Kim smoked slowly, revolving the business, so far as he understood it, in his quick mind.

"Then thou goest forth to follow the strangers?"

"No. To meet them. They are coming in to Simla to send down their horns and heads to be dressed at Calcutta. They are exclusively sporting gentlemen, and they are allowed special facelities by the Government. Of course, we always do that. It is our British pride."

"Then what is to fear from them?"

"By Jove, they are not black people. I can do all sorts of things with black people, of course. They are Russians, and highly unscrupulous people. I—I do not want to consort with them without a witness."

"Will they kill thee?"

"Oah, thatt is nothing. I am good enough Herbert Spencerian, I trust, to meet little thing like death, which is all in my fate, you know. But—but they may beat me."

**

This is an exchange between Kim O'Hara, the eponymous hero of the greatest novel written by a Westerner about India, and an Indian clerk (babu), Hurree Chander Mookerjee. Enrolled in the British Secret Service, they are playing the “Great Game,” the battle of wits between the English and the Russians up on the North West Frontier. Overweight, unctuous, and a parody of everything else that the British condescendingly thought of the Indians, the clerk turns out to be the bravest and brightest agent of them all. Mimicking the head of the Service, and desperate to be regarded as a man of intellect and learning, towards the desired end of being elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of London, the babu has contributed countless “rejected notes” on ethology to the Asiatic Quarterly Review. And he is up on the latest and best philosophy also, being an enthusiastic follower of Herbert Spencer, as were millions of others around the globe in the late nineteenth century.

Herbert Spencer?! As I told you in my brief, excited post yesterday, I am teaching him in a grad course this semester, along with Plato and Hobbes. If anyone had told me 10 years ago that I would be teaching Spencer in class, except to make brief, disparaging remarks, and that
I would be putting him on a level with two of the greatest of philosophers, I would have looked at him or her as if they had gone soft in the head. As a historian of the 19th century, I knew of course that Spencer had then been wildly popular, but I put it down to another of those things that separate us from them—along with attitudes toward sex, to gloomy castles in the Scottish highlands, and to a love of Empire.

I rush at once to say that I do not in any way at all think of Spencer as on a par with Plato and Hobbes. Far from it. But I do now see him as much more representative of deep interests and beliefs, not all of which were wrong. I think his own thinking was a lot more interesting than legend would have it. And most importantly, I see him as tremendously influential, even to this day, especially in the United States.

The key to Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) is that he was born of lower-middle-class, nonconformist (Protestant, non-Anglican) parents in the English Midlands. These were people, small traders and the like, who were proud of who they were, proud that they earned their own livings by the sweat of their brow (and, no doubt, of their various skivvies from across the Irish Sea who did a lot of the dirty work), and who resented bitterly the upper classes whom they saw (with good reason) as perverting the reins of government to uphold the interests of the already rich and powerful.

They were thus ardent liberals in the 19th-century sense, that is in respects a bit like today's libertarians, wanting to abolish many of the laws of the land and to let people take matters (particularly with respect to trading and business) into their own hands. In short, they believed all of the things were believed by the person who (after Spencer) was the most famous product of that background, daughter of a Leicester, Methodist shopkeeper, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Young Herbert absorbed all of his background and more, and his first major work, Social Statics (1851), was a passionate defence of its philosophy. He even went so far as to suggest that the state should get out of the lighthouse business. Let ship owners build and pay the tab themselves, if they want such things. Along with the philosophy went a kind of cocky self-confidence—no one was going to tell him what to believe. As a result, like a lot of the half-educated in the middle of the 19th century, Spencer became an ardent enthusiast for evolution. (It's a big myth that no one was an evolutionist until Darwin published the Origin of Species in 1859. Look at the enthusiasm for the thoroughly evolutionary In Memoriam by Alfred Tennyson, published in 1850. It is true that virtually no respectable scientist became a public evolutionist until 1859, but that is a rather different thing.)

Spencer pushed evolution nonstop for over 50 years. Although, interestingly, he hit on and published the idea of natural selection some eight or nine years before Darwin, he was never that enthused by that mechanism. He was always an ardent Lamarckian, a believer in the inheritance of acquired characteristics—the blacksmith develops strong arms that he then passes on directly to his kids. Spencer combined this with some very Victorian ideas about reproduction. He thought the lowest forms of life had many, many offspring. Through population pressures by a Lamarckian process they start to move upwards, developing larger brains and at the same time having fewer and fewer offspring. There is only so much vital bodily fluid to go around! Finally, you get to the English, at the top of the pile, and they have only a few kids—certainly, as everyone pointed out, compared to the Irish who knew no bounds. Spencer backed this up by pointing out what was known to the parents and teachers of every young boy. Undue production of sperm cells leads first to madness and then to death. It is brains or babies.

Kibroth-Hattaavah! Many and many a young Englishman has perished there! Many and many a happy English boy, the jewel of his mother's heart—brave, and beautiful, and strong—lies buried there. Very pale their shadows rise before us—the shadows of our young brothers who have sinned and suffered. From the sea and the sod, from foreign graves and English churchyards, they start up and throng around us in the paleness of their fall. May every schoolboy who reads this page be warned by the waving of their wasted hands, from that burning marle of passion where they found nothing but shame and ruin, polluted affections, and an early grave.

(This from one of my favorite pieces of Victoriana, Eric, or Little by Little, by Dean Farrar. It was a very popular schoolboy story about decline and fall. Regret came towards the end, but too late!)

Although taking note of these dreadful possibilities—he himself never married, saving up all of his vital fluids for his overheated brain—Spencer preferred to focus on the positive. He was above all the prophet of progress. Life may be stern, but it will be worth it in the end. (This of course is pure Margaret Thatcherism.) Somewhat eclectically grabbing ideas from all over, including physics, Spencer saw a kind of stepwise progress upwards, what he called "dynamic equilibrium." Things start in balance or equilibrium; they then get disturbed; and they then strive to re-achieve equilibrium, which they do, but at a higher, more complex, more desirable level. This is the rule of individuals, of evolution, of society. Progress, progress, progress.

You can see the reason why I am using Spencer in my class, given the theme of change and the analogies between individuals and groups. I am not demanding that he be right, but then I am not demanding that of Plato or Hobbes either. Although as it happens, Spencer is not
as awful as most today think. It is generally believed that he translated his liberalism into biological terms, and then back to society, and 
came up with so-called “Social Darwinism”—the belief that competition should be unfettered and that widows and children should go to 
the wall. There is some truth in this, but not complete. Spencer had Quakerism in his background and always detested militarism. He 
thought the arms races at the end of the 19th century (particularly between the British and German navies) were truly evil. Much better 
spend your efforts on promoting free trade. And the same is true of his followers. Andrew Carnegie, who was a ruthless businessman, 
loved Spencer. But when it came to spending his money, Carnegie gave it to the founding of public libraries (there was one in the town 
where I grew up, I too in the British Midlands), and the philosophy was the Spencerian one of making it possible for the poor-but-gifted 
child to thus better him or herself and rise in society.

With the coming of the 20th century, and the dreadful events of World War I and then the poverty and suffering that came after, especially 
in the 1930s, Spencerian optimism seemed not just wrong but immoral. But he left his mark, particularly in the biological sciences. A 
great deal of early ecology was predicated on the Spencerian belief that balance is the natural state and even though things get disrupted 
they have an innate tendency to right themselves—dynamic equilibrium in action. Indeed, I would say that there are still elements of this 
thinking around and that this is a partial reason why we have an ecological crisis. There is an assumption that it doesn’t really matter 
what we do, it will all automatically right itself in the end. (I blame Spencer. I blame Christianity more. Even a non-literal reading of 
Genesis suggests that the world was made for our use and is there for the taking.)

So this is why I am teaching Spencer, even though there are aspects of his thinking that make me shudder. I hope some of my excitement 
brushes off on my students.

Under the striped umbrella Hurree Babu was straining ear and brain to follow the quick-poured French, and keeping both 
eyes on a kilta full of maps and documents—an extra-large one with a double red oil-skin cover. He did not wish to steal 
anything. He only desired to know what to steal, and, incidentally, how to get away when he had stolen it. He thanked all the 
Gods of Hindustan, and Herbert Spencer, that there remained some valuables to steal.

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