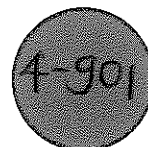


HERBERT SPENCER AND HENRY GEORGE: A CONTROVERSY

By Jack Schwartzman



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This paper deals with the economic dispute (concerning the principle of land ownership) between Herbert Spencer and Henry George.

In 1850, the famed British philosopher and evolutionist, Herbert Spencer, wrote a celebrated book, Social Statics.¹ Spencer, known best for his "synthetic philosophy" of knowledge, was, according to John Stuart Mill, "one of the acutest metaphysicians of recent times, one of the most vigorous as well as the boldest thinker that English speculation has yet produced."²

In Social Statics, Spencer demonstrated, to his own satisfaction, the invalidity of every title by which the exclusive possession of land is claimed. This is what he said in his much-quoted Chapter IX:

Given a race of beings having like claims to pursue the objects of their desires; given a world adapted to the gratification of those desires--a world into which such beings are similarly born--and it unavoidably follows that they have equal rights to the use of the world. For if each of them "has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other," then each of them is free to use the earth for the satisfaction of his wants, provided he allows all others the same liberty. And conversely, it is manifest that no one, or part of them, may use the earth in such a way as to prevent the rest from similarly using it...

Equity, therefore, does not permit property in land. For if one portion of the earth's surface may justly

become the possession of an individual and may be held by him for his sole use and benefit as a thing to which he has an exclusive right, then other portions of the earth's surface may be so held; and eventually the whole of the earth's surface may be so held, and our planet may thus lapse altogether into private hands.³

If that occurs, then the "lords of the land" may "expel" human beings from the earth.

Supposing the entire habitable globe to be so enclosed, it follows that if the landowners have a valid right to its surface, all who are not landowners have no right at all to its surface. Hence, such can exist on the earth by sufferance only. They are all trespassers. Save by the permission of the lords of the soil, they can have no room for the soles of their feet. Nay, should the others think fit to deny them a resting place, these landless men might equitably be expelled from the earth altogether.⁴

Land, therefore, cannot be morally "owned" by private landholders. To Spencer, private land "ownership" was robbery:

It can never be pretended that the existing titles to such property are legitimate....Violence, fraud, the prerogative of force, the claims of superior cunning--these are the sources to which those titles may be traced. The original deeds were written with the sword rather than with the pen...Could valid claims be thus constituted? Hardly....Does sale or bequest generate a right where it did not previously exist?...Certainly not. And if one act of transfer can give no title, can many? No; though nothing be multiplied forever, it will not produce one....

"But Time," say some, "is a great legalizer. Immemorial possession must be taken to constitute a legitimate claim." ...How long does it take for what was originally a wrong to grow into a right? At what rate per annum do invalid claims become valid?

...We have simply to inquire what is the verdict given by pure equity in the matter. And this verdict enjoins a protest against every existing pretension to the individual possession of the soil, and dictates the assertion that the right of mankind at large to the earth's surface is still valid, all deeds, customs, and laws notwithstanding.⁵

To what conclusion, therefore, did the doctrine, "that all men are equally entitled to the use of the earth," finally lead? In Spencer's mind, it led but to one conclusion; a "change of landlords." He advocated the national takeover of all land. "Such a doctrine is consistent with the highest state of civilization...Separate ownership would merge into the joint-stock ownership of the public. Instead of being in the possession of individuals, the country would be held by the great corporate body--Society."⁶ Morality sanctions such a move.

A state of things so ordered would be in perfect harmony with the moral law. Under it all men would be equally landlords; all men would be alike free to become tenants....Clearly, therefore, on such a system, the earth might be enclosed, occupied, and cultivated in entire subordination to the law of equal freedom.⁷

Still--and here Spencer hesitated--the current landowners did have a valid claim to compensation if they were forced to surrender their holdings to Society--the proposed new landlord.

The question of compensation to existing proprietors is a complicated one--one that perhaps cannot be settled

in a strictly equitable manner. Had we to deal with the parties who originally robbed the human race of its heritage, we might make short work of the matter. But, unfortunately, most of our present landowners are men who have...given for their estates equivalents of honestly earned wealth...To estimate justly and liquidate the claims of such is one of the most intricate problems Society will one day have to solve."⁸

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that the problem of compensation would one day have to be faced, Spencer postponed the confrontation to an indefinite future date. There was a more pressing, more immediate concern. There were others, besides the landed class, to consider.

In our tender regard for the vested interests of the few, let us not forget that the rights of the many are in abeyance, and must remain so, as long as the earth is monopolized by individuals...To deprive others of their rights to the use of the earth is to commit a crime inferior only in wickedness to the crime of taking away their lives or personal liberties.⁹

Spencer summarized his views in the last paragraph of Chapter IX:

Briefly reviewing the argument, we see that the right of each man to the use of the earth, limited only by the like rights of his fellow men, is immediately deducible from the law of equal freedom. We see that the maintenance of this right necessarily forbids private property in land. On examination, all existing titles to such property turn out to be invalid...We find that if pushed to its ultimate consequences a claim to exclusive possession of the soil involves a landowning despotism....And we find lastly that the theory of the co-heirship of all men to the soil is consistent with the highest civilization, and that, however difficult it may be to embody that theory in fact, Equity sternly commands it to be done.¹⁰

This was Spencer's view of the land question in 1850. As for Social Statics, it remained a classic for forty-~~three~~^{two} years until, in ~~1893~~¹⁸⁹⁴, it was thoroughly "abridged and revised" by the author, and superseded by a new edition.

* * *

In 1879, an obscure American journalist and economist, Henry George, wrote a book, Progress and Poverty,¹¹ that was destined to become a universal best-seller, and make him world famous. "There can be no question," stated a noted expositor of Henry George's philosophy, George Geiger, "that the book has had a greater circulation than any other volume on political economy."¹² John Dewey paid him the highest compliment. "It would require less than the fingers of two hands," Dewey exclaimed, "to enumerate those who from Plato down rank with George among the world's social philosophers."¹³

In Progress and Poverty, George, like Spencer before him, demonstrated the invalidity of private titles of land. He began:

Whatever may be said for the institution of private property in land...it cannot be defended on the score of justice.

The equal right of all men to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air--it is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence. For we cannot suppose that some men have a right to be in this world and others no right.

If we are here by the equal permission of the Creator, we are all here with an equal title to the enjoyment of his bounty--with an equal right to the use of all that nature so impartially offers. This is a right which is natural and inalienable; it is a right which vests in every human being as he enters the world, and which during his continuance in the world can be limited only by the equal rights of others. There is in nature no such thing as a fee simple in land.¹⁴

George echoed Spencer's cry about "trespassing" on earth:

And to this manifest absurdity does the recognition of individual right to land come when carried to its ultimate--that any one human being, could he concentrate in himself the individual rights to the land of any country, could expel therefrom all the rest of its inhabitants; and could he thus concentrate the individual rights to the whole surface of the globe, he alone of all the teeming population of the earth would have the right to live.¹⁵

Again, like Spencer, George delved into history and philosophy to prove his point about the "illegitimacy" of private titles to land:

Historically, as ethically, private property in land is robbery. It nowhere springs from contract; it can nowhere be traced to perceptions of justice or expediency; it has everywhere had its birth in war and conquest, and in the selfish use which the cunning have made of superstition and law.¹⁶

All human beings, according to George, are equally creatures of the earth. Those who appropriate, by force, what belongs to all, become the tyrants of mankind.

On the land we are born, from it we live, to it we return again--children of the soil as truly as is the blade of grass or the flower of the field. Take away from man all that belongs to land, and he is but a disembodied spirit....Everywhere, in all times, among all peoples, the possession of land is the base of aristocracy, the foundation of great fortunes, the source of power. As said the Brahmins, ages ago--

To whomsoever the soil at any time belongs, to him belong the fruits of it. White parasols and elephants mad with pride are the flowers of a grant of land!¹⁷

George reached the same conclusion as Spencer: Since private ownership of land was based on fraud, theft, and violence--and was contrary to moral law, the solution was to do away with such private land ownership. George's statement is concise:

This, then, is the remedy for the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth apparent in modern civilization, and for all the evils which flow from it:

We must make land common property.¹⁸

Such a proposal, George recognized, had to be consistent with the moral law. "When it is proposed to abolish private property in land," he stated, "the first question that will arise is that of justice."¹⁹ To George, his proposal was just, since it stemmed directly from the rights of man.

To affirm that a man can rightfully claim exclusive ownership in his own labor when embodied in material things, is to deny that any one can rightfully claim exclusive ownership in land.²⁰

Therefore, George concluded:

We have seen that private property in land has no warrant in justice, but stands condemned as the denial of natural right...We have...seen that neither on the ground of equity or expediency is there anything to deter us from making land common property.²¹

While, however, George and Spencer were seemingly in agreement about doing away with private property ~~and~~ⁱⁿ land, their writings show that they differed on two main issues:

1) compensation to the landholders; and 2) communal ownership of land. Concerning compensation, this was George's viewpoint:

Herbert Spencer says: "Had we to deal with the parties who originally robbed the human race of its heritage, we might make short work of the matter." Why not make short work of this matter anyhow? For this robbery is not like the robbery of a horse or a sum of money, that ceases with the act. It is a fresh and continuous robbery, that goes on every day and every hour. It is from the produce of the present. It is a toll levied upon labor constantly and continuously. Every blow of the hammer, every stroke of the pick, every thrust of the shuttle, every throb of the steam engine, pays its tribute.²²

If the land belongs to the people, why continue to permit the landowners to take the rent, or compensate them in any manner for the loss of rent?...It is due to nothing that the landowners have done. It represents a value created by the whole community.²³

Concerning the takeover of land, George was against nationalization of land. He declared:

I do not propose either to purchase or to confiscate private property in land. The first would be unjust; the second needless. Let the individuals who now hold it

still retain, if they want to, possession of what they are pleased to call their land. Let them continue to call it their land. Let them buy and sell, and bequeath and devise it. We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel. It is not necessary to confiscate land: it is only necessary to confiscate rent.²⁴

(In still one other respect, George disagreed with Spencer, and that was on the subject of evolution. Since this paper, however, deals with economic issues only, the theory of evolution will not be discussed here.)

Differences of procedure aside, the two men were alike in their condemnation of the existing "iniquity" resulting from the private ownership of land. George, as a "newcomer," was very much impressed with Spencer's reputation. Speaking of his own "remedy," George uttered: "Such a plan...has... been endorsed by no less eminent a thinker than Herbert Spencer."²⁵

On the topic of Socialism/Communism, both men also agreed. Spencer's proposed plan about national ownership of land, he was quite aware, would make him suspect of favoring Socialism or Communism. He made haste to "rectify" such an assumption. "Plausible though it may be," he declared, neither collectivist philosophy was "in strict conformity with the moral law." Socialism was "ethically imperfect," and Communism, "although correct in theory," was "impracticable"²⁶ and contrary to basic human striving. "An argument fatal to the Communist theory is suggested by the fact that a desire for property is one of the elements of our nature."²⁷

As for George, even though he admitted that "the ideal of Socialism is grand and noble," he had many reservations about this "ideal," and he finally repudiated it altogether. "Society is an organism," he declared, "not a machine. It can live only by the individual life of its parts. And in the free and natural development of all the parts will be secured the harmony of the whole."²⁸

Furthermore, it was George's firm belief that "modern Society" no longer could attempt Socialism. "We have passed out of the Socialism of the tribal state and cannot enter it again except by the retrogression that would involve anarchy and perhaps barbarism."²⁹

Thus matters remained until 1882--when Spencer began to hedge about his original proposal.

* * *

In March, 1882, Henry George met Herbert Spencer in London, at a reception given in honor of George. His son describes the incident:

He met Spencer...as soon as the latter appeared. This gave him real pleasure. He had been hearing stories of vanity in the English philosopher that he could scarcely credit, as he put him on a high plane...He, therefore, expected to find a man who, like himself, saw in the agrarian struggle in Ireland, the raising of the question of land ownership and fundamental economic principles. Their conversation quickly turned to Ireland...The American condemned the Government...Spencer burst into vehement dissent. "They," said he, meaning the imprisoned Land Leaguers, "have got only what they deserve. They are inciting the people to refuse to pay to their landlords

what is rightfully theirs--rent." This speech and the manner of its delivery so differed from what was expected of the man who in Social Statics wrote, "equity does not permit property in land," that Mr. George was first astonished and then disgusted at this flat denial of principle. "It is evident that we cannot agree on this matter," was all that he could say, and he abruptly left Mr. Spencer.³⁰

Bitterly disappointed in and shocked by Spencer's behavior, George later wrote to a friend: "Discount Herbert Spencer. He is most horribly conceited, and I don't believe really great men are."³¹

In the same year, 1882, the St. James's Gazette of London published an article entitled "Mr. Herbert Spencer's Political Theories," which attacked him for his views on the land question. In 1883, the Edinburgh Review published another article, "The Nationalization of Land," which criticized both Spencer and George. The conclusion read:

Writers like Mr. George and Mr. Herbert Spencer are at war not only with the first principles of political economy and of law, of social order and domestic life, but with the elements of human nature...To attack the rights of private property in land is to attack property in its more concrete form. If landed property is not secure, no property can be protected by law, and the transmission of wealth, be it large or small, is extinguished. With it expires the perpetuity of family life, and that future which cheers and ennobles the labour of the present with the hopes of the future. These are the doctrines of Communism, fatal alike to the welfare of Society and to the moral character of man.³²

Miffed at the criticism, Spencer wrote a letter to the St. James's Gazette complaining about both articles, as well

as about being joined with Henry George, whose book, Spencer said, he "closed after a few minutes on finding out how visionary were its ideas." He continued:

Had the Edinburgh reviewer read even the next chapter...he would not have recklessly coupled me with Mr. George as upholding "the doctrines of Communism, fatal alike to the welfare of Society and to the moral character of man;" for he would have discovered the fact...that such current legislation is regarded by me as Communistic, and is for this reason condemned as socially injurious and individually degrading.³³

As for the St. James's Gazette article, Spencer argued that it did not represent his views correctly, and that in a book written subsequent to Social Statics, he had modified his original stand, by using such expressions as: "it may be doubted," "it seems possible," "perhaps," and so on. Even in Social Statics, he claimed, his conclusions were only "tentative," "qualified," and "by no means positive," and dealt only with the future. "The purely ethical view of the matter does not obviously harmonize with the political and the politico-economic views."³⁴

Spencer remained disdainful of George's theories for the rest of his life. Two years later, in 1884, in two separate articles, Spencer made adverse references to George.³⁵

In "The Coming Slavery," one of the two articles, the following passage appears:

Communistic theories...are being advocated more and more vociferously by popular leaders...There is the movement for land-nationalization which, aiming at a system of land-tenure...is, as all the world knows, pressed by Mr. George and his friends with avowed disregard for the just claims of existing owners, and as the basis of a scheme going more than half-way to State-Socialism.³⁶

In "The Sins of Legislators," the second article, Spencer accused "George and his friends" of "tacitly assuming" the doctrine of confiscation of property:

And now this doctrine, which has been tacitly assumed, is being openly proclaimed. Mr. George and his friends...are pushing the theory to its logical issue. They have been instructed by examples, yearly increasing in number, that the individual has no rights but what the community may equitably over-ride; and they are now saying--"It shall go hard but we will better the instruction, and abolish individual rights altogether."³⁷

(George's rebuttal to all of Spencer's comments and writings about land ownership--on and after 1882--will appear in a later part of this paper.)

Five years passed before Spencer felt compelled again to "explain" his ideas concerning land ownership. In a letter to the London Times, in 1889, he defended himself:

I was referred to as having set forth certain opinions respecting landownership. Fearing that, if I remain silent, many will suppose I have said things which I have not said, I find it needful to say something in explanation....

The work referred to--Social Statics--was intended to be a system of political ethics--absolute political ethics, or that which ought to be, as distinguished from relative political ethics, or that which is, at present the nearest practicable approach to it.³⁸

Spencer added that (in 1850 as well as in 1889) his motive was to denounce Socialism and Communism, "to which I was then as profoundly averse as I am now."³⁹ He once more spoke about the qualifying words he used (in respect to the problem of land ownership), such as: "possible," "possibly," and "perhaps," and added: "I have no positive opinion as to what may hereafter take place. The reason for this state of hesitancy is that I cannot see my way toward reconciliation of the ethical requirements with the politico-economical requirements." He concluded his letter by stating that he was not certain about the effectiveness of the policy of land nationalization. "The belief," he wrote, "that land would be better managed by public officials than it is by private owners is a very wild belief."⁴⁰

In an editorial, the Times responded:

Were we asked to point a moral for philosophers, we should bid them beware of meddling with the absolute. Forty years ago Mr. Spencer set forth in search of "absolute political ethics," and constructed his system to his own satisfaction. But it turns out to have been the most relative of things after all, since for the last fifteen years it has ceased to be absolute even to the mind that conceived it.⁴¹

In another letter to the Times, later that year, Spencer again differentiated between "absolute" and "relative" ethics:

I cannot allow the late controversy to pass without disclaiming the absurd ideas ascribed to me. The ascription of these ideas has been made possible only by ignoring the distinction pointed out in my first letter between

absolute ethics and relative ethics, or the ethics of immediate practice--a distinction inadequately recognized in my early work, long since withdrawn...The suggestion that an ideal must be kept in view, so that our movement may be toward it and not away from it, has been regarded as a proposal forthwith to realize the ideal.⁴²

In 1892, Spencer finally "abridged and revised" Social Statics, and published it, together with The Man Versus the State, in one volume.⁴³ In the Preface, Spencer admitted that he "had relinquished some of the conclusions" previously held. He referred the reader to a new volume of his that was published the preceding year. The new work was called Justice, and contained (he stated) his ideas brought up to date.⁴⁴ The abridged and revised edition of Social Statics made no mention of the land problem, and the entire Chapter IX of the original edition was completely eliminated.

In Justice, one pertinent comment appears, which may be said to represent the "new" Spencer:

If, during the many transactions which have brought about existing landownership, there have been much violence and much fraud, these have been small compared with the violence and the fraud which the community would be guilty of did it take possession, without payment for it, of that artificial value which the labour of nearly two thousand years has given to the land.⁴⁵

Justice also contains a chapter entitled "The Rights to the Uses of Natural Media." Spencer, in that chapter, distinguished between the right to light and air, and the right to land. His conclusion was that the landowners do

have the right to the exclusive use of land until and unless they are paid its full value.⁴⁶

This was Spencer's position (concerning land ownership) in 1892.

* * *

When Spencer's letter to the St. James's Gazette was called to George's attention, he became furious and incensed. Writing to a friend, he declared: "Spencer is going the way of Comte--going insane from vanity."⁴⁷

The revised Social Statics shocked and enraged Henry George. Hastily, he composed a book, A Perplexed Philosopher,⁴⁸ which he published in 1892, the same year that witnessed the appearance of the abridged Social Statics. George's entire text was an attack on Spencer and his new attitude. George organized his argument chronologically.

In 1879, George began, when Progress and Poverty first came out, he fully expected Spencer to support him--but it was only wishful thinking.

Believing in Mr. Spencer's good faith, deeming him not a mere prater about justice, but one who ardently desired to carry it into practice, we who sought to promote what he himself had said that equity sternly commanded, naturally looked for some word of sympathy and aid from him, the more so as the years had brought him position and influence, the ability to command attention and the power to affect a large body of admirers who regard him as their intellectual leader.

But we looked in vain. When the Justice that in the academic cloister he had so boldly invoked came forth into the streets and market-places, to raise her standard and call her lovers, Mr. Spencer, instead of hastening to greet her, did his best to get out of the way.⁴⁹

Concerning Spencer's letter to the St. James's Gazette, George felt that here was a splendid opportunity for Spencer either to repeat, courageously, his original beliefs, or "straightforwardly to recant, to apologize to landowners, and to plead that he was young and foolish" when he wrote his 1850 book. "But," George concluded, "instead of manfully defending the truth he had uttered, or straightforwardly recanting it, Mr. Spencer sought to shelter himself behind ifs and buts, perhapses and it-may-bes, and the implications of untruths."⁵⁰

Referring to the charge of Communism leveled against both Spencer and George, the latter stated:

Mr. Spencer is more than unfair...in assuming that the charge of upholding Communism, etc., is applicable to me though not to him. For, although my book was too visionary for him to read, he had at least read the Edinburgh article, and knew that the charge against me had no other ground than that against him--the denial of the moral validity of private property in land.⁵¹

The letter to the St. James's Gazette, George scornfully indicated, revealed Spencer's true character:

This letter is not a withdrawal or a recantation of what Mr. Spencer had said against private property in land. It does not rise to that dignity. It is merely an attempt to avoid responsibility and to placate by subterfuge the powerful landed interests now aroused to anger. But it does indicate what a moral change had come over Mr. Spencer since he wrote Social Statics.⁵²

Furthermore:

...as hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue, so the very crookedness of this letter indicates Mr. Spencer's reluctance flatly to deny the truth to which he had borne witness. He no more wanted to deny it than Simon Peter to deny his Lord. But the times had changed since he wrote Social Statics. From an unknown man, printing with difficulty an unsalable book, he had become a popular philosopher, to whom all gratifications of sense, as of intellect, were open.⁵³

Answering Spencer's own charges, in the two 1884 articles, that "Mr. George and his friends" were Communist sympathizers, George lashed out:

...in nothing I have ever written or spoken is there any justification for such a characterization. I am not even a land nationalizationist...I have never advocated the taking of land by the State...I have always opposed governmental interference. I have been an active, consistent, and absolute free trader, and an opponent of all schemes that would limit the freedom of the individual. I have been...a clearer and more resolute upholder of the rights of property than has Mr. Spencer.⁵⁴

Referring to Spencer's 1889 letter to the Times (wherein Spencer denied, on the ground of "relative political ethics,"

that he ever favored any political action against the landed interests), George accused him of lying. "Mr. Spencer," George contended, "in Social Statics, did condemn private property in land, did advocate the resumption of land by the community, did unequivocally and unreservedly, and with all his force, declare for what is now called land nationalization."⁵⁵ "Could there be," George asked, "any sadder commentary upon the Herbert Spencer who in 1889 wrote this letter to the Times?"⁵⁶

As to "absolute" and "relative" ethics:

What Mr. Spencer does..., in the name of his convenient fiction of relative ethics, is to justify the habitual violations of the right of property...and thus to make his philosophy of things as they ought to be, conform the better with things as the ruling classes desire to maintain them. And he does this effectually,... in idle platitudes.⁵⁷

Discussing the revised Social Statics, George could not contain his rage:

But now at last, it has been done for. It has not been killed outright; that would be mercy compared with its present fate. It has been...disemboweled, stuffed, mummified...⁵⁸

The revised edition, George wrote, no longer concerned him. For Spencer's new view, one now had to turn, at Spencer's own suggestion, to his new book, Justice.⁵⁹ In that book, George declared, Spencer so "blurred" the distinctions between

land and other "natural media" as to make the discussion of the land problem meaningless. "The right of an existing holder of land can be equitably superseded," Spencer had said in Justice, "only if there exists a prior right of the community at large."⁶⁰

George openly showed his contempt:

Not merely is the burning question thus minimized and confused, but it becomes easier by means of analogy to slide over the injustice of the present treatment of land--an injustice which, as Mr. Spencer had himself previously seen, is inferior only to murder or slavery--and to bring private property in land into the category of things with which we need not concern ourselves.⁶¹

The rights to the use of light, air, and other natural media are in truth as inseparable from the right to the use of land as the bottom of that atmospheric ocean which surrounds our globe is inseparable from the globe's surface; and the pretense of treating them separately could spring only from Mr. Spencer's evident desire to confuse the subject he is pretending to treat, to cover with a fog of words his abandonment of a position incapable of refutation.⁶²

Paraphrasing Spencer's famous opening passage in the 1850 Social Statics, George, with bitter sarcasm, presented Spencer's new position:

Given a race of beings having like claims to pursue the objects of their desires--given a world adapted to the gratification of those desires--a world into which such beings are similarly born, and it unavoidably follows that they have the right to use this world as soon as they have paid the full value of it to those of their number who call themselves its owners.⁶³

With poetic eloquence, George summoned "both" Herbert Spencers (the past and the present) to the Court of Justice:

Try Herbert Spencer by the ideas that he once held--the idea of a Living God, whose creatures we are, and the idea of a divine order, to which we are bound to conform. Or try him by what he now professes--the idea that we are but the evolutionary results of the integration of matter and motion. Try him by the principles of Social Statics, or try him by the principles of Justice. In this chapter he proves himself alike a traitor to all that he once held and to all that he now holds--a conscious and deliberate traitor, who assumes the place of the philosopher, the office of the judge, only to darken truth and to deny justice; to sell out the right of the wronged and to prostitute his powers in the defense of the wronger.

Is it a wonder that intellectually, as morally, this chapter is beneath contempt?⁶⁴

As to compensation to the landholders, George was vehement in his opposition. "For compensation," he cried out, "implies equivalence. To compensate for the discontinuance of a wrong is to give those who profit by the wrong the pecuniary equivalent of its continuance."⁶⁵

"The question we are discussing," he argued, still referring to the topic of compensation, "is a moral question"--and there can never be any payment for perpetuating immorality, such as slavery or private property in land.⁶⁶

With a sweeping denunciation, George dismissed Spencer from further consideration:

...This advocate of the rich against the poor, of the strong against the weak, declares that the toiling masses of England, made ignorant and brutal and powerless by their disinheritance, have lost their natural rights by serving as food for powder and payers of taxes in foreign wars waged by the ruling classes.⁶⁷

In his first book, written when he believed in God, in a divine order, in a moral sense, and which he has

now emasculated, he does appear as an honest and fearless, though somewhat too careless a thinker. But this part of our examination which crosses what is now his distinctive philosophy shows him to be, as a philosopher ridiculous, as a man contemptible...

If the result is to shatter an idol, I trust it may also be to promote freedom of thought.⁶⁸

* * *

George's A Perplexed Philosopher infuriated Spencer. In a letter written to a friend in 1893, he accused George of writing "calumnious and vituperative passages," as well as "false insinuations."⁶⁹ He added: "I have continued to maintain that the right of the whole community to the land survives, but...that the community cannot equitably resume possession of the land without making compensation...In recent years I have reached the conclusion that to make anything like equitable compensation, the amount required would be such as to make the transaction a losing one...I reached the conclusion that the system of public administration, full of the vices of officialism, would involve more evil than the present system of private administration. No change has occurred in my view of the principle of the matter, but only in my view of policy."⁷⁰

In his autobiography, Spencer bitterly reminisced:

In my first book, Social Statics, it was contended that alienation of the land from the people at large is inequitable; and that there should be a restoration of it to the State, or incorporated community, after

making due compensation to existing landowners. In later years I concluded that a resumption on such terms would be a losing transaction, and that individual ownership under State-suzerainty ought to continue. In his Progress and Poverty, Mr. Henry George, quoting the conclusion drawn in Social Statics, made it a part-basis for his arguments; and when my changed belief was made public, his indignation was great. There resulted after some years a work by him entitled A Perplexed Philosopher, in which he devoted three hundred odd pages to denunciation, not only of my views but of my motives, and assailed me as a traitor to the cause of the people. He alleged that my change of opinion must have resulted from a wish to ingratiate myself with the landed and ruling classes: applying to me Browning's lines in "The Lost Leader--" "Just for a handful of silver he left us, just for a ribbon to stick in his coat." This he did in face of the fact that in works quoted by him, I have spoken disrespectfully of the two most conspicuous members of these classes, Mr. Gladstone and Lord Salisbury...⁷¹

George, in turn, continued to attack Spencer. In a letter written to a friend, he commented: "I have no respect for Spencer as a philosopher. He was perplexed even in Social Statics, and he got worse and worse when he went into the philosophy business... I think from the very first Spencer as a philosopher is ridiculous... And I regard his great reputation as a bladder which will collapse in a few years if not pricked...Of course I would never touch him but for his attitude on the land question."⁷²

The dispute between Spencer and George was never resolved. In less than a decade, both would be dead, George in 1897, Spencer in 1903. Spencer would be destined to live his remaining years in a surprising eclipse of popularity, and in strange obscurity.

Insofar as the land problem is concerned, it, too, remains unresolved, as vital now as it was a century ago. As for

Spencer and George, their bitterness and hostility have long since faded into history. Commenting on both adversaries, Professor Geiger wisely observed:

Perhaps it was a temperamental difference between the two men, rather than the unworthy motives and blind stupidity with which each charged the other, that accounted for their divergent interests....And maybe it would be best to conclude the dreary record of the attacks and counterattacks of George and Spencer with just such a recourse to differing intellectual interests--to a distinction between the student and the reformer, both, strangely enough, philosophers.⁷³

NOTES

¹Herbert Spencer, Social Statics (1850; rpt. New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1954).

²Henry George, A Perplexed Philosopher (1892; rpt. New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1940) p. xii.

³Social Statics, pp. 103-104.

⁴Ibid., p. 104.

⁵Ibid., pp. 104-105.

⁶Ibid., p. 111.

⁷Ibid., pp. 111-112.

⁸Ibid., p. 112.

⁹Ibid., pp. 112-113.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 113.

¹¹Henry George, Progress and Poverty (1879; rpt. New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1979).

¹²George Raymond Geiger, The Philosophy of Henry George (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), pp. 55-56, footnote 44.

¹³Significant Paragraphs from Henry George's Progress and Poverty (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1929). The quoted passage is from the dedication, on the page following the title page.

¹⁴Progress and Poverty, pp. 338-339.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 345.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 370.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 296.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 328.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 333.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 336-337.

²¹Ibid., p. 403.

²²Ibid., p. 364.

²³Ibid., p. 365.

²⁴Ibid., p. 405.

²⁵Ibid., p. 404.

²⁶Social Statics, p. 118.

²⁷Ibid., p. 119.

²⁸Progress and Poverty, p. 321.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 320-321.

³⁰Henry George, Jr., The Life of Henry George (1900; rpt. New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1960), pp. 369-370.

³¹Ibid., p. 370.

³²A Perplexed Philosopher, p. 57.

³³Ibid., pp. 58-59.

³⁴Ibid., p. 59.

³⁵In 1892, Herbert Spencer combined the two articles here referred to with two other articles published in 1884, in the form of a book, The Man Versus the State; he then combined this last book with Social Statics, Abridged and Revised, and published both books in one volume, in 1892. All references in this paper to both books will be cited from the reprint edition of 1893, published in New York by D. Appleton and Company. For purposes of brevity, the combined volume will be referred to as Social Statics, Abridged.

³⁶Social Statics, Abridged, p. 319.

³⁷Ibid., p. 371.

³⁸A Perplexed Philosopher, p. 74.

³⁹Ibid., p. 75.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 77.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 93-94.

⁴²Geiger, p. 302.

⁴³See note 35, above.

⁴⁴The book is Part IV of the series of volumes by Herbert Spencer, totally entitled Principles of Ethics.

⁴⁵Geiger, p. 307.

⁴⁶See the reprint of the entire chapter in A Perplexed Philosopher, pp. 150-160; the comments of Henry George appear in the pages following.

⁴⁷George, Jr., p. 420, footnote 1.

⁴⁸See note 2, above.

⁴⁹A Perplexed Philosopher, pp. 53-54.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 57-58.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 61.

⁵²Ibid., p. 63.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 80.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 86.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 204.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 105.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 107.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 159-160.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 149.

⁶²Ibid., p. 169.

⁶³Ibid., p. 181.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 191.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 224.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 233.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 254.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 274-275.

⁶⁹Geiger, p. 315.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 315-316.

⁷¹Herbert Spencer, An Autobiography (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), II, p. 536.

⁷²Geiger, p. 330.

⁷³Ibid., p. 335.

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1986 Vancouver Conference - read by Jack Schwartzman

MY FINANCIAL CAREER

By Stephen Leacock

WHEN I go into a bank I get rattled. The clerks rattle me; the wickets rattle me; the sight of the money rattles me; everything rattles me.

The moment I cross the threshold of a bank and attempt to transact business there, I become an irresponsible idiot.

I knew this beforehand, but my salary had been raised to fifty dollars a month and I felt that the bank was the only place for it.

So I shambled in and looked timidly round at the clerks. I had an idea that a person about to open an account must needs consult the manager.

I went up to a wicket marked "Accountant." The accountant was a tall, cool devil. The very sight of him rattled me. My voice was sepulchral.

"Can I see the manager?" I said, and added solemnly, "alone." I don't know why I said "alone."

"Certainly," said the accountant, and fetched him.

The manager was a grave, calm man. I held my fifty-six dollars clutched in a crumpled ball in my pocket.

"Are you the manager?" I said. God knows I didn't doubt it.

"Yes," he said.

"Can I see you," I asked, "alone?" I didn't want to say "alone" again, but without it the thing seemed self-evident.

The manager looked at me in some alarm. He felt that I had an awful secret to reveal.

"Come in here," he said, and led the way to a private room. He turned the key in the lock.

"We are safe from interruption here," he said; "sit down."

We both sat down and looked at each other. I found no voice to speak.

"You are one of Pinkerton's men, I presume," he said.

He had gathered from my mysterious manner that I was a detective.

I knew what he was thinking, and it made me worse.

"No, not from Pinkerton's," I said, seeming to imply that from a rival agency.

"To tell the truth," I went on, as if I had been prompted about it, "I am not a detective at all. I have come to open an account. I intend to keep all my money in this bank."

The manager looked relieved but still serious; he concluded that I was a son of Baron Rothschild or a young Gould.

"A large account, I suppose," he said.

"Fairly large," I whispered. "I propose to deposit fifty-six dollars now and fifty dollars a month regularly."

The manager got up and opened the door. He called to the accountant.

"Mr. Montgomery," he said unkindly loud, "this gentleman is opening an account, he will deposit fifty-six dollars. Good morning, I rose.

A big iron door stood open at the side of the room.

"Good morning," I said, and stepped into the safe.

"Come out," said the manager coldly, and showed me the way.

I went up to the accountant's wicket and poked the ball at him with a quick convulsive movement as if I were doing a juring trick.

My face was ghastly pale.

"Here," I said, "deposit it." The tone of the words seemed

"Let us do this painful thing while the fit is on us."

He took the money and gave it to another clerk.

He made me write the sum on a slip and sign my name in it. I no longer knew what I was doing. The bank swam before me.

"Is it deposited?" I asked in a hollow, vibrating voice.

"It is," said the accountant.

"Then I want to draw a cheque."

My idea was to draw out six dollars of it for present use. The manager gave me a cheque-book through a wicket and someone else brought me how to write it out. The people in the bank had the idea that I was an invalid millionaire. I wrote something on the slip and thrust it in at the clerk. He looked at it.

"What! are you drawing it all out again?" he asked in