

THE LAST TWENTY years have seen a notable revival of scholarly interest in Herbert Spencer, for long the most neglected of the major “founding fathers” of sociology. The three most notable works to date are Michael Taylor’s *Men Versus The State* (1992), Tim Gray’s *The Political Philosophy of Herbert Spencer* (1996) and Mark Francis’s *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (2007), the last of which is the only substantial biography. All of these are now eclipsed by John Offer’s excellent study, which must surely remain the definitive critical treatment of the whole range of Spencer’s thought for quite a time to come.

Spencer’s scholarship faces peculiar difficulties. The contrast between the tremendous reputation which he enjoyed in his lifetime and the decades of scholarly neglect after his death, the high ideological charge of much of his writing, the sheer disciplinary range of his system and the complexities of the adjustments that he made to it over time – all these have meant that polarized and simplistic views of his work have been common. After an introduction in which he deftly surveys some of this diversity of interpretation, Offer presents three chapters which provide a biographically-based overview of the development of Spencer’s thought. This approach makes sense, since Spencer’s patchy education meant that his intellectual development was highly dependent on the diverse influences that impinged on him throughout his 20s and 30s, when he laid the foundations for the synthesis that he would spend the second half of his life elaborating and defending. One such influence on which Offer lays particular weight is the political economist Richard Whately (later archbishop of Dublin) – probably made known to Spencer by his uncle Thomas, a radical parson – for the idea of “catallaxy”: an unplanned but reliable and mutually beneficial nexus of relations between competing and cooperating social individuals.

Offer opens his discussion of Spencer’s mature thought (which occupies six chapters) with the important observation – particularly pertinent to the sociologists or political theorists who have recently been most interested in it – that its interpretation is bound to suffer if the parts of it are not considered in relation to the whole. As he

* About John OFFER, *Herbert Spencer and Social Theory* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

graphically puts it, if it is dismembered, “the cuts tend to bleed”. His account of *First Principles* (1862), which sets out the epistemological and “metaphysical” basis of all that was to follow – of all of Spencer’s major works, the one most likely to be dismissed unread – is lucid and penetrating. A recurrent challenge in Spencer’s interpretation is how to address its characteristic tensions, antinomies or contradictions. Offer rightly resists such strategies as trying to determine which position Spencer “really” held, or of discerning multiple, incompatible positions, as with Werner Stark’s “Spencer’s three sociologies”, for these tend to ignore the unifying framework of Spencer’s evolutionary system.

In discussing the main components of Spencer’s sociology – institutional differentiation, the social organism, militancy and industrialism as social types – Offer builds on Gray’s definitive refutation of the widespread idea that Spencer was inconsistent in combining individualism and organicism. Central to his interpretation of Spencer’s conception of sociality – contrary to Durkheim’s caricature in *The Rules of the Sociological Method* – is his catallactic conception of social order, and his argument for the emergence of altruism under the conditions of “industrial” social forms. A chapter on Spencer’s treatment of music, which sets him alongside the man who began to redeem England’s reputation as a *Land ohne Musik*, Sir Hubert Parry – to me totally unexpected as a Spencerian – is quite a surprise item in the package.

Offer decisively scotches the most persistent misrepresentation of Spencer, to describe him as a “Social Darwinist” – yet again, for the point was made by John Burrow and by myself forty years ago. Though Spencer coined the notorious phrase “survival of the fittest” for Darwinian natural selection, and from the outset incorporated it as a factor of evolution, he remained “indissolubly tied” to the reality of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Interestingly, Offer notes that he made increasing use of natural selection in the later volumes of *The Principles of Sociology*, though this seems to have been *ad hoc*, and does not allow us to see it as a significant anticipation of today’s neo-Darwinian socio-cultural selectionism. It is an irony that W.G. Runciman should have applied the label of “Social Darwinist” to Spencer (pejoratively), when it is more appropriate that it should be applied to him (non-pejoratively).

In his concluding remarks, Offer asks if anything survives from Spencer’s system that might engage contemporary social theory. He dismisses his interlinked Lamarckism and faith in the ultimate beneficence of evolution, which was essentially a scientised version of natural theology, as hopelessly untenable. But Offer’s own conception of what

RETRIEVING SPENCER

might be the building blocks for a viable social theory today – a selectionist account of socio-cultural change and catallaxy as a minimum model for cooperation between individuals – are such as would give Spencer a much more central place in the genealogy of sociology than he has enjoyed for the better part of a century.

J . D . Y . P E E L