

## Politics as self-sacrifice

Mark Francis: *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Acumen, 2007)

Reviewed by Melissa Lane

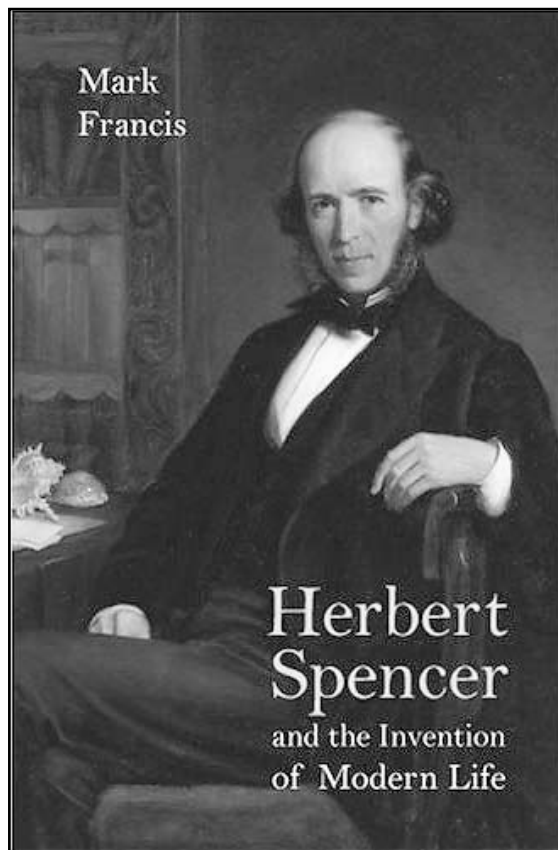
**T**HIS IS a monumental, painstakingly scrupulous, and innovative study, based on a complete grasp of Spencer's corpus and a thorough use of archives relating to his circle and period. Francis succeeds in recovering the precise lineaments of Spencer's complex project, and in rebutting the unconscionable oversimplifications which have dogged, and to a large extent substituted for, his scholarly reception: in particular, in Spencer's relation to 'social Darwinism', his classification as a sort of Comtean positivist, and his purported status as an arch-individualist of a laissez-faire type in politics. He is also alert to Spencer's contributions to his own mis-reception and instructive on aspects of his personal life, including his relationship with George Eliot. The book's larger purposes – portraying Spencer as the inventor of modern life and tracing the possible contributions that a proper understanding of Spencer's politics could offer to political life today – are more sketchily realised, though thought-provoking.

At the heart of the book's argument is a novel reading of Spencer's *Autobiography* as the key to his mature ethical and emotional outlook. Spencer came to see the emotional tumult and lashings of duty imposed on him by his particular breed of moderate dissenter family as psychologically devastating (Francis is particularly good at distinguishing the old dissenters from those, like Spencer's partly Methodist family, who bordered on and sometimes married into Anglican circles and who could, without conscientious scruple, choose to

attend Oxford or Cambridge, though Spencer proudly did not). Although he believed that love and play were the keys to human happiness, he nonetheless was incapable of returning George Eliot's love in an emotionally or physically satisfying way for either of them, and his ponderous attempts at play and exercising his 'philoprogenitive' instincts on friends' children were self-conscious efforts to construct a balanced life around his emotionally crippled core. More positively, he drew from his unhappy upbringing the moral that anger was a barbaric emotion to be expelled from civilised life. Francis argues that Spencer's ethics and politics were a form of self-sacrifice, in which Spencer advocated the sort of emotionally harmonious, calm and playful future which he had not been able to achieve for himself, and criticised militarism and aggression as forces that, while previously necessary to progress, had no place in that future state. To mark how far this is from the conventional image of Spencer, Francis recounts that his single public address on his 1882 tour of the United States, far from endorsing the law of the market jungle, admonished his audience of businessmen and public figures to spend more time at play (pp.103–05).

By 'Spencer's ethics and politics' in the preceding paragraph I am implying his *Principles of Psychology* and *Principles of Sociology*, the latter including among its parts *Political Institutions*, which Spencer regarded as his most important book and which inter alia expressed his vehement anti-militarism. Francis views the works up to and

including *Social Statics* (1851) as radical juvenilia in which Spencer flirted with popular suffrage and democracy before coming to view democracy as an atavistic expression of will-theory, in which the popular will replaced monarchical despotism, and which was unsuited to the complex conditions of modern life. A fear that such democracy was on the verge of triumphing in the early 1880s led to *The Man 'versus' the State* (1884), the crudeness and extremism of which Francis views as separated by a 'rift' (p.323) from his other, and mature, political writings. (Francis notes without really explaining the fact that 'paradoxically ... he was an advocate of democracy in his psychology' (p.339), in which as, the book shows, Spencer rejected the crude domination of reason or will in favour of a sort of consensus model acknowledging the reality of the various passions and emotions.) In focusing on Spencer's ethics and politics, I cannot do justice to Francis' supple and revisionist treatment



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A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

# FIGHTING LABOUR: THE STRUGGLE FOR RADICAL SUPREMACY IN SCOTLAND 1885–1929

The Liberal Democrat History Group is holding its first meeting in Scotland, part of the fringe at the Scottish Liberal Democrats' spring conference. The meeting will look back at the Liberal Party's contribution to radical, progressive politics in Scotland and its struggle with Labour in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in the years following Asquith's by-election win in Paisley in 1920.

**Speakers: Professor Richard Finlay** (Strathclyde University); **Dr Catriona MacDonald** (Glasgow Caledonian University, author of *The Radical Thread: Political Change in Scotland; Paisley politics, 1885–1924*); **Jim Wallace** (Baron Wallace of Tankerness, former Deputy First Minister of Scotland). Chair: **Robert Brown MSP**.

**6.45pm, Friday 13 March 2009**

Royal George Hotel, Tay Street, Perth

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of Spencer's biology, in which, while acknowledging that Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest', he stresses Spencer's interest in the adult organism and its adaptive rapport with its environment rather than in natural selection, and his view of human intelligence as enabling a break-out of previous conditions of evolution.

Does Francis justify his portrayal of Spencer as the inventor of modern life, even while placing him firmly in the now neglected debates and concerns of the mid-, rather than late, Victorian period? This claim rests variously on his rejection of Christianity (although his advocacy of the 'Unknown' played, as Francis deftly shows, a key role in easing mid-Victorian angst), his resolutely scientific and anti-classical outlook (which

attempted to free philosophy and social science from the inherited prejudices of past metaphysicians, whilst basing them on a zealous and indefatigable assemblage of empirical knowledge – Spencer's rebuttal of Paley's natural theological paean to the oyster by dryly ranking its sensations below those of the cuttlefish (p. 290), is priceless) and his valuing of peace and altruism rather than militarism and competition as part of the evolution of civilisation. These contentions mix ways in which Spencer was ahead of his time but far from influential (anti-militarism) with ways in which he is portrayed as an inaugurator of new currents of thought, though even then his repudiation by the Edwardians make it difficult to see him as a causal fashioner of modernity rather than, in some

respects, as a prophet of an idealised vision of the latter. In ethics and politics, Francis contends that Spencer's twin legacies should be the value he attributed to human emotions and his desire to see suffering diminished (although, as Francis demonstrates throughout the book, this did not prevent him from a lifelong hostility to what he viewed as a hyper-individualist and unscientific Benthamite utilitarianism), coupled with his advocacy of a liberalism unencompassed by democratic politics that acknowledges 'the primacy of communal decision-making' (p.311) and protects the notion of 'private' life which has a non-political value of its own as a more highly evolved site of ethics. Yet just what form 'the primacy of communal decision-making' would take – and how Spencer's rejection

of force and state power could be reconciled with his demand for governmental powers to administer social complexity and institute justice – remains unclear in both this biography and in his thought. The book is also rather better at summing up the results of Spencer's thinking (sometimes taking the reader's knowledge of its basic content too much for granted in the quest for interpretation) than at illustrating his thought process – more could be said about what Spencer read and how he wrote, for example. This is nonetheless a landmark work of intellectual biography

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