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HERBERT SPENCER  
ON SOCIALISM.

A REPLY

TO THE ARTICLE ENTITLED

THE COMING SLAVERY,

(In the "Contemporary Review" for April, 1884.)

BY

'FRANK FAIRMAN.'

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“ Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee.”

## HERBERT SPENCER ON SOCIALISM.

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“Is Saul also amongst the prophets?” seems to have been at one time the proverbial formula for expressing surprise, bordering on incredulity, at the appearance of any wellknown individual in a new and unexpected character, and the like feelings may probably be evoked by the inquiry—“Is Herbert Spencer also amongst the humourists?” A careful and repeated perusal, however, of his latest deliverance on social questions in the April number of the *Contemporary Review*, and a comparison of it with other writings of his which are undoubtedly serious, almost forces one to the conclusion that he is on this occasion laughing in his sleeve at the British public, and enjoying the joke of being held up as Defender of the universal-scramble and Devil-take-the-hindmost Faith which not once only, but all his life, he has laboured to destroy. Probably no one—not even Dr. Marx, himself (his works being inaccessible in English) has done so much to promote the spread of socialistic ideas in England as Mr. Spencer, and to those who have for years felt that in the principles he has laid down they had a sure and solid foundation on which to stand, and a clue to guide them in coming to a right conclusion on many vexed questions of political and social importance, it will be an immense relief to find that their great teacher has not really turned his back upon himself, but that like Rabelais and others, he is only concealing his real purpose under a cloak—not of nastiness—which neither his own taste, nor the manners of the age would permit—but of apparent hard-heartedness and economic superficiality, both of which are alike repugnant to his real nature. What better evidence can we have that a writer is masquerading than to find—

1.—That being a philanthropist, whose sympathies are not

limited by country, colour, or creed, he insults the unfortunate and apparently depreciates all attempts to help them.

2.—That being an exact and profound thinker, he overstates and mis-states his (nominal) opponent's case in order to prejudice it, and trots out from the economic stable venerable old screws like "wages-fund," which though they made good running in their day, are now only fit for a fair-trade procession.

3.—That being probably the leading philosopher of the age, he condemns, because it bears an unpopular name, the very thing which he has himself held up as the grand desideratum.

4.—That being a master of the English language, he uses terms so exactly and admirably adapted to describe the effects of the present system of production that when applied to its rival they can only be taken ironically, and—

Lastly, when there is an intelligible object for the grim joke, viz., that of sending those who are so delighted with this last essay, to study the other writings of their supposed champion, where, if they are at all amenable to reason, his inexorable logic can hardly fail to convince them of the necessity of at least as radical a reconstruction of society as even the Democratic Federation can desire. Furthermore, the discovery that there is this vein of humour in Mr. Spencer's composition will assist one to read between the lines of those portions of *Social Statics* in which he has denounced Socialism—in name—and even combatted, though, but imperfectly, some of its claims, though at the same time admitting that they spring naturally from the principles he has formulated.

Let us take these various propositions in order and see whether or not they are justified.

1.—It is hardly necessary to prove that Mr. Spencer is a genuine philanthropist, but the following sentences show what was once the real attitude of his mind towards the poorer classes, and the hard conditions of their lot:—

"It is a pity that those who speak disparagingly of the masses have not wisdom enough, to make due allowance for the unfavourable circumstances in which the masses are placed. Suppose that after weighing the evidence it should turn out that the working men do exhibit greater vices than those more comfortably off; does it therefore follow that they are morally worse? . . . Shall as much be expected at their hands as from those born



into a more fortunate position? . . . Surely the lot of the hard-handed labourer is pitiable enough without having harsh judgments passed upon him. To be wholly sacrificed to other men's happiness; to be made a mere human tool; to have every faculty subordinated to the sole function of work—this, one would say, is alone a misfortune, needing all sympathy for its mitigation. . . It is very easy for you, oh respectable citizen, seated in your easy chair, with your feet on the fender, to hold forth on the misconduct of the people, very easy for you to censure their extravagant and vicious habits, very easy for you to be a pattern of frugality, of rectitude, of sobriety. What else should you be? Here are you surrounded by comforts, possessing multiplied sources of lawful happiness, with a reputation to maintain, an ambition to fulfil, and prospects of a competency for old age. . . If you do not contract dissipated habits where is the merit? How would these virtues of yours stand the wear and tear of poverty? Where would your prudence and self-denial be if you were deprived of all the hopes that now stimulate you; if you had no better prospect than that of the Dorsetshire farm-servant with his 7s. a-week, or that of the perpetually straitened stocking weaver, or that of the mill-hand with his periodical suspensions of work? Let us see you tied to an irksome employment from dawn till dusk; fed on meagre food, and scarcely enough of that; married to a factory girl ignorant of domestic management; deprived of the enjoyments which education opens up; with no place of recreation but the pot-house, and then let us see whether you would be as steady as you are. Suppose your savings had to be made, not, as now, out of surplus income, but out of wages already insufficient for necessaries; and then consider whether to be provident would be as easy as you at present find it. . .

"How offensive it is to hear some pert, self-approving personage, who thanks God that he is not as other men are, passing harsh sentence on his poor, hardworked, heavily burdened fellow-countrymen; including them all in one sweeping condemnation, because in their struggles for existence they do not maintain the same prim respectability as himself. Of all stupidities there are few greater, and yet few in which we more doggedly persist, than this of estimating other men's conduct by the standard of our own feelings. . . We cannot understand another's character except by abandoning our own identity, and realising to ourselves his frame of mind, his want of knowledge, his hardships, temptations and discouragements. And if the wealthier classes would do this before framing their opinions of the working man, their verdict would savour somewhat more of that charity which covereth a multitude of sins." — *Social Statics*, part 3, chapter 20.

What a striking contrast do those sentiments present to the opening of the article on the Coming Slavery, where the author speaks of "the miseries of the poor being thought of as the miseries of the deserving poor, instead of being thought of as in large measure they should be, as the miseries of the undeserving poor"; goes on to describe the idlers about tavern doors, the men who appropriate the wages of their wives, the fellows who share the gains of prostitutes, &c.,

and then says—"Is it not manifest that there must exist in our midst an enormous amount of misery which is a normal result of misconduct, and ought not to be dissociated from it?" Can any one doubt that Mr. Spencer is as perfectly well aware as any one who reads these lines, that it is the misery of the deserving poor, not that of the undeserving, which has excited so much sympathy:—and that if by toiling twelve or fourteen hours a day men and women could have secured as good accommodation as well kept pigs, and as good and sufficient food as cart-horses, we should have heard no "bitter cry," and had no Royal Commission? The loungers who rush to open a cab-door are not to be lost sight of, but it is a mere gratuitous assumption that all or most of them could find better work to do. An equally patent fact is the immense rush for any opportunity of earning an honest living at even the lowest remuneration, as witness the crowds who besiege the London Docks at 6 o'clock every morning, 40 per cent. at least being stated by eye-witnesses to go away disappointed. Mr. Spencer has taken great pains to collect information regarding the aborigines of all parts of the globe, and can hardly have passed over his own countrymen; if he has ever made a personal tour of our great metropolitan markets and leading thoroughfares, early in the morning or late at night, he must be convinced from witnessing the innumerable shifts and devices resorted to, the hard work undergone, and the discomfort endured, to gain a few miserable pence and so escape the workhouse, that taking the poorer classes as a whole, laziness is the last vice which can be laid to their charge. Thriftless they undoubtedly are, but what inducement have they to be otherwise, when the most strenuous efforts would be so hopelessly futile of obtaining anything like a tangible result. Intemperate, on occasion they are also, but there is much excuse, if no justification, for their indulging when they have the means in the only form of pleasurable excitement known or open to them. Underlying these opening sentences, is the common assumption that an honest, sober, and industrious workman can always find employment. It must be acknowledged that there is *some* slight colour for the assumption, but what does it come to when analysed? Simply that the best men get employed first. But if *all* were equally sober, industrious, and skilful, their good qualities would

bear no premium in the labour market, and what little foundation there is now for this assumption would vanish; so that, in fact, it rather is to the bad qualities of their fellows than to their own virtues—to the existence in short, of the tavern and street corner loungers—that the *élite* of the working classes owe such advantages as they possess. Once more, can any one suppose that Mr. Spencer, of all men, needs to have this pointed out? It is impossible.

2.—“There is a notion,” says Mr. Spencer, “always more or less prevalent, and just now vociferously expressed, that all social suffering is removable, and that it is the duty of somebody or other to remove it. Both these beliefs are false.” A great portion of social suffering arises from the death of relatives and friends, but no instructed Socialist has as yet proposed to remove it; on the contrary, unhappily, some *uninstructed* ones seem rather in favour of increasing it. Speaking seriously, however, what Socialists maintain is—not any such absurdity as the above, but that a great deal of suffering *is* removable, and in particular that an immense deal of it results directly from defective social arrangements; and that this portion at least, can be, and ought to be, removed. They are firmly convinced that material improvement without moral and intellectual elevation is a chimera, but they are equally convinced that the moral elevation of the lowest class without material improvement is impossible. They agree with Mr. Spencer in accepting the scientific accuracy of the maxim, “If any will not work neither shall he eat;” but they also believe that “if any do not eat neither can he work;” and they object to the present system of distribution because on the one hand it gives plenty to eat to those who do not work at all, and on the other, leaves those who work the hardest the smallest possible means and opportunity of eating anything.

The next suggestion is that the working classes are being supplied with dwelling accommodation at less than its commercial value, because in Liverpool the municipality has spent £200,000 in pulling down and reconstructing, and “the implication is that in some way the ratepayers supply the poor with more accommodation than the rents they pay would otherwise have brought.” An equally logical implication would be, that in some way some of the non-working classes have obtained £200,000 of the ratepayer’s money be-

yond the commercial value of their property. Mr. Spencer also says that the advantages derived from free libraries, public baths, Board schools, etc., are only a rate in aid of wages, and that these seeming boons are really illusory. It might be said that these things being necessities, if they were not supplied by the public, the working classes would insist on such wages as would enable them to provide them for themselves; and such an argument would be not only plausible, but sound, assuming the premises to be correct, which evidently they are not. But the line of reasoning adopted seems to be that capitalists give as high wages as ever they can afford, many of them even coming to grief from their liberality in this respect, and that any inroads by taxation on either profits or "wages fund" necessitate, much against their will, an equivalent reduction in wages. Whether either the premises or the argument in this case be sounder than in the previous one, those who understand anything of economics must judge. It may be pointed out, however, that this view accords very ill with the conclusions of Mr. Giffen, and similar optimists, who prove very much to their own satisfaction that the wages of the working classes have considerably improved during the very period that the public have been providing these illusory benefits. Besides, supposing Mr. Spencer's criticism on this point well founded, it is obviously only an argument against half and half measures, and in favour of real Socialism, (did he mean it as such?) which would abolish this cut-throat competition between employers, by which both their own profits and the remuneration of labour are reduced to a minimum.

3.—The condemnation of Socialism by name is too obvious to need more than a general reference. To show that the *thing* itself is the only legitimate outcome of Mr. Spencer's teaching, it is necessary to refer in some detail to *Social Statics*, especially as this book is not now readily accessible. It is understood that Mr. Spencer objects to its being reprinted until he has time to revise and modify some portions, but judging by the preface to the last edition, such modifications will be confined to the practical applications of the principles laid down, and will not interfere with the principles themselves. So firmly, indeed, has the author established these, that it would be difficult even for him to upset them. It is to these that attention will be chiefly directed, rather



than to special deductions which the writer draws from them; and, be it said with all deference, it is not for a philosopher who succeeds in establishing a principle to dictate what conclusions may or may not be drawn from it; that must depend on the acknowledged rules of logic.

Without unduly lengthening these pages by citations, it may fairly be said that the one great principle which Mr. Spencer establishes as the fundamental law of morality for human beings, is what he terms "the law of equal freedom;" that is, that every individual should enjoy perfect liberty to exercise all his faculties, the only limitation being that he shall not in so doing infringe in any manner on the like freedom of others. As he puts it, "man must have liberty to go and to come; to see, to feel, to speak, to work, to get food, raiment, and shelter, and to provide for each and all the needs of his nature." (p. 93.) Again, "If this law of equal freedom is the primary law of right relationship between man and man, then no desire to get fulfilled a secondary law can warrant us in breaking it." It is here contended that the acceptance of this primary law inevitably leads to Socialism, and can lead to nothing else. Mr. Spencer has himself done the greater part of the work required to show that it does so, by himself drawing from it the deduction that it includes the right to the use of the earth. "Each 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 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." (p. 131.) Again, "It is impossible to discover any mode in which land can become private property." And at p. 143 "Bye and bye men may learn that 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."

So far so good; but the author goes a step, and a very important step further, and when dealing with the rights of property points out that all wealth being derived from the earth, the only legitimate basis of property is the exercise of man's labour upon land for which he has paid to society, the rightful owner thereof, a fair rent, and this never having been done, all personal as well as real property, is tainted and illegitimate in its origin. This important deduction of his own drawing

Mr. Spencer seems afterwards to have somewhat lost sight of. Well may he say, with reference to another matter, but it is equally applicable to this: "Due warning was given that our first principle carried in it the germs of sundry unlooked for conclusions. We have just found ourselves committed to a proposition at war with the convictions of almost all. Truth, however, must of necessity be consistent; we have, therefore, no alternative but to re-examine our pre-conceived notions in the expectation of finding them erroneous." (p. 195.) This is exactly what Socialists desire mankind to do with regard to their pre-conceived notions about the production and distribution of wealth, bearing in mind that "as liberty to exercise the faculties is the first condition of individual life, the liberty of each limited only by the like liberty of all, must be the first condition of social life, the law of equal freedom is of higher authority than all other laws." (p. 217.) Remembering also that "before establishing a code for the right exercise of faculties there must be established the condition which makes the exercise of faculties possible. It is the function of this chief institution which we call a government, to uphold the law of equal freedom." (p. 278.) Is not this precisely the contention of Socialists, that the first duty of the State is to see that each individual has a chance of exercising his faculties, the digestive ones included?

It is quite true that Mr. Spencer apparently shrinks from this "unlooked for conclusion," and declines to recognise either a right to maintenance, or the right to labour; but, as observed at the outset, a suspicion not unnaturally arises that in so doing he was possibly actuated rather by policy than conviction, especially when we examine the mode in which he deals with these two claims. He disposes of the first by asserting that it cannot be entertained until an exact definition is arrived at of what a maintenance means, whether a bare subsistence, or a certain amount, and if so how much, of comforts or luxuries. It may be replied in the first place that though this task may be difficult, it does not follow that it is impossible; and if confined, as is evidently contemplated, to those who cannot get their own living, those entrusted by society with the charge of maintaining them would easily establish a working scale, as is in fact done. Besides, as Mr. Spencer repeatedly points out in other cases, it by no means follows that the law of perfect morality is discredited because

it is difficult or even impossible of application in an imperfect state of society. Once more, Socialists do not contend that every one is entitled to a maintenance without earning it; quite the reverse. The real gist of the argument therefore, turns on the next point, the right to labour, which is dealt with still less satisfactorily. Mr. Spencer says, "First, let us make sure of the meaning wrapped up in this expression—right to labour. Evidently, if we would avoid mistakes we must render it literally—right to the labour;" (which does not seem to make it any plainer) "for the thing demanded is not the liberty of labouring; this no one disputes;" (on the contrary it is the very thing which is disputed, unless swinging one's arms and legs aimlessly is to be called labouring) "but it is the opportunity of labouring, the having remunerative employment provided, which is contended for." Now, to take Mr. Spencer literally, one wants to know whether it is the liberty combined with the opportunity which he concedes (if he does he concedes the whole point), or the liberty without the opportunity, which he seems to mean; if so, he may as well concede the liberty to fly. It is something like the liberty which calvinistic theologians accord to those predestined to damnation; just enough to save the credit of the deity, but not enough, without the effectual grace which they never get, to save their own souls. Again, "the word *right*, as here used, bears a signification quite different from its legitimate one, for it does not here imply something inherent in man, but something dependent upon external circumstances, not something possessed in virtue of his faculties, but something springing out of his relationship to others, not something true of him as a solitary individual, but something which can be true of him only as one of a community, not something antecedent to society, but something necessarily subsequent to it, not something expressive of a claim to do, but of a claim to be done unto." With the exception of the last member of the sentence, which might be disputed, this is an accurate criticism, but does it not strengthen the claim rather than weaken it? The *right*, in its strict sense, on which the claim is founded, is the right to use the faculties, and the fact that everything on which that right can be exercised, every inch of ground, and every particle of wood, stone, iron, etc., has been previously appropriated by society seems a very insufficient reason for

rejecting the claim. To so reject it, is in fact to contravene one of the fundamental rules of equity, that no one may take advantage of his own wrong doing.

Going on further, Mr. Spencer by that clear method of analysis of which he is a master, points out that when the proposition is reduced to its lowest terms, it only means that society is the employer, and therefore in effect the labourer says that A B C and D are bound to employ him; that he, with B C and D are bound to employ A; and so on with each individual of the twenty millions of whom the society may be composed; and then, with a fine touch of humour, he adds: "Thus do we see how readily imaginary rights are distinguishable from real ones. They need no disproof, they disprove themselves. The ordeal of definition breaks the illusion at once." It certainly does not break *this* illusion, if it be one; on the contrary, this admirable mode of stating the case only confirms the justice of the claim, when the real facts are considered. It is in truth the veritable A B C of Socialism. All the letters of the social alphabet, large and small, furnish employment; even the veriest waif and outcast provides employment for others, be it only the policeman and gaoler; and this claim of the right to labour is nothing more nor less than a protest on the part of the small letters, who each help to swell the demand, against the supply being monopolized by the capitals for their own profit. As Mr. Spencer himself puts it at p. 345: "We must not overlook the fact that erroneous as are these poor law and communist theories, these assertions of a man's right to maintenance and of his right to have work provided for him, they are nevertheless nearly related to a truth. They are unsuccessful efforts to express the fact that whoso is born on this planet of ours thereby obtains some interest in it—may not be summarily dismissed again—may not have his existence ignored by those in possession. In other words, they are attempts to embody that thought which finds its legitimate utterance in the law, all men have equal rights to the use of the earth. . . . After getting from under the grosser injustice of slavery men could not help beginning in course of time to feel what a monstrous thing it was that nine people out of ten should live in the world on suffrance, not having even standing room save by allowance of those who claim the earth's surface. Could it be right that all these human beings should not only be with-



out claim to the necessities of life, should not only be denied the use of those elements from which such necessities are obtainable—but should further be unable to exchange their labour for such necessities except by leave of their more fortunate fellows? . . . . To all which questions now forced upon men's minds in more or less definite shapes, there come amongst other answers these theories of a right to a maintenance and a right of labour. Whilst, therefore, they must be rejected as untenable we may still" [not give any definite answer which is more tenable, but] "recognise in them the imperfect utterances of the moral sense in its efforts to express equity."

4.—At p. 474 of the *Contemporary Review* Mr. Spencer says: "Why is this change described as the Coming Slavery? The reply is simple. All Socialism involves slavery," and then, in an eloquent passage he asks and answers the question, "what is essential to the idea of a slave?" The result being thus expressed. "The essential question is, how much is he compelled to labour for other benefit than his own, and how much he can labour for his own benefit? The degree of his slavery varies according to the ratio between that which he is forced to yield up and that which he is allowed to retain; and it matters not whether his master is a single person or a society. If, without option he has to labour for the society and receives from the general stock such portion as the society awards him, he becomes a slave to the society." Could there be a more exact description of the condition of the modern wage labourer under the capitalist system? Yet Mr. Spencer adds, "Socialistic arrangements necessitate an enslavement of this kind." If they did, they would be no worse than present arrangements, but they do not. Socialistic arrangements literally, etymologically, and reasonably, only mean such arrangements as will admit of the great primary law of equal freedom being carried out. As the whole work of Mr. Spencer's life shows, Sociology as a science is still in its infancy; it is no wonder therefore that though many good men in former times have indistinctly seen the promised land afar off, or in visions, no Moses has yet arisen with sufficient knowledge, wisdom, and divine enthusiasm to lead the people out of their worse than Egyptian bondage, and guide them safely through the dreary wilderness of economic truisms and fallacies which have to be traversed ere that holy land is

reached. Happily, a very good sketch map of the route has recently been laid down by Mr. Carruthers, some of whose observations on this particular point seem to have been written specially in anticipation of "The Coming Slavery." He says:—

"Without formally asserting that men under Communal Government could not be allowed every possible freedom, except that of compelling others to serve them, they (capitalists) assert that such freedom would not be granted if any but capitalists governed the world. Acting under these opinions, or rather prejudices, they devise an ideal commune, in which every public and private action would be guided by idiotic folly and perversity, and then triumphantly ask whether even the working classes are not better off under commercialism than they would be under so absurd a system. If we are to believe what they tell us, communal government would be entrusted to a huge bureaucracy, sitting at the capital town, like a spider in the middle of its web, and sending its commands over the country as to what every one should eat and drink, what clothes he should wear, what religion he should profess, at what sports he should play, what trade he should follow, when and whom he should marry, and finally, the shape and material of his coffin. . . . Imperfect as the workmen's freedom actually is, we are quite prepared to admit that mere material well-being would not compensate them for its loss, and that they would do better for themselves by upholding commercialism than by adopting such a scheme of communism as is sketched out for them by the capitalists. They are not, however, tied to this system, which is indeed such as no sane man would ever dream of establishing, nor need they fear that under the commune, anyone would lose any freedom he now enjoys. . . . Instead of comparing commercialism with the form of communism that would be set up by men as foolish and meddling as the capitalists assume every one but themselves to be, we must compare it with a system in which no one desires, or would be permitted to interfere unnecessarily with his fellows, and in which the sphere of State control would be made as restricted as was compatible with securing the end for which all government is established, namely, the well-being of the people."—*Communal and Commercial Economy*, p. 321 et seq.

Very much to the same practical effect are Mr. Spencer's own words: "Civilization is evolving a state of things and a kind of character in which two apparently conflicting requirements are reconciled. To achieve the creative purpose—the greatest sum of happiness—there must on the one hand exist an amount of population maintainable only by the best possible system of production; that is, by the most elaborate subdivision of labour; that is, by the extremest mutual dependence, whilst on the other hand each individual must have the right to do whatever his desires prompt. Clearly these two conditions can be harmonized only by that adaptation humanity is undergoing, that process during which all

desires inconsistent with the most perfect social organization are dying out, and other desires corresponding to such organizations are being developed." (*Social Statics*, p. 482.)

A better definition of the real aims of Socialism than the first portion of the above extract could hardly be given, and the conclusion seems inevitable, either that Mr. Spencer is having his little joke in denouncing the Coming Slavery; or, which seems still more difficult of belief, he has fallen into the vulgar error of condemning Socialism because he does not agree with what all who call themselves Socialists may say. He might as well deride all law, religion, medicine, and charity, because unscrupulous advocates, corrupt judges, self-seeking hypocrites, ignorant quacks, and misguided enthusiasts have sheltered themselves under these sacred names. In any case, genuine Socialists will be none the less grateful to him for affording this opportunity of supporting the cause which he and they alike have at heart, from the rich storehouse which he has provided. If, as may perhaps be inferred from the last sentence quoted, his objection is merely to the method, and he only fears that the desired reforms may be attempted too soon, or by wrong means, he may be reassured by a consideration of the fact, which he has over and over again insisted upon, that "the sense of rights, by whose sympathetic excitement men are led to behave justly to each other, is the same sense of rights by which they are prompted to assert their own claims." And conversely those who are most forward to assert their own claims are as a rule the most ready to respect the rights of others. Mr. Spencer has a well-founded dread of paternal legislation, and unlimited faith in the power of voluntary co-operation, but seems hardly to realize how far the government of the future will necessarily partake of the character of co-operation, forcible interference being limited almost entirely to his own minimum, that necessary to secure equal justice. In conclusion it may with all respect be submitted that his great powers would be more usefully employed in assisting the efforts of those who share his own aspirations, and found themselves upon his own principles, than in even appearing to lend the weight of his authority to the already overwhelming mass of stolid Conservatism. Intelligent criticism is always useful, and to none more so than to those who are endeavouring to devise a better mode of life; but Mr. Spencer

