



Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life

Mark Francis

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The ideas of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) profoundly shaped Victorian thought regarding evolutionary theory, the philosophy of science, sociology, and politics. In his day, Spencer's works ranked alongside those of Darwin and Marx in their importance to the development of disciplines as wide-ranging as sociology, anthropology, political theory, philosophy, and psychology. Yet during his lifetime-and certainly in the decades that followed-Spencer has been widely misunderstood. Both lauded and disparaged as the father of Social Darwinism (it was Spencer who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest"), and as an apologist for individualism and unrestrained capitalism, he was, in fact, none of these; he was instead a subtle and complex thinker. In his major new intellectual biography of Spencer, Mark Francis uses archival material and contemporary printed sources to create a fascinating portrait of a man who attempted to explain modern life in all its biological, psychological, and sociological forms through a unique philosophical and scientific system that bridged the gap between empiricism and metaphysics. Vastly influential in England and beyond-particularly the United States and Asia-his philosophy was, as Francis shows, systematic and rigorous. Despite the success he found in the realm of ideas, Spencer was an unhappy man. Francis reveals how Spencer felt permanently crippled by the Christian values he had absorbed during childhood, and was incapable of romantic love, as became clear during his relationship with the novelist George Eliot. Elegantly written, provocative, and rich in insight, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* is an exceptional work of scholarship that not only dispels the misinformation surrounding Spencer but also illuminates the broader cultural and intellectual history of the nineteenth century.

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