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# HERBERT SPENCER ON "SOCIALISM THE COMING SLAVERY."

By E. H. Blakeney, M.A.

IT is almost exactly a hundred years ago since Herbert Spencer was born, and he has been in his grave nearly twenty years. Do many read him to-day? Possibly not: *stat magni nominis umbra.* Yet time was when the opinions of "our great philosopher," as Darwin called him, were listened to with deference; his influence on the thought of his generation was admittedly greater than that of almost any other contemporary writer; but, since his death, that influence has so dwindled that his name is rarely mentioned in scientific or philosophical circles: "now none so poor to do him reverence." It is the penalty a distinguished man has often to pay for being over-estimated; and that he was over-estimated few will deny. The idol of the seventies is found now to have feet of clay, and it is smashed to pieces in consequence. So we read of certain pagan worshippers who, displeased with their deities, take them down and beat them for not responding to the worshippers' desires. It is a curious thing for people so to revenge themselves for their own folly and extravagance. But it may not be unbecoming to remark that the idol with feet of clay may have a head of gold, though the disillusioned devotee deems this gold to be, after all, but lead.

Spencer had his day: those that have succeeded him are having their day—and their vengeance. "So runs the course of life from hour to hour."

Nevertheless, if we consider the matter a little more closely, Spencer's influence cannot be so gaily discounted as it is the fashion to do in these times. He had faults of temper, faults of insight, faults of understanding; yet, in his fashion, he was a considerable man; and it is not to be assumed that his "wisdom"—irritating as its oracular tone might sometimes be—is fit only to be thrown into the limbo of forgotten audacities. There is an element of real and permanent value in his best work, not lightly to be disregarded. He has much to say, on political and kindred questions that now exercise and exacerbate champions on either side, which it is important for us to weigh, even when his views run directly

counter to the views of a dominant majority. We admit that the climate of thought has so changed since the Spencerian epoch that much of his most characteristic teaching is highly unpopular. But the popularity of opinions is no fixed criterion of their intrinsic worth.

It is not as a philosopher nor as a scientist, in the narrow sense that Spencer will ultimately be remembered, though his indirect influence on the world of thought ought not, in justice, to be minimized. He was not the mere sciolist that his enemies have represented him to be. His most abiding work may be found in his political and social discussions: such publications as *Social Statics, The Study of Sociology, Education,* and perhaps—above all—*The Man versus the State,* are his best title to fame. As a corrective to many of the false formulas and loose dogmatism that do duty for thought in our midst to-day, Spencer is not without real value. His prescience was sometimes remarkable, not least in his forecast of the trend of Socialism. He was an unbending individualist, and if he overstressed his doctrine, it must be admitted that recent events have fully justified those fears to which he courageously gave expression. Take, for example, this passage on the need for limiting State interference:—

"Popular influence will inevitably go on increasing. Should the masses gain a predominant power, while their ideas of social arrangements and legislative action remain as crude as at present, there will certainly result disastrous meddlings with the relations of Capital and Labour, as well as a disastrous extension of State administrations. Immense damage will have been inflicted, primarily on employers; secondarily, on the employed; and eventually on the nation as a whole. If these evils can be prevented at all, they can be prevented only by establishing in the public mind that there are certain limits to the functions of the State, and that these limits ought on no account to be transgressed."

These words were written sixty years ago, but the fundamental verity they imply holds good still.

Spencer's mistrust of current political fetichisms and easy economic nostrums—we have raised a notable crop of them since the year 1860—was constant. No one knew better than he the maleficent power of common catch-phrases—"words, words, words"—to impose upon an ignorant and gullible electorate. We are deluged with such phrases to-day; we tend to ascribe to them a

sort of supernatural efficiency which they certainly do not possess; a cliché from over the water appears to have, for many, an ecumenical authority; and the daily papers—nothing if not "derivative" in the thoughts they utter—enable such phrases to harden into totems.

There is no political superstition more rife in our midst than that State control will cure economic ills and social sores. "Why does not Government intervene?" is a pretty continual cry, and the paid parrots of the press play upon the imaginations of their readers by their vain repetitions. The fact that State control (as opposed to private enterprise) has again and again proved a failure, produces little effect in the mentality of the devotees of this strange cult. Men of the type of Mr. Smillie demand with shrill insistence the nationalization of the coal mines—which is admittedly only a step towards a further demand for the nationalization of all industries. And this, despite the well-grounded belief that State interference is almost certain to achieve failure in the long run, owing to the wastefulness, slowness, and lack of imagination which are inherent in the official mind. All that is envisaged by these ardent advocates of bureaucratic control is the curing of some proximate evil; the idea that some ultimate, and unforeseen, mischief may arise, sufficient to counterbalance, and more than counterbalance, the immediate evil, never appears to occur to them. It is a curious commentary on the persistence of human faith in the graven images they themselves—or their representatives—have erected. "These be your Gods, O Israel."

M. Guizot has justly spoken of "that great delusion, a belief in the sovereign power of political machinery." Indeed, we may term it the great superstition of our time—that, and the notion that all progress is in a straight line, and that regress has no qualifying part in the evolutionary process. Tennyson knew better, when he wrote (*Locksley Hall sixty years after*):—

> "Evolution ever climbing after some ideal good,
> And Reversion ever dragging Evolution in the mud."

In point of fact the word "progress," as it is used by our light-hearted schemers of the present, is one of the least edifying words in the common vocabulary. Progress: yes, but whither? how? "Let us hush this cry of 'Forward' till ten thousand years are done." Herbert Spencer's comment runs thus:—

" A great service would be done by any man who would analyse the legislation, say of the last half century [this was written in 1865], and compare the expected results of Acts of Parliament with their proved results. He might make it an instructive revelation by simply taking all the preambles, and observing how many of the evils to be rectified were evils produced by preceding enactments. His chief difficulty would be that of getting within any moderate compass the immense number of cases in which the benefits anticipated were not achieved, while unanticipated disasters were caused. And then he might effectively close his digest by showing what immense advantages have followed the entire cessation of legislative action. Not indeed that such an accumulation of cases would have an appreciable effect on the average mind. Political fetichism will continue as long as men remain without scientific discipline . . . until the thing which now usurps the name of education has been dethroned by a true education."

Again, in one of his later essays, he uses pregnant words, which our Socialists—blind worshippers of the Great Political Fetich—might do well to take seriously into account :—

" The fanatical adherents of a social theory are capable of taking any measures, no matter how extreme, for carrying out their views [1] ; holding, like the merciless priesthood of past times, that the end justifies the means. And when a general socialistic organization has been established, the vast, ramified, and consolidated body of those who direct its activities, using without check whatever coercion seems to them needful in the interests of a system (which will practically become their own interests) will have no hesitation in imposing their rigorous rule over the entire lives of the actual workers ; until, eventually, there is developed an official oligarchy, with its various grades, exercising a tyranny more gigantic and more terrible than any which the world has seen."

Prophetic words ! the wheel has well-nigh come full circle ; and we see to-day, in the rule of Trades Unions in England—and, in a far more virulent form, in the Soviets of Russia—the establishment of the very despotism foreseen by Spencer. We are fast passing " from freedom to bondage."

Why is this ? Surely because, in some occult fashion, the sense of justice is less vigorous than it was. Yet, as Spencer says, " the root of all well-ordered social action is a sentiment of justice, which at once insists on personal freedom and is solicitous for the like freedom of others ; and there at present exists but a very

[1] Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* is one long extended commentary on this plain statement.

inadequate amount of this sentiment." Here Spencer joins hands with the great prophets of Israel, to whom the idea of justice was a passion. Pure justice, in this distempered world, is perhaps unattainable; but the very thought of it ennobles and strengthens. The central truth at the heart of every great concept is like a flaming fire, approached but never attained.

One of the most incisive writers of our time, Dean Inge, very properly associates the pathetic but fallacious belief in a coming millennium wrought through the agency of administrative regimentation, with the general delusions of democracy. The rule of the democrat is merely another form of autocracy; it is the transference of power from the tyranny of the individual to the far worse tyranny of a machine-made majority.[1] "The corruption of democracies proceeds directly from the fact that one class imposes the taxes and another class pays for them." Under any tolerable monarchy, all men pay taxes; under democratic socialism one-tenth of the population pays five-sixths of the taxes. Justice hardly enters into the scheme, and perhaps it was never meant to do so. Justice *qua* justice is the last thing a modern democracy loves; what it aims at, under the camouflage of social reform, is to compel the good-for-somethings to work out the economic salvation of the good-for-nothings: it is the victory of sentimentality over reason. That is why democracies have been, and always will be, cruel at bottom; for sentimentality is a poor substitute for justice and righteousness. "Of all broken reeds," said Mr. Roosevelt in his Guildhall speech, "sentimentality is the most broken reed on which righteousness can lean"; and this simply because it is, in the inmost fibre of its being, self-deception. Democracy, as wise students of history are aware, is peculiarly subject to panic, and the spirit of panic is the spirit of cruelty.

To all criticism of past failures democracy turns a deaf ear.

[1] Aristotle observes that a democracy has many striking points of resemblance with tyranny: *τὸ ἦθος τὸ αὐτό, καὶ ἄμφω δεσποτικὰ τῶν βελτιόνων, καὶ τὰ ψηφίσματα ὥσπερ ἐκεῖ τὰ ἐπιτάγματα, καὶ ὁ δημαγωγὸς καὶ ὁ κόλαξ οἱ αὐτοὶ καὶ ἀνάλογον*, κ.τ.λ. Cf. Burke, *Reflections*: "Of this I am certain, that in a democracy the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppressions upon the minority; and that oppression of the minority will extend to far greater numbers, and will be carried on with far greater fury than can almost ever be apprehended from the dominion of a single sceptre." As Mr. Birrell cynically remarked once in the House of Commons: "Minorities must suffer—it is the badge of their tribe." Justice, we observe, may be a rare and refreshing fruit; but it is certainly rare.

"This time, at least, we shall make no such blunders as the past can show," is the invariable retort. Hear Spencer again :—

"The welfare of a society and the justice of its arrangements are dependent on the character of its [individual] members; and improvement in neither can take place without that improvement in character which results from carrying on peaceful industry under the restraints imposed by an orderly social life. The belief that, by due skill, an ill-working humanity may be framed into well-working institutions is a delusion. There is no political alchemy by which you can get golden conduct out of leaden instincts."

The truth is there, in a nutshell. Christianity, rightly applied, can alone solve the problem, because it alone has adequately declared that social reform can only come through an inward regeneration of the individual heart.[1]

Meddling legislation has been the bane of this country. We have witnessed its disastrous effects, but the calm verdict of history has small power of appeal, despite the known truth that such meddling is but "a proposal to improve life by breaking through the fundamental conditions to life." Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the never-ceasing efforts of Trades Unions and other similar agencies in pressing forward the demand for legislation, and ever more legislation. Not that way lies the true cure for the disease in the body politic. We do not reach heaven by piling Pelion upon Ossa. We have witnessed in Russia, during the past three years, a complete reversal of order, justice, decency and good faith, in the demoniac effort to achieve, through legislative enactment, changes that can be brought to pass only by the slow processes of economic and social growth. If the old system was defective—and defective it was—the new is infinitely worse, and the misery increases. Have we not once again before us an example of the poignant truth that to the impatience of the idealist are

[1] I fear that the major part of Socialism—the genuine article, not that mixture which is known as Christian Socialism—is profoundly anti-Christian (see Belfort Bax, *Religion of Socialism*; Capero and Reclus, preface to *God and the State*); indeed how can it be otherwise, for the living kernel of the creed is injustice? State Socialism, says Mr. D. M. Panton, is the ideal of the sensuous, worldly man; the Utopia of unbelief dressed in arguments of economic wisdom.

due most of the tragic miscarriages of history?[1] Revolution is rarely a final and positive cure for political or social evils; it ends in devouring its own offspring. Only when a gangrene has become so deeply embedded into the vitals of the state that the knife and cautery must be used, are such desperate remedies tolerable; and even then the proximate benefits achieved always have within them the seeds of unsuspected reactions. It is not by socialistic schemes, however rosy in the eyes of their makers, not by revolutionary violence, however necessary in the heated imaginations of its contrivers, but by the gradual and orderly adjustment of internal to external relations that the balance of benefits is finally and firmly secured to the community at large. The end of all true government lies in the freedom of the governed.

E. H. BLAKENEY.

[1] "Political arrangement, as it is a work for social ends, is to be wrought only by social means. There time must conspire with mind. Time is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at. Our patience will achieve more than our force" (Burke, *Reflections*).

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SERVICE AND PERSEVERANCE. By the Hon. Mrs. Corfield, O.B.E. London: *Robert Scott*. 3s. net.

Mrs. Corfield has had a wide experience in addressing meetings in connection with the Mothers' Union. She is the President for the diocese of Bath and Wells, and formerly conducted an exceptionally large Branch when her husband was Vicar of the Derbyshire mining parish of Heanor. She is also Divisional Commissioner of Girl Guides in the County of Somerset and is much in request as a speaker. In this book she has given the substance of some of her addresses. In addition there is an interesting chapter dealing with well-known people she has met. The Bishop of Bath and Wells wrote a commendatory preface. The subjects dealt with are (1) "Examples of Men and Women," (2) Self-Sacrifice, (3) Duty and Love, (4) Fellowship in Service, (5) Citizenship. It is an inspiring book though written in simple language. Many speakers to women make the sad mistake of condemning faults, instead of showing the attractiveness of virtue. Those who have heard Mrs. Corfield give these addresses must have gone away with an earnest longing to live nobler, purer, more unselfish and more useful lives. There is a distinct "pull" heavenwards in the chapters. There are four illustrations, including one of her early home, Castle Wemyss, on the Clyde.