
THE MAN VERSUS THE STATE

by Herbert Spencer

Foreword by Eric Mack; Introduction by
Albert Jay Nock

(Liberty Classics, 7440 North Shadeland,
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Reviewed by Edmund A. Opitz

It was Albert Jay Nock who acquainted me with Spencer's book on the State. Nock used to appear regularly in Paul Palmer's old *American Mercury*, and in 1938 devoted one of his columns to *Man versus the State*. This book, Nock averred, was the best single volume ever written to counter the New Deal ideology, and it said little for the perspicacity of the conservative and business opponents of the welfare state, he added, that they had let this book go out of print.

Shortly after reading this essay on Spencer I wandered into a little bookshop on Copley Square—led by the invisible hand, no doubt—and for one buck picked up a copy of the last American edition of *Man versus the State* published in 1916 by the house of Mitchell Kennerley in New York. This edition was edited by Truxton Beale, and Mr. Beale's personal card was still in the book, which appeared to be unread.

Herbert Spencer wrote four essays

for *The Contemporary Review* in 1884 and brought them out in book form the same year, adding a Preface and a Postscript. A second edition appeared in 1892. Americans had to wait twenty-four years for their own version, and a vastly expanded version it was. Mr. Beale not only added five more Spencer essays to the original four, but he had each essay introduced by a distinguished public figure: William Howard Taft, Charles W. Eliot, Elihu Root, Henry Cabot Lodge, David Jayne Hill, Nicholas Murray Butler, Judge E. H. Gary, Harlan F. Stone, and Augustus P. Gardner. This blue ribbon crowd contributed 72 pages of text, which might be regarded as a representative sampling of American opinion in the pre-World War I era: the publication of this book in 1916 attests to the nation's individualism and its dedication to political and economic liberty.

The American mind was radicalized during the two decades between the wars; the older ideas were not rebutted, they were simply ignored as a new set of ideas swirled around them. A novel (for America) ideology was grafted into place during the thirties, and men like Nock were becoming superfluous.

It was of little consequence that I read Nock's praise of Spencer, but it was of great moment that the *Mercury* essay was also read by James Gipson of Caxton Printers in Boise,

Idaho. Many years after the event Gipson told me that he wrote to Nock, whom he did not know but admired, to say that he'd never heard of Spencer's book but that if it was all Nock said it was he'd publish it—if Nock would edit and write a Preface. Nock agreed, added two essays to the original four, and the Caxton edition came off the presses in 1940. It got several reviews, an especially fine one from a well known literary man of the period, Benjamin De Caseres, who reviewed for the Hearst chain. The review took a full tabloid size page and appeared in papers coast to coast. And the book sold under two dozen copies the first year! The same dismal sales record was repeated each year until 1944 when the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce under Leonard Read bought a thousand copies and laid its members under heavy persuasion to buy. The book sold moderately well during the fifties and sixties and went out of print a few years ago.

This handsome new Liberty Classics edition thus comes at an opportune time, and at a time when more and more minds are attuned to what Spencer has to say. The binding and paper are superb, and the price is friendly. This edition adds six Spencer essays to the original four, retains the Albert Jay Nock Introduction and has a helpful new Foreword

by philosophy professor Eric Mack. There is also a full index, which earlier editions lacked.

Spencer championed a laissez faire society, where personal relations are free from feudal domination, where political power is not available to some to enrich themselves at the expense of others, where industry and trade enjoy fair competition and operate within the controls of the market. Spencer wants a society of equal freedom for all persons, and demonstrates that the needs of a commercial and industrial nation turn it away from war and colonialism, both of which he denounces fiercely. Freedom and justice within nations lead to peace between nations, and conditions are established wherein individual virtues may flourish.

I am impressed by the earnestness and moral passion which suffuse these pages. Spencer had caught a vision of what might be in store for mankind if its potential were free to realize itself. With this part of his mind he was an optimist and a believer in some sort of a planetary surge carrying mankind onward and upward. But he also had premonitions of bad times coming, and late in life he foresaw a process of rebarbarization looming just ahead. His forebodings have been amply realized in our time, but his great truths still await their day. ⊗



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