass increasingly differentiates itself and the individuals comprising it become heterogeneous. Along with the increase in heterogeneity these individual parts become more sharply demarcated from each other. Thus there is a movement from the indefinite to the definite both in structure and function. In sum, evolution produces more complex structures in which the parts are both more differentiated and more integrated. In the social and economic realm, the most recognized manifestation of this is the spreading of specialization and division of labor from local areas to, ultimately, the entire world. As is well-understood, the word-wide division of labor increases not only the heterogeneity of individual functions but also their mutual dependency. Thus, the social universe becomes an increasingly complex, integrated whole.

The process of dissolution, on the other hand, is simply the reverse process. Structures become less complex; they disaggregate and thus lose their heterogeneity and related integration. In the social context, the breakup of the world-wide division of labor due to increased military hostilities or, relatedly, the imposition of protective tariffs and quotas would be an example of dissolution.

The key to the oscillation between these two processes is a fundamental physical law which Spencer called the "Rhythm of Motion." There is a rhythm or oscillation between the antagonist forces of evolution and dissolution because evolutionary processes contain the seeds of dissolution. Matter which has aggregated into an undifferentiated or homogeneous mass is unstable. When it is hit by some other matter in motion, the elements of former scatter since they are not held together by an integrated structure. As they disperse they become subject to differentiation because they enter new environments. There is a "transfer" of motion from the new environments to the elements and vice versa. This is a compounding of the processes of differentiation. In the course of this scattering and differentiating of elements they begin to lose their retained motion. This is either the result of "friction" or the encountering of resistance. So in the first part of the evolutionary process motion is dissipated. As the elements dissipate their motion, they tend to integrate or coalesce. So the very process which created or allowed for the integration creates a decrease in the forces behind the motion. "Every motion being a motion under resistance is continually suffering deductions, and these unceasing deductions finally result in the cessation of motion" (Spencer 1888:484–485). But not all elements cease motion at the same time. So the stronger forces remain and create exaggerated movements or oscillations in the system. (Turner 1985:40). At this stage, the changes may be progressive or retrogressive.

But since the direction of the system is toward the cessation of motion, the "moving equilibria" temporarily established at various points in the evolutionary process become precarious. A moving equilibrium exists only insofar as its motion can overcome the counterforces in its environment. So there will be movement toward a "higher"—that is, a more differentiated and integrated—society, so long as the resistance to such movement

can be overcome. But with the dissipation of motion, the resistances or counterforces begin to overtake the moving equilibrium. First the progressive movement ceases and then is supplanted by a retrograde movement. Such a retrograde movement is the consequence of a petering out of the motion toward complexity ("higher social form") relative to its resistances. Thus it is a natural consequence of the dissipation of motion that is an inherent part of the process of complexification. Spencer summarized the whole process succinctly:

> During the earlier part of the cycle of changes, the integration predominates—there goes on what we call growth. The middle part of the cycle is usually characterized, not by equilibrium between the integrating and disintegrating processes, but by alternate excesses of them. And the cycle closes with a period in which the disintegration, beginning to predominate, eventually puts a stop to integration, and undoes what integration had originally done (Spencer 1888:284).

2. *Ideas and sentiments.* Spencer's analysis of the cosmic processes of evolution and dissolution was intentionally abstract for he was trying to create a "systems theory" (Turner 1985:30–44) that would apply to all systems—physical, biological and social. In so doing, the realm of ideas and moral sentiments (or, in general, the contents of the human mind) is not explicitly incorporated into his analysis. This is not to say, however, that ideas and sentiments play no role. Indeed, when one studies Spencer's sociology one can easily see that they play an important role. Yet they are not autonomous influences. They are largely dependent "variables" which adapt to or equilibrate with an environment determined in accordance with the principles discussed above.

   If ideas, moral and political sentiments are adaptations to the environment then, arguably, their role would be simply to reinforce the existing social organization, whatever it might be. Ideas, under those circumstances, would never be the source of movement in the evolution of human societies. One could understand both progressive and retrograde movements by reference to the cosmic principles of change alone. At every stage, ideas and sentiments would be purely accommodating. Such a position, however, is an oversimplification of the Spencerian system.

   To say that ideas are adaptations to the environment is not to say that they are always in permanent equilibrium with their environment or that the equilibrium is a stable one. Spencer believed that the "character," that is, the ideas, moral and political sentiments and associated behavior, of most individuals in late Victorian Britain was "inferior" or maladapted to the ideal of a voluntary society. It was instead, adapted to the then-existing hybrid of militancy and industrialism. But this equilibrium could not be maintained because it contained the seeds of its own transformation. Its internal transformation was "inevitable" in two senses. First, given the threshold of militant ideas and sentiments reached by the latter half of the nineteenth-century, retrograde social development had to occur. This is what Spencer tried to demonstrate in "The Coming Slavery" and elsewhere. There is a cumulative behavioral "logic" to intervention by the State, with relatively small interventions giving rise to larger and more damaging ones as we have already seen above. Second, the moving equilibrium that constitutes a centuries-long growth of ideas, sentiments and institutions appropriate to a "higher"—more evolved,

more heterogeneous and interdependent—society had to be interrupted because of the cumulative effect of resistance. This is what Spencer referred to as the "Rhythm of Motion." Consider the strong words in the following statement:

> On recognizing the universality of rhythm, it becomes clear that it was absurd to suppose that the great relaxation of restraints—political, social, commercial—which culminated in free trade would continue. A reimposition of restraints, if not of the same kind then of other kinds, was inevitable; and it is now manifest that whereas during a long period there had been an advance from involuntary cooperation in social affairs to voluntary cooperation..., there has commenced a reversal of the process (Spencer 1904:435).

This reversal would result in "a new tyranny eventually leading to new resistances and emancipations" (Spencer 1904:436).

In their essential nature, the resistances consist of the pains associated with relatively right actions under imperfect conditions. As the reader will recall, only absolutely right actions taken by the perfect man in the perfect society produce pleasure unalloyed with pain. The relatively right, on the other hand, produces a mixture of pleasure and pain. The greatest surplus of pleasure over pain under imperfect conditions does involve, at times, a considerable amount of pain. The "least wrong" may be distasteful, especially when the pain is immediate and the pleasures in the distant future (as may be the case in educating oneself). It may also be difficult for men of ordinary, "inferior" constitution to resist the pleasure associated with actions whose pain is difficult to envision because it may be spread in small individual doses across large numbers of people. Such difficulties are also manifest where pains can only be discerned with the assistance of theoretical constructs, as in the case of harmful social policies. In this way the universality of rhythm, one of the cosmic principles of change, made itself felt in Victorian society:

> Having by long struggles emancipated itself from the hard discipline of the ancient regime, and having discovered that the new regime into which it has grown, though relatively easy, is not without stress and pains, its impatience prompts the wish to try another system: which other system is, in principle if not in appearance, the same as that which during past generations was escaped from with much rejoicing (Spencer 1982b:498).

Spencer had hoped that the modified Law of Equal Freedom implemented in imperfect social conditions might overcome these resistances to a higher form of social existence. But the Law of Equal Freedom under the current imperfect and transitional state produces pain. It requires that individual suffer the consequences of their own misdeeds and of their general unfitness for the "associated state," that is, for life in a voluntary and contractual society. The refusal of individuals to bear the socially-progressive pain associated with maladaption and their willingness to create what may appear to be ameliorative institutions generate an interruption in the long progressive march toward perfection.

> In the final analysis, however, these resistances can stave off the process of social evolution for only a temporary period. As Spencer never tired of showing, the "ameliorations" of necessary suffering do not work. They create still more suffering and degradation until the social system based on a mixture of militant and industrial organization breaks down. As a mixed system, it is unstable. To the extent that it moves to "slavery" it is unworkable in today's world. So social progress is the only long-run alternative.

5. The role of ideas

It is now time to address explicitly the difficult issues involved in the deterministic outlook developed by Spencer. First and foremost, he considered himself a scientist who was not satisfied until he produced a successful deterministic explanation of the world. His cosmic process provided a common, abstract and mechanical explanation of the physical, biological and social domains. Within each of these areas, Spencer developed what he considered "illustrations" of the cosmic processes. These were more specialized and particularistic theories of the mechanisms of evolution and dissolution that explained the observed changes in the psychological, biological, sociological and ethical worlds. Second, as a scientist, he treated the ideas and ethical sentiments of people as determined by antecedent factors—chiefly by the environment. But, thirdly, as an intellectual, Spencer believed in the importance of ideas in the development of societies and their political structures, or, more broadly, in the determination of much of the "environment." Bringing all of these strands together, we must face the question: Has Spencer worked himself into an elaborate circularity? If "everything" is rigidly determined by everything else, then how can there ever be change? Furthermore, if ideas, sentiments, and resistances are all the inevitable products of antecedent events, then what sense does it make to rail against the "coming slavery"? Are we not simply viewers of a play "written" long ago by unknowable forces?

> The truth is that a society and its members act and react in such ways that while, on the one hand, the nature of the society is determined by the natures of its members; on the other hand, the activities of its members (and presently their natures) are redetermined by the needs of society, as these alter: change in either entails change in the other (Spencer 1901a:vol. 3, 490).

Why does change in either ideas or social forms ever occur if the one is always determined by the other? The reason is that not all equilibria are permanent or, in Spencer's terms, "complete." For example, although the ethical sentiments of a militant or coercive society are adapted to that social form—hence, the ethics of enmity, it is the case that individuals in militant societies tend to aggregate through military conquest and hence to differentiate and integrate through trade. This produces change in the social environment and, accordingly, the ethics of enmity becomes transformed into the ethics of amity.

> Social progress is, in fact, viewed as a natural evolution in which the social units are moulded into fitness for the social aggregate and the social aggregate adjusted into fitness

> for the social units—the two perpetually acting and reacting, until equilibrium is reached (Spencer cited in Gray 1996:179).

The complete equilibrium is one in which there is "such a perfect reconciliation of individual natures with social requirements, that private interest and public interest were finally synthesized" (Gray 1996:181). This equilibrium which joins the "highest individuation" with the "greatest mutual dependence" is the only permanent one. Such an equilibrium is only possible under complex social arrangements in which the individual is able to fulfill his wants by satisfying those of others simultaneously, and in which the psychological and physiological relations among human being are such that pleasure given to one is pleasure received by the other. When individual ideas and sentiments become truly conformable to and in permanent harmony with the existing social organization, change will cease.

What, then, of the importance and autonomy of ideas in the process of social evolution? The first thing to understand is that importance and autonomy are not the same. Ideas and moral sentiments can be (and are) very important in Spencer's equilibrating processes without being independent from antecedent or simultaneous environmental conditions. The essential character of social change is the equilibration and re-equilibration of ideas with the existing environment. So there is no question that ideas are important. On the other hand, their autonomy is in doubt.

It is useful, for our purposes, to distinguish between two types of ideas. The first consists of ideas about the achievement of personal goals, technology, natural science and, more generally, all knowledge that is unrelated to speculations about the nature of society. The second consists of ideas about the social process or social science. The first set are natural factors in the process of social evolution and dissolution. They are determined by the cosmic forces of adjustment—either ideas and sentiments adjusted to the existing social forms or rhythmic perturbations implying temporary retrograde movements. Thus while "voluntary" actions based on ideas and sentiments are important, these actions are not the product of "free will" (Gray 1996:178). They do not have autonomy from the environment and its forces.

The second set of ideas—theories about society and the social process—can somewhat enhance or retard social progress by affirming or negating the fundamental legal, political, economic, and social conditions for progress. Adherence to the (modified) Law of Equal Freedom is an example of affirming the conditions of progress. Ideas about the social process, however, whether true or false, will have only a temporary impact on the nature or direction of change. In the long run, social science has no influence.

If we were to examine the acceptance or rejection by "society" of the "true" theory of social evolution—putatively Spencer's theory—we would find that this too is determined by the environment in which men find themselves. In this case the environment is an intellectual one. Writing about the publication of his book, *Political Institutions*, which ultimately became a part of *Principles of Sociology*, Spencer made his position clear:

> Beliefs, like creatures, must have fit environments before they can live or grow; and the environment furnished by the ideas and sentiments now current is an entirely unfit environment for the beliefs which the volume sets forth (Spencer 1904:547).

If beliefs have a social function and cannot be brought into general acceptance before their time, then why bother to express opinions that go against the grain of the current social and intellectual environment? Spencer poses the same question and answers it:

> If it be asked why, thinking this, I have persevered in setting forth views at variance with current creeds, my reply is the one elsewhere made:—It is for each of us to utter that which he sincerely believes to be true, and, adding his unit of influence to all other units, leave the results to work themselves out (Spencer 1904:547).

Thus Spencer is himself part of the cosmic process of evolution, temporary retrogression, and ultimate dissolution about which he wrote. His words, his influence are part of vast story written by the unknowable and unfolding inexorably through the history of the universe. He will do his part because he must do his part. It is hard to imagine, however, how in the context of his world view, Spencer's part could be more than a minor and temporary role in the movement toward social progress.

6. Moral relativism

The ultimate difficulty in Spencer's system arises out of his attempt to explain ethical sentiments and ideas as a determinate function of the environment while, at the same time, seeking to judge or evaluate social change. His desire to understand the world was in conflict with his desire to judge it. The conundrum into which he worked himself is very modern. It is shared by late twentieth-century economists and social scientists. (Need I remind the reader of George Stigler's *The Economist as Preacher*?) What has happened is that in an attempt both to explain the function of normative behavior and then to make meta-evaluations of that behavior, the principle of explanation is transformed into the principle of evaluation. Ideas and social institutions are judged by the very same factors which constitute the explanation for them.

> The conception initiated and developed by Social Science, is at the same time Radical and Conservative—Radical to a degree beyond anything which current Radicalism conceives; Conservative to a degree beyond anything conceived by present Conservatism. When there has been adequately seized the truth that societies are products of evolution...[then] what, relatively to our thoughts and sentiments , were arrangements of extreme badness, had fitnesses to conditions which made better arrangements impractical: whence comes a tolerant interpretation of past tyrannies at which even the bitterest Tory of our own days would be indignant. On the other hand, after observing how the processes that have brought things to their present stage are still going on...there follows the conviction that the remote future has in store, forms of social life higher than any we have imagined: there comes a faith transcending that of the Radical, whose aim is some [relatively minor] re-organization admitting of comparison to organizations which exist (Spencer 1886:399–400).

The implicit normative evaluation behind the term "conservative" is derived from the ethical sentiments and ideas which were (are) in temporary equilibrium with the conditions of a particular (perhaps the existing) social state. When the analyst sees the function they serve in promoting the life and well-being of the human species, he has no choice but to "endorse" them himself. This is because, in Spencer's system, the only standard of morality is the life of the species which, in an incomplete equilibrium, must take a certain priority over the life of any one individual. What other standard is possible for an evolutionary ethicist?

The "radical" normative evaluation is more complex. It amounts to judging a set of moral ideas and sentiments, not according to the function they synchronically serve, that is, their efficacy in bringing about the "least wrong" in the circumstances, but, rather, by reference to the morality that would characterize the perfect man in the perfect society. This is the "complete equilibrium" in which the great moral dilemmas of the ages, born in the conflict between egoism and altruism, are overcome, and the demands of the individual and society are reconciled. It would be easier to understand the purpose of such a radical moral evaluation if it could be shown that holding the individual and society to this standard would help bring about the moral utopia. Spencer is doubtful on two counts. First, it is not likely that a complete equilibrium could ever be attained because the endogenous social process will increasingly meet strong resistances and because exogenous environmental circumstances will continually change (Gray 1996:182–183). The second reason is more fundamental. As we saw above, a radical critique of society is simply part of the process of evolution itself. And, at certain stages, an insignificant part. Both "complaints" against the current state of the world, and the general acceptance or rejection of those complaints are determined by environmental conditions. So radical moral evaluation will matter when (external) circumstances are right, and not before.

It finally becomes clear that terms like "retrograde movements" and "social progress" have a value-free dimension. Social progress is the greater complexity and integration of society's constituent parts with the whole: the "highest individuation" joined with the "greatest mutual dependence" (Spencer cited in Gray 1996:181). Retrograde movements are simply the temporary movements away from the long-term trend of social progress. But whence Spencer's passion, his feeling of moral indignation at the "coming slavery," his periodic depression about the state of mankind, and his cries to be heard through the recrudescence of barbarism? All Spencer could finally say was that this is his part in the great, ultimately "unknowable," process of cosmic evolution.

7. Conclusions

Spencer's "synthetic philosophy"—his massive systems-theory of cosmic evolution—is an awesome accomplishment. While Jeremy Bentham had hoped to become the Newton of social science, Spencer could more seriously be said to have achieved this position. Many intellectuals, in all fields, are too alienated by his political philosophy to see the massive social-scientific edifice he created. Social scientists, especially in economics and sociology, who never may have heard of Spencer are following in his footsteps in terms of method. The determinism of Herbert Spencer is the determinism of today's social science, particularly of today's economics.

Spencer "abolished" change. His "process" of social evolution is an enormous, complex predetermined pattern—complete with its "progressive" and "retrograde" movements, its cycles, its rhythm of motion, its evolution, and ultimately, dissolution. From time to time, random shocks might impinge upon the system dramatically affecting the proximate, but not ultimate, course of social change (Spencer 1901b:vol. 2, 648). By applying his method to the development of the human mind and its moral choices, Spencer also "abolished" normativity, at least in its traditional sense. A mechanistic endogeneity of ethical ideas and sentiments renders autonomous moral evaluation either impossible or irrelevant. Thus, both positive and normative social science implode.

This, I believe, is the position of neoclassical economics today. It has abolished genuine change and novelty, and, by applying its methods to the explanation of law and ethics, it had abolished the possibility of normative economics. In this sense, Spencer, and not Adam Smith or Leon Walras, is the father of contemporary economics with all of its achievements and problems.

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