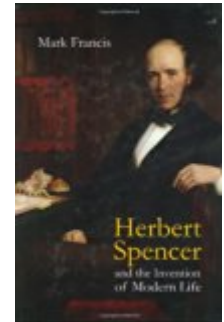


Mark Francis. *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. xiv + 434 pp. + 12 pp. of plates \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4590-3.



Reviewed by Stewart Weaver

Published on H-Albion (July, 2008)

We remember Herbert Spencer, if we remember him at all, as the man who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" and made free and unfettered competition a social and moral law. "Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man," Spencer wrote in *Social Statics*, the book that made him famous on its appearance in 1851, and in the hands of such admirers as Andrew Carnegie this "right to ignore the state," as Spencer called it, became the philosophical justification for unrestrained, laissez-faire capitalism. [1] Imperialists too eventually latched on to Spencer and found in his immutable law of organic progress justification for colonial conquest and political subjugation of lesser nations and peoples. These are heavy historical burdens to bear, and needless to say they do not withstand close scrutiny of what Spencer actually wrote and said. In what the publisher's flyer trumpets as "the first comprehensive biography in over thirty years," Mark Francis sets out to sweep the clichés and caricatures away and recover the subtlety and nuance, as well as the intellectual and historical contexts, of Herbert Spencer's thought. His hope is

that his painstakingly thorough archival research together with his sustained immersion in nineteenth-century philosophical and scientific literature "will permanently change existing discussions of Spencer's philosophy, and create new interpretive patterns where none existed" (p. viii). This is probably hoping for too much. Caricatures are stubborn things and in many other cases--Adam Smith comes to mind--have proved surprisingly resistant to the most careful and extended work of re-interpretation. But for those who have the patience for it, this remarkable work of scholarship will disclose a very different Spencer from the one they thought they knew. It is indeed, as one of the dust-jacket blurbs says, "*the book on Spencer for the present and next generation.*"

Francis calls his book an "intellectual biography" (p. 4), a hybrid, that is, between life-story and textual analysis. But the emphasis is very much, almost exclusively on the latter, in part because Spencer had little life apart from his writings. There was, to be sure, the famously frustrated love affair with George Eliot and, later, the sort of fatherly intellectual adoption of Beatrice Potter,

later Webb, whose portrait of Spencer (the philosopher on the hearth) in her memoir *My Apprenticeship* remains the most insightful ever written. But these passing female attractions aside, there was, Francis says, a "dramatic void" (p. 4) at the heart of Spencer's life that no biographer could will away. That Spencer in old age recalled and destroyed most of his personal correspondence does not help. But even had he preserved it, one senses that it would not have revealed much. Spencer lived for his ideas, and Mark Francis, it has to be said, seems to live for them too. This is as ruthlessly and rigorously *intellectual* an intellectual biography as this reviewer has read for a long time. Eschewing chronology altogether, Francis takes a thematic approach to Spencer's life that allows for sustained discussion of his metaphysics, for instance, as opposed to his philosophy of science, evolutionary theory, his sociology, or his ethics. The result is, again, a more complete and nuanced account of Spencer's thought than anyone else has ever attempted, still less achieved. But the effect along the way is somehow to diminish the life as actually lived from one year to the next. The "dramatic void" of which Francis speaks is in part of his own making.

Part 1, "An Individual and His Personal Culture," is the most richly biographical of the four parts of this book. Here Francis takes up Spencer's nonconformist inheritance, his personal life (such as it was), his feminist politics, his aesthetics--which rejected equally reason and passion as organs of aesthetic feeling--and his fairly conventionally Victorian hypochondria. Part 2 excavates "the lost world of Spencer's metaphysics" and includes chapters on the great man's early association with the radical newspaper *The Leader*, his friendship with John Chapman and other intellectuals in the Strand, the publication of *First Principles* in 1862, Spencer's engagement with common-sense philosophy, and the move from philosophy

to psychology that culminated in the second edition of *The Principles of Psychology* in 1870.

Part 3, "Spencer's Biological Writings and His Philosophy of Science" is in critical respects the heart of the book, for it is here that Francis undertakes to bring Spencer out from under the enormous shadow of Charles Darwin and emphasize, for once and for all, the essentially non-Darwinian quality of Spencer's ideas. For those readers who lack patience, he lays out his three-part argument in brief early on: "(i) Spencer's evolutionary theory did not focus on species change; (ii) Spencer's faith in progressive evolution did not draw on natural selection or competition; and (iii) Spencer did not accept that modern individuals and societies would continue to make progress through struggle for survival" (p. 2). On the contrary, Francis argues, Spencer's evolutionary thought was fundamentally altruistic. His whole purpose, in this domain, was "to demonstrate that life in general, and humanity in particular, was evolving away [from] a cruel and predatory past." Rather than regarding competition and natural selection as "principles guiding current human development," Francis says, "Spencer had consigned these to the pre-institutional past of humanity" (p. 329).

Equally wrong-headed as the attribution of social Darwinism to Spencer is the familiar view of him as a champion of unrestrained individualism, and in part 4, "Politics and Ethical Sociology," Francis sets out to rescue Spencer from the obtuse adulation of libertarians whose acquaintance with him extends no further than the late and wholly unrepresentative *Man 'versus' The State* (1884). Far from being the anomaly it is usually made out to be, Spencer's advocacy of land nationalization, for instance, was perfectly consistent with a philosophy that emphasized the primacy of justice over the individual. Francis's Spencer was a corporate and not an individualist thinker, one who "militated against war, agitated against the coercive treatment of children and an-

imals, grieved about the displacement of aboriginal peoples and provided the politically confident bourgeoisie a classless vision of the future" (p. 249). He was also, to be sure, a liberal. But Francis's more general purpose in considering Spencer's politics is "to cast doubt on the apparently well-established belief that liberalism was fundamentally concerned with limiting social or political control over the individual" (p. 250). This, he argues, is a shibboleth that an examination of Spencer's beliefs will finally overthrow.

We shall see. Again, shibboleths have enormous staying power, and this one in particular has resisted many a revisionist charge. This is a bold, important, intelligent, and original book on Herbert Spencer, but it is tough scholarly going in parts and may not find the general readership its wider interpretive ambitions require.

Note

[1]. Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or, The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1851), 103.

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Citation: Stewart Weaver. Review of Francis, Mark. *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

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