Herbert Spencer

The shaming of the science of society

Fred Harrison

SO PERSISTENT is the failure of democratic governments to devise solutions to abiding social problems, that we need to question whether an explanation is to be found in terms of a general incomprehension of the rudimentary mechanics of society. V. Gordon Childe, the most influential archaeologist of the 20th century, offered such an explanation:

> A reasonable inference has been that the painful discrepancy between humanity's control over the external environment and its incapacity to control the social environment is due to the absence of any science of society, the failure of sociology to become genuinely empirical and the impossibility of conducting experiments under laboratory conditions in human relationships.[1]

Armed with the tools of the natural sciences, we can unlock the most intimate secrets of nature, and yet we continue to be defeated in our best attempts to decipher the codes that would explain the way in which society works. Some clues may emerge from a study of the way in which sociology evolved as a discipline for the systematic study of collective activity.

Sociology is now generally treated as a discipline fit for public ridicule. It counts heads and opinions in the attempt to convey scientific rigour. But is its failure due to an impenetrable density in the subject matter? Or has the way in which we approach the study of society been prejudiced in some significant way? The formative influence of Herbert Spencer may supply some of the answers, argues Fred Harrison. Spencer's works are no longer as popular in Britain as in the USA, but his influence is all the more profound because it escapes scholarly curiosity.

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HERBERT SPENCER was not born into the privileged class. His father was a schoolmaster. He trained to be an engineer for the railways in the 1830s, and turned to journalism in the 1840s. He received a substantial inheritance when his uncle died in 1853, which released him to pursue the career of a freelance writer.

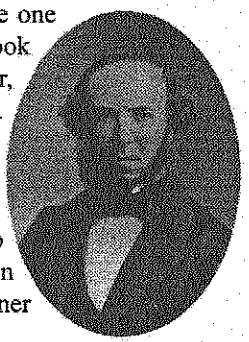
His first book, *Social Statics* (1850), was written while he worked as a sub-editor on *The Economist* in London. In this, he described society from first principles. One of the crucial features which he exposed was the grotesque distortions that stemmed from the private ownership of land, which severely compromised people's freedoms. This insight, if it had been developed, would have provided the key to the systematic study of Victorian society.

The radical content of *Social Statics* went largely unnoticed. In 1873, Spencer published *The Study of Sociology*, in which he enriched our understanding of human behaviour by drawing on knowledge from biology and psychology. He developed a theory of human society based on the thesis of evolution, which was to be given scientific rigour by Charles Darwin. The evolutionary law of growth manifested itself in the movements in the direction of complexity and heterogeneity. Present, however, were the institutions and processes that ensured equilibrium in the dynamic system.

Then, early in the 1880s, Spencer's reputation as a scholar was threatened from an unexpected quarter. The event that would put him to the most profound moral and intellectual test surfaced while he was on a lecture tour in the United States. The significance of his first book was drawn to the attention of the class that monopolised the seats of power in Britain.

In the United States, in 1879, a book was published called *Progress and Poverty*. The author had arrived at a conclusion similar to the one that appeared 30 years earlier in *Social Statics*. The new book exploded on the public in both the US and Europe. Its author, Henry George, became the target of intense public vilification.

George, too, went on a lecture tour – around the British Isles and in Ireland, where he was temporarily imprisoned for his inflammatory denunciation of those who pocketed the rent, the community-created income. George's offence was to inform the British aristocracy that its title to land was based on violence and fraud; and that, morally, everyone was a joint owner of the resources of nature. In his book, Henry George had reviewed this philosophical tradition and, as an honest scholar, he gave due credit to his predecessors. One of them was Herbert Spencer. Spencer had characterised the owners of land as "the parties who originally robbed the human race of



Herbert Spencer, aged 38

From *Herbert Spencer, An Autobiography*, Vol.1, London: Williams and Norgate, 1904.

its heritage".[2] Henry George cited Spencer's analysis with approval, and that was why he came to be branded as a communist by the British media. *The Edinburgh Review* (January 1883), in an article entitled "The Nationalisation of the Land", reviewed *Progress and Poverty*. Its concluding words began with the following:

> Writers like Mr. George and Mr. Herbert Spencer are at war not only with the first principles of political economy and of law, of social order and domestic life, but with the elements of human nature ... [3]

Spencer did not welcome this notoriety. In a letter to the Editor of the *St James's Gazette*, he sought to clarify the "misapprehensions" which had been attributed to him. It seems that he had been misquoted, no doubt the confusion arising because "the *Edinburgh Review* has not itself discovered me, but has had its attention drawn to me by quotations in the work of Mr. Henry George – a work which I closed after a few minutes on finding how visionary were its ideas".[4] Spencer may have closed the book, but millions were in the process of avidly turning *Progress and Poverty* into the first best-selling text on economics ever. It remains in print to this day.

The Poor Law and the 'diseased state'

BUT FOR Herbert Spencer, the comfortable life that he had carved for himself was now being jeopardised by his association with the American. That their philosophy on property had converged to expose the great injustice of land privatisation or, more precisely, the privatisation of rent, counted for nothing. Spencer, according to the American, wished to remain acceptable in British society. Henry George was so disgusted by this public display of what he regarded as intellectual dishonesty and moral cowardice that he penned a book called *A Perplexed Philosopher*. In this, he sought to explain why Spencer double-crossed his integrity. The American journalist and social reformer accused the English journalist and social scientist of "crookedness".

> He had tasted the sweets of London society, and in the United States, from which he had just returned, had been hailed as a thinker beside whom Newton and Aristotle were to be mentioned only to point his superiority. And, while the fire in the hall of the High Priest was warm and pleasant, "society" had become suddenly aroused to rage against those who questioned private property in land.[5]

Spencer, while developing his sociology of mankind, had learnt to indulge himself in the joys of London high society. His recreations were reported to include "concerts, operas, theatres, billiards, salmon-fishing, yachting, city rambles and country excursions; and it has been his fixed rule, when work grew burdensome, to strike his tasks abruptly and go away for pleasure and amuse himself till work again became attractive and enjoyable".[6]

Spencer had earned the right to enjoy the fruits of his intellectual labours. He had spotted the flaw in modern society, a flaw that he diagnosed as producing a *pathological condition* – a diseased state, as he called it.

> The wrong done to the people at large, by robbing them of their birthright – their heritage in the earth – is, indeed, thought by some a sufficient excuse for a poor-law, which is regarded by such as an instrumentality for distributing compensation. There is much plausibility in this construction of the matter. But...why organise a diseased state? Sometime or other this morbid constitution of things, under which the greater part of the body politic is cut off from direct access to the source of life, must be changed.[7]

Here was clarity of diagnosis and strength of moral purpose. Spencer's account contained the core of what could have become the foundation of an effective sociology. The pathological condition of society required the careful formulation of remedial policies, and the introduction of laws that demanded the accuracy of the surgeon's scalpel in the defence of people's freedoms. Instead of remaining faithful to his insights, however, Spencer treated his audience to a display of moral back-sliding and linguistic contortions in an effort to retract that part of his analysis relating to property rights in land. But he did not feel obliged to abandon his claim to his royalties. He continued to allow *Social Statics* to be reprinted in New York all the way through to 1892, drawing his American royalties while protesting to his English audience that he had washed his hands of its inflammatory discourse. In 1897, *Social Statics* was printed in the US in an abridged and revised form, from which Spencer expunged his analysis of property rights in land.

Freedom and the law of progress

ENLIGHTENMENT philosophers had placed great faith in the idea of progress. But that progress was contingent on the freedom of people to enjoy their natural rights, so that everyone could share in the benefits of scientific advances without sacrificing the spiritual and sociological characteristics of healthy communities.

The basic formula for achieving progress was eloquently defined by Henry George in terms that echoed Spencer's principles.

> [A]ssociation in equality is the law of progress. Association frees mental power for expenditure in improvement, and equality, or justice, or freedom – for the terms here signify the same thing, the recognition of the moral law – prevents the dissipation of this power in fruitless struggles.[8]

Creative people could advance the condition of mankind, which would lead to an ever more complex culture – just as Spencer had described – but there had to be an equilibrating mechanism to ensure that the momentum

was sustainable. The destabilising force in the system – the over-riding drive towards social disintegration – was associated with the net income produced by the community. Henry George provided a historical account of how this net income – the rent of land and all of nature's resources - increased with the advance of scientific and technological knowledge, and with the concentration of people into ever larger communities. His reading of history left him with no doubt that the disposition of rent would deliver either good or evil, depending on how that net income was controlled and spent. The

> unequal distribution of the wealth and power gained as society advances tends to produce greater inequality, since aggression grows by what it feeds on, and the idea of justice is blurred by the habitual toleration of injustice.[9]

This was not an inevitable outcome – George rejected the deterministic theory of history which his contemporary, Karl Marx, was embroidering. But he insisted that the privatisation of rent in all civilisations led to the corruption of the equality of status that people had formerly enjoyed, or ought to enjoy.

The solution, according to Herbert Spencer in Chapter 10 of *Social Statics*, was not to be found in Socialism or Communism. This form of social organisation did not conform to "the moral law". Nor was the solution to be found in attempting to divide Earth equally among everyone. But nor was it possible to leave the structure of power and property rights as they stood, if the objective was freedom.

> After getting from under the gross injustice of slavery men could not help beginning, in course of time, to feel what a monstrous thing it was that nine people out of ten should live in the world on sufferance, not having even standing-room, save by allowance of those who claimed the earth's surface.[10]

The monopoly power inherent in the private possession of land had to be neutralised, and there was a fair and efficient solution: share not the land, but the rent of land, among everyone in the community. Spencer wrote in Ch. 9 of *Social Statics* that a non-catastrophic result would be achieved from the following strategy:

> The change required would simply be a change of landlords. Separate ownerships would merge into the joint-stock ownership of the public. Instead of being in the possession of individuals, the country would be held by the great corporate body – Society. Instead of leasing his acres from an isolated proprietor, the farmer would lease them from the nation. Instead of paying his rent to the agent of Sir John or His Grace, he would pay it to an agent or deputy agent of the community. Stewards would be public officials instead of private ones; and tenancy the only land tenure.

Under these terms, land could be enclosed and privately occupied and used. The free market would operate to determine the leasehold rents in a competitive way (just as it does today), but the whole arrangement would be "in entire subordination to the law of equal freedom". This was also the solution favoured by Henry George. Here was a paradigm that equipped the scientists to expose the social pathologies, and the politicians to formulate practical policies for emancipating people from the last great injustice.

Spencer formulated the fundamental principles that delivered what Gordon Childe sought – an empirical sociology. But Spencer succumbed to the pressure of his "betters". Here was a classic case of self-censorship, for the sake of remaining socially acceptable to the people who wielded cultural power.

One of the grounds on which Spencer sought to dodge his earlier reasoning was the alleged difficulty of calculating the compensation that would have to be paid to the landlords. What compensation, asked an indignant Henry George, whose criticisms of this attempt by Spencer to escape from his original insights are now viewed as "compelling".[11]

Unfazed by his betrayal of integrity, Spencer published a book called *The Principles of Sociology*, the last edition of which appeared in 1896. This provided wondrous analyses of the rituals of tribal societies; but the insight which was the key to integrating material interest which the rituals of modern society was vaporised from his sociology.

Spencer's last volume was entitled *Justice*. This contained his final pronouncement on the land question. He located himself squarely in the camp which claimed that private property in land could not be equitably challenged. In *Social Statics*, justice was pronounced as incompatible with private ownership of land. Spencer's justice, however, assumed a plastic quality, following the public media's interest in his early views.

Land rights had been a sensitive political issue throughout the 18th century, but under the influence of Spencer's pen we can trace a hollowing out of the liberal social conscience (beginning in the 1880s). According to J.A. Hobson, land reform was the first principle of the New Liberal Charter.[12] That Liberal understanding, however, underwent an adjustment among the intelligentsia, and Spencer led the retreat from first principles. As a result, and with one creditable exception,[13] attempts in the 20th century at remedial action by democratic governments would be in the nature of shadow boxing. Spencer brought shame to the science of society, by perverting the intellectual challenges of those who would follow him.

The coming apart of society

IF WE want to reform the present, we must also revise our perception of the past, because our minds cannot tolerate discontinuity. So we have to refashion continuity, to free us to

behave differently in the future. By "mind" I mean our perception of our identity, which is a total experience designed to ensure integration of the personality.

Recasting history is a process of recovering our lost identities. It is a process of glimpsing what could have been, to spur us into becoming fuller personalities. To ensure full psychic health, there should never be a gap between our actual and our potential. The reciprocal of personal fulfilment is social health. But to sustain that healthy situation, we need an appropriate set of rules that enable us to achieve both progress (which entails change) and stability.

In the 19th century, Britain, as the first nation to industrialise, was a demographically disturbed country. It needed an honest sociology to identify the roots of social pathology. Some of the theories and concepts that would provide the tools for diagnosing this pathology were developed in France by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). He saw that the division of labour, if undertaken in an enforced manner that created social inequality, would not deliver the full benefits of increased productivity but would lead to deprivation and ignorance.

Unfortunately, the qualitative differences between land and man-made capital escaped Durkheim. Consequently he associated himself with the socialist paradigm, although he readily acknowledged that socialism was not a science, more "a cry of grief, sometimes of anger, uttered by men who feel most keenly our collective malaise. Socialism is to the facts which produce it what the groans of a sick man are to the sickness with which he is afflicted, to the needs that torment him".[14]

The French sociologist provided the language with which to diagnose the infirmities in the modern social organism, but his prescriptions were distorted by the failure to differentiate the concept of property. He saw that in a healthy society, inequality based on unjust contracts would not exist. Thus, he was able to offer a convincing account of the decomposition of society. One of his key concepts was *anomie*, which British sociologist Trevor Noble described in these terms:

> Anomie is not just a condition of the individual but of the society to which he or she belongs. The anomic society is one where the decline of the conscience collective, the disappearance of shared moral values and the sense of collective identity which they provide, is clearly a pathological condition. The anomic society is a society that is falling apart.[15]

Durkheim was an advocate of *moral individualism*, meaning that he did not support either collectivist or traditionalist doctrines that placed the state or the community above individual rights. But he was equally opposed to the methodological individualism of the kind championed by Herbert Spencer. He saw that individualism was a social product, and that

– correctly constructed – individuals became interdependent within an increasingly complex society. But while his diagnosis of the problem of 19th century society was pregnant with fruitful insights, his ambition to restore health to society was defeated by the partial understanding of the significance of rights to property. The outcome would be a generalised attack on that ambiguous creature we now call "capitalism".

Capitalism as the new scapegoat

IN HERBERT SPENCER, the science of society had found a voice of equivocation. In one of his late essays (*From Freedom to Bondage*), he blamed "capitalism" for inequality of social status and income. He lamented that "the distribution achieved by the system, gives to those who regulate and superintend, a share of the total produce which bears too large a ratio to the share it gives to the actual workers".[16] But Spencer had lost the moral authority to champion the rights of the working class. His crocodile tears did not impress the law-makers, but his attempt at a sociology of economics did contribute to the ease with which classical economics could be subordinated to the ideological interests of the property owners who feared the democratic strength of the emerging labour movement.

The pathological condition of Victorian Britain was in abundant evidence, but Spencer was no longer the impartial diagnostician. In lamenting the "demoralisation" of business, for example, he blamed entrepreneurs who indulged in "commercial cannibalism". This "competitive warfare" he equated with "commercial murder".[17] He resorted to moral pronouncements and universal principles to call for restraint on the part of the businessman "when his own wants and those of his belongings have been abundantly fulfilled". While the landed class was now free to accumulate its acres and rents unhindered by principles of sufficiency, the capital-forming entrepreneurs were satirised as avaricious by the sociologist who entreated them to play fair.

The plasticity in Spencer's notion of justice can be seen in his advocacy of payment to workers based on piecework, which ensured that "rewards shall be proportionate to merit". This was grounded in the general law of species-life, and "the law implied in our conception of justice".[18] Thus, while workers would be paid by results – by the value they added to the common wealth – the landlords were released from the execration heaped on them in *Social Statics*: they would be free to extract value that was not proportionate to anything which (*qua* landowner) they contributed. Pathetically, Spencer, in his old age, came to believe that "co-partnership and piecework" were the adequate solution to all problems – "inaugurating industrial peace and bringing about a decay of militarism".[19]

Spencer exposed his sociology of the jobs market to the fatal

objection that was perceived by a Belgian scholar, Emile de Laveleye, who wrote to him:

> I maintain that you demonstrate in your *Social Statics* (chapt. IX) that when primary rights are violated, i.e. when the labourer or the tenant, deprived of all property, is forced to choose between the wages offered him by his employer or the owner of the land and starvation, he is no more free than the traveller when requested to deliver up his money or his life.[20]

The "capitalist" market *was* based on unequal bargaining power, but the fault did not originate with the avarice of entrepreneurs; it was to be found in the dysfunctional dynamics of the land market – which Spencer no longer wished to subject to scholarly scrutiny.

By erasing analysis of the acquisitiveness of landowners from this sociology, Spencer's strictures of seemingly wasteful investment practices were deprived of their utility. He was particularly annoyed at the greed of railway companies and he wrote an essay on the subject.[21] He objected to their inclination to build superfluous and often unprofitable branch lines – and he wanted contractual constraints imposed on shareholders. But why did investors indulge in investments that would prove unprofitable? Many of the railway companies were land speculators in disguise – but to identify speculation in land as the source of dysfunctional investment strategies would have been to enter into a dialogue about the subject which Spencer was anxious to avoid.

By *renéging* on his analysis of the role played by land privatisation in the state of humanity, Spencer rendered sterile his other insights. For example, he censured the wage labour system in the Victorian factories as "slavery".[22] Likewise, on the farms, workers were "coerced".[23] The degenerating impact of the "circumstances" which made a mockery of people's freedoms were to be observed in the way their life prospects were prejudiced. And yet, because Spencer had qualified his analysis of property rights in land, his excavation of the realities of the workplace could achieve little, in terms of either sociological investigation or legislative correction.

The washing of hands

SPENCER was to be haunted by *Progress and Poverty*. He did his best to bury his words, even to the point of writing a pamphlet in 1895 (*Mr. Herbert Spencer on the Land Question*), following which he determined that "I must wash my hands entirely of the whole of the George business".[24]

Having washed his hands of the land question, Spencer contributed significantly to ensuring that future generations of social scientists and philosophers were blind to the implications of privatised rent. All that was left to be resolved was the explanation for the startling abandonment of the

hard case against private land ownership elucidated in *Social Statics*. How can we account for the great man's reversal of views? Not, it seems, in the intemperate terms of *The Perplexed Philosopher*. We are now told that his was not so much a recantation based on opportunism, more a case of hard-headed pragmatism.

> In his earlier works, Spencer justified inequalities in wealth *only* insofar as they were grounded in equal access to land. The silhouette of new liberal equal opportunity is clearly evident in Spencer's theory of land nationalisation. But this silhouette faded as he began concluding that land nationalisation was a sub-optimal utilitarian strategy. Spencer's growing conservatism was the growing conservatism of an "empirical" utilitarian. [25]

In other words, the shift in Spencer's views was not the correction of deductive errors by a "rational" utilitarian. His evolving prescriptions for land policy are now perceived as the analytical adjustments of a scholar who amended his views in the light of new facts – and, it seems, irrespective of the moral laws to which he would otherwise frequently appeal. What was originally a "crime inferior only in wickedness to the crimes of taking away their lives or personal liberties",[26] was transformed largely by the onerous poor-law burdens carried by landowners, into an acceptable social arrangement. The groundwork was thus laid for a Welfare State in which people deprived of land would become the new class of dependents on the generosity of the state.

The moral and intellectual challenge that ought to have engaged the Enlightenment philosophers was the redefinition of the individual, without ripping him and her from the social environment which was the site of personal perceptions of reality. Whether the Enlightenment philosophers were successful in discharging this responsibility is a matter for further exploration. In any event, Herbert Spencer betrayed his responsibility as a philosopher. If science was to make a healthy contribution to the evolution of humanity, the individual needed to be firmly located within the community. This meant that the rules that order the social context needed to be refined to correspond with parallel developments in the notion of the individual. But it was in the realm of those social rules that we observe the greatest neglect.

While many philosophical failures may have occurred through default, Herbert Spencer consciously prejudiced objective truth in the pursuit of self-interest. By his nefarious deed, Spencer succeeded in expunging from the sociological literature the insights that he had originally formulated which would have provided the conceptual tools for elaborating a workmanlike science of society. Those tools ought to have been at the disposal of modern sociologists. Instead, sociology was neutered and the injustice that Spencer had originally exposed was allowed to continue to

inject its vitriol into the body politic for yet another 100 years, subverting the aspirations of a democracy that was supposed to draw its authority from universal suffrage.

The shaming of sociology

DARWIN SPOKE of Spencer as "our great philosopher". Biologist T.H. Huxley said that he was "the embodiment of the spirit of Descartes in the knowledge of our own day". Economist Stanley Jevons ranked his work with the *Principia* of Isaac Newton. Philosopher J.S. Mill characterised him as "one of the acutest metaphysicians of recent times, one of the most vigorous as well as the boldest thinker that English speculation has yet produced". The student of society was celebrated by the most distinguished thinkers of his time – and he was not about to relinquish his reputation for the sake of the truth about what created the "diseased state".

Spencer's reputation survived the episode of the land question, but what of his legacy to sociology? Should we be surprised that, in the 20th century, this social "science" was to suffer the humiliation of being treated as a non-subject, vilified by the political Right, satirised by music hall comedians?

Spencer's legacy to sociology was a shameful one. The impact coursed through the 20th century, contributing to the crippling of attempts by reforming governments that went in search of solutions to the symptoms of the diseased state. It is in this light that we need to view with understanding the attempts at social reform by Tony Blair, the champion of something that New Labour calls the Third Way.

The leading intellectual behind the Third Way doctrine is Anthony Giddens. He left his post as Professor of Sociology at Cambridge University to become Director of the London School of Economics. From there, he acquired international recognition as the guru to the British prime minister. According to the *Dictionary of Cultural Theorists*, "With the possible exception of Herbert Spencer, Giddens is arguably the greatest British-born sociologist".[27]

Drawing on the insights offered by Giddens and others, Blair promised to abolish poverty in 20 years. In this, he was echoing the promise made by politicians at the beginning of the century, around the time of the death of Spencer in 1903.[28] The aspiration – and the ill-fated solutions – had not changed in 100 years. But for Blair, it was possible to live in the hope of formulating *new* policies for a *new* age – all under the rubric of *New* Labour. The lessons of the past were not relevant; for, as Giddens argued, contemporary life was analytically distinct from the periods before it.[29] Herbert Spencer, by closing down sociological discussion of the evolution of property rights, broke the thread of continuity on which we rely for our identities. Modern sociology would operate in a historical vacuum.

Thus, sociology could not offer revealing insights into the nature of unemployment. Similarly, sociology as the science of society cannot account for why almost 55,000 people died from cold-related illnesses in the three months up to March 2000 in Britain. People freezing to death in Eskimo societies may be understandable. In a society enjoying a temperate climate and generous Welfare State there would appear to be no justification for this kind of tragedy. One reason for the policy errors is that sociologists like Giddens lock us into the social model that solidified in Western Europe. Giddens does not recognise the flaws that warrant changes of the kind that would deliver a qualitative change in society.

Rescuing social democracy: back to the future

THE GIDDENS version of the Third Way is no more than a rallying cry to the Left, which is invited not to loose faith in itself; to believe that it is possible to renew social democracy by making some psychological adjustments. One of these relates to the rejection of the Old Labour dichotomy between the public and private sectors in the economy.[30] Tony Blair's government adopted the new attitude, promoting public-private sector partnerships called Public Finance Initiatives (PFI).

This conciliatory attitude was not guided by a realistic appraisal of principles. The crude theorising that has gone into this development of public policy has consequently generated predictable problems, the key one of which is that PFIs have been unfair to Britain's taxpayers.

- On June 2000 the National Audit Office revealed that the two companies which financed, built and ran a prison in Liverpool raised their expected rate of return on the deal by 75% once the project was operating. Re-financing gave them a £14 million gain, of which the Prison Service received only £1 million. This was the tip of the iceberg.
- In the first three years of New Labour's administration, the Treasury failed to negotiate clawback clauses in most of the current £17 billion worth of PFI deals. In some cases, re-financing deals meant private sector firms were projecting a doubling of their planned rate of return and a move into profit within three years of a 25-year contract.

In future, the Treasury will enforce clawback clauses so that the public sector will share windfall profits. But this decision was not based on a coherent understanding of the biblical invocation "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's".

The issues that New Labour ought to have been explored before embarking on a new policy tack include the legitimacy of property rights and the ethics of income distribution. How could the public take a *principled share* of the additional gains? Ought this distributive debate to be guided by efficiency arguments with a better chance of succeeding than the *ad hoc* approach to contracts linking the interests of the public and

private sectors? The soft Giddens formula failed to identify the appropriate ethical and economic parameters.

Herbert Spencer had originally identified the correct formula. This was the sophisticated fiscal policy based on charging people the current market rent for the use of land or any other natural resource. By this means, if a piece of land suddenly rose in value, the additional value would be monitored through the regular reassessment of rent and captured for the benefit of everyone. That value would be the exclusive property of the public sector, an outcome prescribed by both morality and economic efficiency. But the gains accruing to the private sector's investment of man-made capital would legitimately remain the income of the investors.

The origins of the class system

SIMILARLY simplistic theorising impedes the attempt by Anthony Giddens to formulate a strategy for overcoming the class divisions that continue to pervert British society. He offers a notion of meritocracy that is too narrowly constructed to deliver the conclusion he wants.

Giddens targets what he calls "voluntary exclusion", which he claims is a new phenomenon, the "revolt of the élites". These modern, highly paid people are apparently withdrawing from engagement in public institutions. They choose to live separately from the rest of society.[31] In fact, voluntary exclusion has been a key feature of English society for 500 years. Its origins as a technique for dividing people must be traced back to the transformation of property rights in land. And its continuation today must be attributed to that same system of property rights and associated tax policies, the analysis of which ought to be a central concern of a socially-relevant sociology.

David Underdown, Professor of History at Yale, describes the formation of one layer of the English class system. By 1640, in almost every county, a larger group of governing families existed than before the plunder of church lands. The age of the gentry had arrived, who during the 16th century were "obsessed with their status".

> Insistence on status was accompanied by insistence on property rights as land came increasingly to be viewed as a source of profit rather than responsibility.[32]

> They eagerly collaborated in the racket by which the College of Heralds legitimised the distinctions raising them above the common herd. [33]

Premier Blair wants to unite Britain by overriding class divisions. But because of the imperfect sociological advice he has received, he vaults the realities of history and locates his government's policy on the presupposition that class divisions no longer exist. This has created problems within his own party ranks, with traditional socialist MPs

recognising that a yawning gap persists between the rich and the poor. Northern MPs are particularly annoyed that the Blairite doctrine seeks to eliminate discussion of an economic divide between North and South.

Blair's Third Way vision contains no substantive proposals for changing the structure of society in a way that would eliminate class divisions. Because the Third Way doctrine does not constitute a new paradigm, Blair is forced to fall back on narratives that are no more than a generous application of lacquer on existing policies. This was recognised by Thomas Frank, the editor of the Chicago-based *Baffler* magazine, a journal of cultural criticism. In a new book,[34] Frank notes that one of Blair's other gurus, Charles Leadbeater, explicitly acknowledges that the "New Economy" required a new "narrative", an "engaging and compelling account of [the] future that captures the popular imagination, and which people can buy into, endorsing and enacting it in their everyday lives".[35] The word popularised by Leadbeater's Demos, a New Labour-supporting think-tank, is "rebranding". In place of hard principle there would be new packaging, with the future floated on "thin air", with the value-creating industrial society rendered redundant by the knowledge-based society which would generate "lasting value". These words were written before the hot air that floated the New Economy bubble was burst with a dose of cold reality.

Reaching beyond ideology

ADOPTION OF the device of the individual as the unit of analysis by social scientists sterilised philosophy as the technique for sign-posting new domains of progressive knowledge.

John Gray, the professor of European thought at the London School of Economics, has analysed the "unreflective individualist bias of contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy" which was animated by "abstract individualism" and placed "in the service of a legalist or jurisprudential paradigm of political philosophy".[36]

Ultimately, it may not be possible to achieve the ideal that was claimed for Marxism, the formulation of theory "which establishes a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and by revealing this past as ideological".[37] Spencer is an archetype of the objectivity-claiming scientist who could not detach himself from the influence of ideology. Marx was no more successful, even though he – unlike Spencer – rejected the social and financial temptations that were available to famous authors.

But if the social sciences cannot expunge ideological prejudice – to achieve the sublime state of abstraction of the "pure" sciences – we must remain alert and ask: whose ideology? For if we have a choice, we can opt for "our" version, rather than someone else's. The democratic ideology may have as many flaws as (say) the ideology of the aristocratic model of governance and society; but at least the mistakes would be ours, not theirs.

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