MAJOR CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERTARIAN THINKERS

EDITED BY JOHN MEADOWCROFT

HERBERT SPENCER

Herbert Spencer

Alberto Mingardi

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Series Introduction

The *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series aims to show that there is a rigorous, scholarly tradition of social and political thought that may be broadly described as 'conservative,' 'libertarian' or some combination of the two.

The series aims to show that conservatism is not simply a reaction against contemporary events, nor a privileging of intuitive thought over deductive reasoning; libertarianism is not simply an apology for unfettered capitalism or an attempt to justify a misguided atomistic concept of the individual. Rather, the thinkers in this series have developed coherent intellectual positions that are grounded in empirical reality and also founded upon serious philosophical reflection on the relationship between the individual and society, how the social institutions necessary for a free society are to be established and maintained, and the implications of the limits to human knowledge and certainty.

Each volume in the series presents a thinker's ideas in an accessible and cogent manner to provide an indispensable work for students with varying degrees of familiarity with the topic as well as more advanced scholars.

The following twenty volumes that make up the entire *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series are written by international scholars and experts:

The Salamanca School by Andre Azevedo Alves (LSE, UK) and José Manuel Moreira (Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal)
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Of course, in any series of this nature, choices have to be made as to which thinkers to include and which to leave out. Two of the thinkers in the series – F. A. Hayek and James M. Buchanan – have written explicit statements rejecting the label 'conservative.' Similarly, other thinkers, such as David Hume and Karl Popper, may be more accurately described as classical liberals than either conservatives or libertarians. But these thinkers have been included because a full appreciation of this particular tradition of thought would be impossible without their inclusion; conservative and libertarian thought cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of the intellectual contributions of Hume, Hayek, Popper and Buchanan, among others. While no list of conservative and libertarian thinkers can be perfect, then, it is hoped that the volumes in this series come as close as possible to providing a comprehensive account of the key contributors to this particular tradition.

John Meadowcroft
King's College London

Series Editor's Preface

Herbert Spencer was one of the foremost intellectuals of the Victorian era, his works widely read and debated by his contemporaries. But in the twentieth century Spencer's reputation suffered a dramatic decline, so that today his work is often seen as being of purely historical interest – an example of a particular mindset that has long been consigned to history.

In this book, Dr Alberto Mingardi of the Istituto Bruno Leoni makes a compelling case for the continued relevance and significance of Spencer's work. Spencer was a thinker who engaged with the big philosophical and practical issues of his day and ours: the relationship between the individual and the state; the nature of majoritarian democracy; the legitimacy of private property; the consequences of the transition from relatively simple, feudal communities to complex, industrial societies; and the causes of war and the prospects of international peace. In all these areas Spencer made important and original contributions that reward engagement with his work and ideas.

As Dr Mingardi sets out, Spencer's analysis of these issues makes him an important originator of the evolutionary classical liberal or libertarian approach that was exemplified in the twentieth century by F. A. Hayek. Much of Spencer's work develops the proposition that human civilization is on a progressive, evolutionary course towards a future in which government will provide only a minimal framework of the rule of law and the enforcement of property rights, allowing individuals to meet one another's needs in the marketplace. Hence, for Spencer, the future was individualist. But as the scope of state action expanded and classical liberal ideas became increasingly marginalised

during the course of his life, Spencer grew evermore pessimistic about the future prospects for liberty.

By setting out Spencer's thought in a highly lucid and accessible manner, this volume makes a crucial contribution to the *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series. It presents Spencer's intellectual contributions in the context of his life and times, considers the reception of Spencer's work by his contemporaries, notes its long decline in influence and argues for its continuing relevance to those scholars seeking to grapple with the proper relationship between the individual and the state. As such, this volume provides an excellent introduction to Spencer's work and engages with the more advanced debates that his thought addresses. Dr Mingardi shows that the neglect of Spencer by so many contemporary scholars has been to the detriment of political and social theory; Spencer is a scholar to be returned to the libertarian and conservative canon.

John Meadowcroft
King's College London

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This book would not have seen light if it hadn't been for John Meadowcroft. Special thanks are due to John not only for being so confident in me as to insist I take up the endeavour, but also for his patience with my many delays and weaknesses.

This book would have never been completed if it were not for the time spent at Franco Debenedetti's peaceful house in Dobbiaco, in the Dolomites. I am indebted to Franco for his patience with me, not to mention the many great conversations and glorious bottles of wine.

This book has many faults, for which I take sole responsibility. But it would have far more if my daily work as the director general of Istituto Bruno Leoni lacked the splendid aid of our executive team: Filippo Cavazzoni, Vera Costantino, Elena Lanzotti, Carlo Stagnaro, Sara Scordari. They are a crew of fabulous people, who make fighting for liberty a personal joy besides a moral duty. Oscar Giannino, as always, provided constant encouragement. David Perazzoni deserves more gratitude than I can express, for he patiently re-read every single sentence that escaped my pen. The corrections to the manuscript were completed during a period I spent as a Visiting Fellow at the Hoover

Institution (Stanford, California), where I benefited from a most hospitable environment.

This book is dedicated to the unforgettable memory of Lord Harris of High Cross, a Richard Cobden of our times.

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Introduction

'The reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated.' Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) has long been considered nothing more than an archeological relic of the Victorian era. In his classic *The Structure of Social Action* (itself now somehow a forgotten work), the great sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–79) claimed Spencer as a victim of the very God he constantly preached: Evolution. It was 'the vengeance of . . . evolution' which led to the 'evolution of scientific theory' and evidently killed Herbert Spencer (Parsons 1937, p. 3).[1]

Parsons, himself a 'liberal' in the modern sense, was quoting Crane Brinton's (1898–1968) *English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. Brinton defined Spencer as 'the intimate confidant of a strange and rather unsatisfactory God, whom he called the principle of Evolution. His God has betrayed him. We have evolved beyond Spencer' (Brinton 1949, p. 227).

Brinton was surely echoing what many thought in the 1930s, when he asked:

> Who now reads Spencer? It is difficult for us to realize how great a stir he made in the world. The *Synthetic Philosophy* penetrated into many a bookshelf which held nothing else quite so heavy. It lay beside the works of Buckle and Mill on the shelf of every Englishman of a radical turn of mind. It was read, discussed, fought over. And now it is a drug on the second-hand market. (Brinton 1949, p. 226)

In a nutshell, it seems the fate of Herbert Spencer was very much the reverse of the destiny of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900). Twenty years Spencer's junior, Nietzsche was not widely recognized in life but exerted a lasting influence on the development of twentieth-century thinking. On the other hand, Spencer was seen by his contemporaries as a major thinker for most of his adult life. Though his nervous breakdowns, poor health and idiosyncratic character seemingly did not allow him to enjoy this celebrity status, he was indeed discussed and much thought of by the educated man of his age. His popularity went beyond the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon world as he developed a growing following in continental Europe. He was 'on the edge': he provided his readers with the impression that he was one of the very few masters dominating the intricacies of the time, and casting light on the obscurity of the future. There was hardly a subject he did not write on, and his *Synthetic Philosophy* seemed to embrace all the span of the knowable. He was perhaps the only philosopher to sell one million copies of his work while still alive. Robert Nisbet (1913–96) noted that

> his relentless rationalism, his unquenchable faith in the individual and in voluntary cooperation, and his conviction of the necessity in the entire world of human progress toward ever higher levels of freedom, gave him an influence in social and economic areas that has been exceeded only by Karl Marx. (Nisbet 1980, p. 236)

In a way, he was *the* philosopher of his time. 'If the Victorian age was pre-eminently the age of self-made men, Spencer was pre-eminently its self-made philosopher' (Taylor 2007, p. 144).

Alas, posterity can be a hard judge. The tides turned very rapidly for Spencer.

When the British people mourned his death in 1903, memorial activities were readily set up with no economies of pomp. Among others, 'a sum of £1000 was presented to the University of Oxford by Mr Shyamaij Krishnavarma to found a Herbert Spencer Lectureship' (Duncan 1904, II, p. 483). If Spencer

would have approved of his friend Auberon Herbert (1838–1906) giving a lecture in this series in 1905 and Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911) delivering it in 1906, he would have been distinctly less pleased with many of the subsequent lecturers. His intellectual legacy was quickly dispersed, and looked irrelevant as the world moved towards more government intervention rather than less in the many areas of social life.

Talking of metaphors, the fate of Spencer is best epitomized by the fact that Beatrice Potter (1866–1943), the daughter of dear friends who grew up literally at his knee, turned out to be perhaps the most vocal and effective promoter of Fabian socialism, a set of ideas that Spencer identified as inimical to his own.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that such an unforgiving dismissal of Spencer as Brinton's dates back to the New Deal era, when the events seemed destined to march in a very un-Spencerian direction. Herbert Spencer's political convictions were constants throughout his life. If he was attacked for minor self-corrections over the years, his consistency was remarkable. Ever since his youth, he preached the gospel of smaller government, believing that the evolution of human cooperation was leading us in the way of freedom. In his first, major work, *Social Statics*, he came to postulate 'the right to ignore the state.' Later in time, he stopped to bend over anarchism, but never surrendered to the idea that any step towards a bigger state could be anything less than a form of atavism. He was an adamant pacifist and must not have been pleased to see the first steps toward what later came to be the modern welfare state in Britain. In the face of rising public expenditure both on the 'social' and the 'military' front, he opposed the warfare–welfare state to the bone.

Very soon after history gave birth to the twentieth century, in England as well as in the United States as much as anywhere else in the world 'in the transition from war mood to the disillusionment of the 1920s, the philosophy and practice of liberalism was the chief victim' (Ekirch 2009, p. 243).

There are many reasons why Spencer could not be popular in the twentieth century. One was his adamant faith in the progress of human society 'from status to contract,' to quote Henry

Sumner Maine (1822–88), from archaic face-to-face societies dominated by coercion to impersonal, freer societies driven by private contracts. Mercilessly the day after day developments of politics were contradicting the pattern of evolution he sketched in all his writings: less spontaneous cooperation, and growing coercion, seemed to be the inevitable consequences of progress. As free markets did not enjoy great popularity for most of the twentieth century, so one of their staunchest champions could hardly enjoy much good press.

But Spencer was on the losing side in other fields too. The ever-growing professionalization in academia and a higher division of intellectual labour made it increasingly difficult for scholars to cope with system-builders whose ambitions were as great as Spencer's. Plus, the sticky label of 'social Darwinist' came to cast an ominous shadow over his figure – social Darwinism being associated with racism and imperialism. Also, the traditions of natural rights and of classical utilitarianism, both influential in the development of Spencer's thought, were long deemed as vestiges of the past – at least until the 1970s, when they both started to enjoy some kind of a revival.

Contrary to figures such as Darwin (1809–82) and Mill (1806–73), it became fashionable to dismiss Spencer as at best an ideologue. For such a distinguished historian of the Victorian age as Gertrude Himmelfarb, he was nothing but 'an autodidact and popularizer by temperament,' whose work was 'a parody of philosophy' (Himmelfarb 1959, p. 213).

The man of his age, Spencer had difficulties in making it into the future. But perhaps the question of who reads Spencer today could, in the early twenty-first century, bear different answers than it did right after the Great Depression.

A growing body of literature is now seeing the development of the free society through evolutionary lenses. Though some of these authors do not even quote Spencer (e.g. Rubin 2002), and though they clearly can access a much wider pool of information about our evolutionary past, they reach conclusions that are surprisingly similar to those that Spencer foresaw in the 1800s.

A caveat is due to the reader. This short monograph concentrates exclusively on Herbert Spencer's political thought, and

the much larger body of his work is examined only superficially and specifically in connection with his political thinking. Spencer produced four major works on political philosophy: *The Proper Sphere of Government* (1842–43), *Social Statics* (1851), *The Man Versus the State* (1884), and 'Justice,' the fourth part of his *Principles of Ethics* (published before the remaining parts, in 1891). This monograph will focus by and large on Spencer's political thought as it emerges from these works, plus a few important articles on political subjects. Frequent reference will be made to his *Autobiography* (1904) because in those two fat volumes Spencer reconstructs the development of his thought over his entire lifetime.

Spencer's life was not adventurous or by any standard filled with exciting events, but I have tried to summarize it, albeit very briefly, in the Chapter 2. The central chapter of the monograph aims to present, in a way that aims to be first and foremost fair to him, his political thought. I have chosen to discuss his influence by linking him directly to the work of some of his disciples and to later thinkers who – for the most part independently – have developed similar ideas. This is done in the last two chapters.

To present a great thinker's worldview synthetically is always a challenge – and Spencer is no exception. Since he wrote so extensively, it is very difficult to pretend to master his thinking to the most minute detail. System builders are often possessed by fundamental intuitions that they stretch to the limits in their overreaching analyses. I will necessarily present Spencer through his generalizations and his judgments, leaving aside the cornucopia of empirical considerations and little insights they are founded upon. Spencer is an incredibly rich and interesting author, I hope this book may succeed in conveying at least a small portion of such richness and interest to the reader.

Note

[1] In a perceptive debunk of Parsons, Lorenzo Infantino noted that the very opposite might be true: authors who 'did not adapt themselves to Parsons's plan' were intentionally trashed in his work. See Infantino 1998, pp. 132–3.

2

The Life and the Character

Family and Dissent

Born in Derby on 20 April 1820, Herbert Spencer took pride in emphasizing how he came to the world in a 'dissenting family.' Dissenters, or Nonconformists, were Protestants who did not belong to the established Church of England. In England, after the *Act of Uniformity* of 1662 a Nonconformist was an English subject belonging to a non-Christian religion or any non-Anglican church. People who advocated religious liberty may also have been more narrowly considered as such. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, and those less organized were considered Nonconformists at the time of the *Act of Uniformity*. Later, as other groups formed, the label applied to them as well. These latter included Methodists, Unitarians, and members of the Salvation Army.

In England, Nonconformists were restricted from many spheres of public life and were ineligible for many forms of public educational and social benefits until the repeal in 1828 of the *Test and Corporation Acts* and the subsequent toleration. For instance, attendance at an English university had required conformity to the Church of England before University College, London (UCL) was founded, compelling Nonconformists to fund their own dissenting academies privately. For this very reason, intellectuals as prominent as Spencer or the two Mills never made it to the universities of the day.

Not surprisingly, then, Dissent was one of the magnets in nineteenth-century politics in England.[1] The disestablishment of the