

THE PERPLEXED PHILOSOPHER

The English philosopher Herbert Spencer commanded a high reputation in the late nineteenth century. John Stuart Mill described him as ‘. . . 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.’

In 1850, when he was young and unknown, he wrote a book, *Social Statics*, in which he dealt with the land question. He wrote:

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 this world. For if each of them “has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of the 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; seeing that to do this is to assume greater freedom than the rest, and consequently to break the law.

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 world may be so held; and eventually the whole of the earth’s surface may be so held, and our planet may lapse into private hands. Observe now the dilemma to which this leads.

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 . . . 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. If, then, the assumption that land can be held as property, involves that the whole globe may become the private domain of a part of its inhabitants; and if, by consequence, the rest of its inhabitants can then exercise their faculties — can even then exist — only by consent of the landowners, it is manifest that an exclusive possession of the soil necessitates the infringement of the law of equal freedom. For, men who cannot “live and move and have their being” without the leave of others, cannot be equally free with those others.

It can never be pretended that the existing titles to such property are legitimate. Should anyone think so let him look in the chronicles. 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; not lawyers, but soldiers, were the conveyancers; blows were the current coin given in payment; and for the seals, blood used in preference to wax. Could valid claims be thus constituted?

“But time”, say some, “is a great legalizer. Immemorial possession must be taken to constitute a legitimate claim. That which has been

held from age to age as private property, and has been bought and sold as such, must be now considered as irrevocably belonging to individuals.” To which proposition a willing assent must be given when its propounders can assign it a definite meaning. To do this, however, they must find satisfactory answers to such questions as: 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? If a title gets perfect in a thousand years, how much more than perfect will it in two thousand years — and so forth.

But to what does this doctrine, that men are equally entitled to the use of the earth, lead? Must we return to the times of unenclosed wilds and subsist on roots, berries, and game?

The change required would simply be a change of landlords. Separate ownerships 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. Instead of leasing his acres from an isolated proprietor, the farmer would lease them from the nation. Instead of paying his rent to the agent of Sir John or His Grace, he would pay to an agent of the community.

A state of things so ordered would be in perfect harmony with the moral law.

Either men have a right to make the soil private property, or they have not. There is no medium. We must choose one of the two positions. There can be no half opinions. In the nature of things the fact must be one way or the other.

Spencer’s thoughts were expressed plainly and unambiguously, with not the least qualification. George marveled at this kindred spirit across the Atlantic. Though certain of his ideas might not yet be fully thought out in practice and, in one place, he considers compensating landlords, George overlooked such lapses of reason as matters of slight importance. Spencer’s book was not a conspicuous success; an American edition, however, published in 1864 sold well.

Spencer had become a hero of George during his Californian days when he was putting his thinking on economic questions together. However, as he advanced in age and became a respectable figure, he hardened into a reactionary bigot. His fame now depended on his plausibility and he set out to obscure his youthful utterances. George dubbed him, on account of the patent materialism of his thinking, ‘the Pope of the agnostics.’

With the spread of George’s influence, Spencer became more uncomfortable. In late 1882, four months after *Progress and Poverty* had been reviewed in *The Times*, a review in the *Edinburgh Review* first coupled the ideas of George with Spencer. This drew from him a letter in the *Tory St. James’s Gazette*, in which he admitted reading George’s book but added that it was ‘. . . a work which I closed after a few minutes on finding how visionary were its ideas.’ He pointed out that *Social Statics* had by now been withdrawn from circulation in England and that, in his recently published *Study of Sociology and Political Institutions*, he

had sprinkled the passages on land tenure with such predicatory terms as 'it seems,' 'may be' and 'perhaps' indicating a shift away from the more certain approach of his earlier work. Therefore, he insisted, his thinking could in no way be equated with either the communists or George.

Spencer made further efforts to distance himself from the application of ideas that now appeared to him attractive in the abstract only. In 1884 in a new book, *Man versus the State*, he condemned government action to relieve poverty. George distilled the spirit of this new book thus, 'If any man would not work, neither should he eat. The reader of *Social Statics* might suppose he had made censure of landholders, whom he had been wont to refer to 'Sir John' or 'His Grace'. But now he was referring to the 'idle poor,' whom he had once reckoned to be the victims of the theft of their birthright.

He had always been dissuasive of socialist palliatives but, in *Social Statics*, Spencer acknowledged the basic cause of the condition of poverty. 'As the first item on the list there stands that injustice inflicted on nineteen-twentieths of the community by the usurpation of the soil — by the breach of their rights to use the earth. For the civil power is responsible — has itself been party to the aggression — has made it legal, and still defends it as right.'

Not only did Spencer display pitiful cowardice in denying his own arguments, but he also sought to discredit others, like George, who took up similar ideas. In *Man versus the State* he wrote, 'There is the movement for land nationalization, which aiming at a system of land tenure, equitable in the abstract, is, as the world knows, pressed by George and his friends with avowed disregard for the just claims of existing owners, and as the basis of a scheme going more than halfway to state socialism.' George had never advocated land nationalization nor even as much as considered it.

Yet Spencer had not recanted completely, for he acknowledged the equity of a system of land tenure — in abstract; even though, in *Social Statics*, he had expressly discountenanced abstract speculation. 'For what does a man really mean,' he wrote, 'by saying that something is "abstractly right!" Simply that it accords with what he, in some way or other, perceives to be the established arrangements of Divine rule. When he admits that an act is "theoretically just" he admits it to be that which, in strict duty, should be done. By "true in principle" he means in harmony with the conduct decreed for us. The course which he calls "abstractly right" he believes to be the appointed way to human happiness. There is no escape. The expressions mean this or they mean nothing.'

In November, *The Times* reported an incident in which John Morley, the Liberal politician, had been asked by a constituent whether he supported land nationalization. When Morley indicated dissent, his questioner stated that Spencer had declared that land had been made private property by force of fraud. The report drew an immediate and lengthy response from Spencer. He advanced the specious argument that *Social Statics* 'referred to ... absolute ethics, or that which ought to be, as distinguished from relative ethics ... the use of the words 'possible,' and 'possibly,' and 'perhaps,' ... shows that 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 towards reconciliation of ethical requirements with the politico-economic requirements.' He might have more honestly said that he was unable to reconcile his position in society with the radical and courageous views which he had expressed so eloquently almost forty years earlier.

In a leading article some days later, *The Times* accepted the explanation thus, 'So, without denying that he did say something of the sort, he [Mr. Spencer] explains that it was forty years ago, and that for the last fifteen years he had been doing all that he

can to suppress the book in which he said it, and that he never meant his words to have any bearing on practical questions. He was in fact engaged in constructing a system of "absolute political ethics or that which ought to be", and he was distinctly aggrieved by the transfer of his opinions from the transcendental to the very different one in which [Mr. Morley's constituents] are accustomed to dwell.'

Yet *The Times* allowed the correspondence on the matter to run, first publishing an article by Frederick Greenwood, a leading Tory, who, citing the example of Spencer, delivered a caution to social philosophers. Then Sir Louis Mallet weighed in to express the danger and wickedness that Spencer had caused by coupling land ownership with slavery. But it was Professor Thomas Huxley who really set the matter alight by stating he was sure his friend Mr. Spencer would sanction popular acts of injustice by antiquarian and speculative argument. He demanded an answer to a question which was brutal in its simplicity. 'Did AB, who had bought a piece of land as one might buy a cabbage, have a moral or legal right to it or not? If he does not, how does "absolute political ethics" deduce his right to compensation? If he does, how does "absolute political ethics" deduce the state's right to disturb him?'

Clearly, Spencer had opened a Pandora's Box by writing to *The Times*. His reply to Huxley's letter was long and only its first paragraph endeavoured to answer the Professor's question. 'As Professor Huxley admits that his friend AB's title to his plot of land is qualified by the right of the state to dispossess him if he sees well — as, by implication, that all landowners hold their land subject to the supreme ownership of the state, that is, the community — as he contends that any force or fraud by which land was taken in early days does not affect the titles of existing owners and *a fortiori* does not affect the superior title of the community — and as, consequently, he admits that the community, as supreme owner with a still valid title, may resume possession if it thinks well, he seems to me to leave the question standing very much where it stood, and since he, as I suppose, agrees with me that any such resumption, should a misjudgement lead to it, ought to be accompanied by due compensation for all the artificial value given to the land, I do not see in what respect we disagree on the land question.'

He devoted the rest of his letter to an explanation of what he meant by the term 'absolute political ethics,' concluding with the words, 'In so far as I am concerned, the controversy must end with this letter.'

George, meanwhile, was greatly enjoying following Spencer's discomfiture. In essence, all he thought Spencer was saying was, 'I admit all that the landowners may want to admit. Let us change the subject.' George decided to expose him further in a book which he called *The Perplexed Philosopher*.

Social Statics continued to be published in America until a second edition appeared in January 1892 with no references to land in it at all. In George's opinion, it was like Hamlet without Hamlet himself, and represented an advance from attempted repudiation to recantation.

Spencer's mature reflections on the land question were contained in a book entitled *Justice*, which was the tenth volume of his *Synthetic Philosophy*. Whereas *Social Statics* had treated of social reform, this larger work ventured into speculative philosophy. George was surprised to discover that the First Cause, instead of being regarded as a spiritual being, was simply referred to as 'unknowable'; a vacuum created by his denial. He found Spencer's philosophy materialistic and empty, pessimistic and fatalistic.

It was Spencer's wont to recant by confusing the issue, rather than by employing a direct denial. The space devoted to 'The

Rights of Life and Personal Liberty,' which were covered in one page of *Social Statics*, ran to two chapters in *Justice*, and contained references to numerous obscure races in his search for the truth.

In place of the chapter 'The Right to the Use of the Earth,' which had appeared in *Social Statics*, there now appeared 'The Rights to the Use of the Natural Media,' which led the reader's mind through a tortuous argument which ends with the words, 'Though the right to use the Earth, possessed by each citizen, is traversed by established arrangements to so great an extent as to be practically suspended; yet its existence as a suitable claim cannot be denied without affirming that appropriation by State decree is inequitable. The right of an existing holder of land can be equitably superseded, only if there exists a prior right of the community at large consisting of the sum of the individual rights of its members.'

The last sentence is elegant in appearance but meaningless. Spencer had ousted the equitable rights of men by the customs of the day. What need, one may ask, has man of principles and ideals when they fall under the impress of injustice? Spencer used the legal right of the community to purchase land to show that the equal right of the individual to land is recognized and the landowner's right to compensation is also endorsed. 'Since equity and custom alike imply that existing holders of particular portions of land may not be dispossessed without giving them in return its fairly estimated value, it is also implied that the wholesale resumption of the land to the community can only justly be effected by the wholesale purchase of it.'

Thus the 'absolute theory' formulated in *Social Statics* had been tempered in practice. The reasoning, however, is specious. If it is pretended that every individual has an equal right in equity to acquire land at its full value, it must also be conceded they have an equal right to a cup of tea at the Ritz. A right he shares with every other individual in mankind. George considered this argument as both morally and intellectually beneath contempt.

Having established an equal right to acquire land, in the following chapter, Spencer denies that such a right exists. George commented 'Truly *Justice* is a surprising book ... had [it] been written under coercion, if [he] was imprisoned in the chambers of an Inquisition ... we might well believe [this] section contained his sign to posterity that, in spite of the denials he had just been compelled to make, he in his heart held to the truth.'

George poured especially caustic scorn on Spencer's notion of compensation. The idea that landowners were entitled to be compensated for their land was a fantastic and vulgar speculation. Private ownership of land was robbery in George's eyes; the state does not compensate robbers.

George took particular trouble to differentiate property in land from property in other things. Spencer had mindlessly lumped everything together in order to strengthen his argument that a destruction of private property in land would lead to the destruction of all property. George defined property as the establishment of a title in things made by man. The notion that what was made by the Creator for all mankind could be privately owned was deranged and idiotic.

In another chapter, George took a pot shot at Professor Huxley, whom he dubbed Professor Bullhead. He represented him as a writer to a journal who enquired whether a slave was his property morally and legally.

George drew attention to reliance on authority:

Taking Mr. Spencer as the foremost representative of those who deny the justice and expediency of recognizing the equal right to

land — a pre-eminence given him by his great reputation ... and the fact that he once avowed the opinions he now seeks to discredit — I have set forth his utterances on the land question, from his first book to his last, printing them in full in order to do him the amplest justice, and subjecting them to an examination which anyone of ordinary ability and information is competent to test. I have thus given the best example to be found in the writings of one man, of what may be said for and what may be said against the equal right to land.

It is not the example of intellectual prostitution thus disclosed that I would dwell upon. It is the lesson that prompts to intellectual self-reliance. It is not merely the authority of Mr. Spencer as a teacher on social subjects that I would discredit; but the blind reliance upon authority ... Given a wrong which affects the distribution of wealth and differentiates society into the rich and the poor, and the recognized organs of opinion and education, since they are dominated by the wealthy class, must necessarily represent the views and wishes of those who profit or imagine they profit by the wrong.

That thought on social questions is so confused and perplexed, that the aspirations of great bodies of men, deeply though vaguely conscious of injustice, are in all civilized countries being diverted to futile and dangerous remedies, is largely due to the fact that those who are credited with superior knowledge of social and economic laws have devoted their powers, not to showing where the injustice lies but hiding it; not to clearing common thought but to confusing it.

I care nothing for creeds. I am not concerned with any one's religious belief. But I would have men think for themselves. If we do not, we can only abandon one superstition to take up another, and it may be a worse one. It is as bad for a man to think that he can know nothing as to think he knows all. There are things which it is given to all possessing reason to know, if they will but use that reason.

A Perplexed Philosopher was published in October 1892. It circulated well and received extensive press coverage, but it was the only one of his books not to be widely translated, appearing only in Russian. Indeed, the thoroughness of the exposure made it a difficult, not to say a dull, book for the general reader. It drew no direct reply from Spencer himself though he did write to an American friend: 'I have read the introduction ... and my secretary ... has read me sundry of the calumnious and vituperative passages ... irrespective of numerous utterly false insinuations, there are two direct falsehoods which it may well to name and to flatly contradict ... The first is ... where he says I have placed myself, "definitely on the side of those who contend that the treatment of land as private property cannot equitably be interfered with." I have said nothing of this kind. I have continued to maintain that the right of the whole community to the land survives and can never be destroyed.'

In fact, George never argued for the community's right to possess land, but rather against the retention of the value of land, which was the creation of the community, by private landlords. Such was the colossal egoism of Spencer that he was incapable of distinguishing between his ideas and his beliefs; he regarded George as having attacked him personally. To another correspondent he wrote, 'There is only one short word — not used in polite society — which fully describes Mr. George.' 🟩

