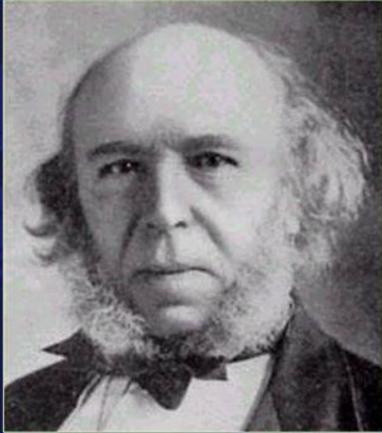


Why would some Christians accept Herbert Spencer's evolutionary and immoral economics for our government?

Herbert Spencer

Social Darwinism

- economic “survival of the fittest”
- believed in *laissez-faire*
- the government must let the “unfit” (the weak, lazy, stupid)...die off

A black and white portrait of Herbert Spencer, an elderly man with a full white beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit and a white bow tie.

Have you ever heard anyone say “Government should not be involved in anything except protecting us from within (e.g., criminals) and from without (e.g., foreign nations)?” Have you ever heard Christians saying something like this? Every wonder where this idea came from? It did not come from natural law, the Bible, or any respected economic leader today.

It came from Herbert Spencer. Before we take a look at his statements, note that there are roughly four philosophical positions regarding economics.

1. Laissez-faire capitalism. According to this theory a government ‘leaves it all alone.’ The government has a completely hands-off attitude to all economic issues. This was the position of Herbert Spencer.
2. Ordo-capitalism (originally called ordo-liberalism). In ordo-capitalism, the government provides a moral order in which capitalism, the free-market, can operate justly. It prevents monopolies and unscrupulous activities in the marketplace. There are degrees of ordo-capitalism as far as how much government is involved in the various theories of Adam Smith, John Maynard Keynes, and Milton Freidman. All of these theories believe in the right of private property as well as human rights. All of the above believe in limited government. They just have different limits.
3. Marxism. The goal here is the violent overthrow of what he viewed as the “exploitative capitalistic system” (more akin to Laissez-faire) than ordo capitalism. The goal is to abolish private property and put everyone on the same economic level. As evil as this is, it is not nearly as evil as the philosophical foundational principles of its dialectical materialism.

4. Socialism. The goals of socialism as far as economics (not social services or medicine) are much like Marxism except the transition from capitalism to socialism is gradual rather than abrupt overthrow.

There are good historically, moral, and philosophical reasons to reject (1, 3, 4). This leaves us with ordoliberalism and the mixed economies of Smith, Keynes, and Friedman. To understand this is to avoid the trap of calling others Marxists or Socialists because they may be less Friedman than you. Friedman is the extreme example of the freest market, and yet he himself explicitly stated that "while capitalism is a necessary condition for freedom, it is not sufficient." The other things needed are found in the "ordo" (moral) of capitalism, which would include at least a safety net—if a penniless, helpless person is dying the government does not just "let it be."

Herbert Spencer was a British philosopher who applied Darwin's theory of evolution to economics. In the late 1800s, many Americans enthusiastically embraced Spencer's "Social Darwinism" to justify laissez-faire, or unrestricted, capitalism. In 1851, he published his first book. He argued for laissez-faire capitalism, an economic system that allows businesses to operate with virtually no government interference. A year later, and seven years before Darwin published *Origin of Species*, Spencer coined the phrase "survival of the fittest."

Herbert Spencer believed that the government should have only two purposes. One was to defend the nation against foreign invasion. The other was to protect citizens and their property from criminals. Any other government action was "over legislation."

Spencer opposed government aid to the poor. He said that it encouraged laziness and vice. He objected to a public school system since it forced taxpayers to pay for the education of other people's children. He opposed laws regulating housing, sanitation, and health conditions because they interfered with the rights of property owners.

Spencer said that diseases "are among the penalties Nature has attached to ignorance and imbecility, and should not, therefore, be tampered with." He even faulted private organizations like the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children because they encouraged legislation. In the economic arena, Spencer advocated a laissez-faire system that tolerated no government regulation of private enterprise. He considered most taxation as confiscation of wealth and undermining the natural evolution of society.

Spencer argued against legislation that regulated working conditions, maximum hours, and minimum wages. He said that they interfered with the property rights of employers. He believed labor unions took away the freedom of individual workers to negotiate with employers.

According to the Social Darwinists, capitalism and society itself needed unlimited business competition to thrive. By the late 1800s, however, monopolies, not competing companies, increasingly controlled the production and prices of goods in many American industries. Workers' wages and working conditions were unregulated. Millions of men, women, and children worked long hours for low pay in dangerous factories and mines. There were few work-safety regulations, no worker compensation laws, no company pensions, and no government social security. Although wages did rise moderately as the United States industrialized, frequent economic depressions caused deep pay cuts and massive unemployment.

Labor union movements emerged but often collapsed during times of high unemployment. Local judges, who often shared the laissez-faire views of employers, issued court orders outlawing worker strikes and boycotts. Starting in the 1880s, worker strikes and protests increased and became more violent. Social reformers demanded a tax on large incomes and the breakup of monopolies. Some voiced fears of a Marxist revolution. They looked to state and federal governments to regulate capitalism. They sought legislation on working conditions, wages, and child labor.

Around 1890, the U.S. Supreme Court began aggressively backing laissez-faire capitalism. Supreme Court Justice Stephen J. Field asserted that the Declaration of Independence guaranteed "the right to pursue any lawful business or vocation in any manner not inconsistent with the equal rights of others . . ."

Despite a hostile Supreme Court, Progressive Era reformers became increasingly successful in curbing the abuses of laissez-faire capitalism. For example, in 1906, Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act that prohibited companies from selling contaminated foods and misbranded drugs.

By 1912, both the federal government and many states had adopted Progressive reform legislation aimed at ending child labor and improving working conditions. That year saw three major candidates for president, all espousing Progressive ideas (Democrat Woodrow Wilson, Republican Howard Taft, and Progressive Theodore Roosevelt, who had broken from the Republicans because he believed Taft was not progressive enough). The idea of passing more laws to correct society's ills had replaced the Social Darwinist view that civilization best advanced when the "fittest" had their way while the "unfit" were allowed to die out. Americans had increasingly come to believe that society could choose its future, which might require government regulations on private enterprise. In England,

Herbert Spencer grew increasingly pessimistic as he witnessed a swelling tide of legislation that attempted to end the evils of industrialization and laissez-faire capitalism. Spencer died in 1903 and was buried in the same London cemetery as that great enemy of capitalism, Karl Marx.

Given what the Word of God says about government's economic role regarding the weak and helpless (see Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:17-21), it is difficult to understand why any Bible believer would think that government has no responsibility to help the helpless. Perhaps his faith has been hijacked by Herbert Spencer and the contemporary polarization in our Great Republic.

The only viable position is ordo-capitalism. Moreover, limited ordo-government is always the best, but it only works if the people have integrity. And integrity starts with truth, not slogans or what sounds good.

In His Grace,

Pastor Don