

**Naomi Beck.** *La gauche évolutionniste: Spencer et ses lecteurs en France et en Italie.* (Collection Annales Littéraires, 927.) 221 pp., bibl., index. Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2014. €12 (paper).

Naomi Beck's very readable book examines the reception of Herbert Spencer's work among Italian and French intellectuals from 1860 to 1900, focusing on the role of biology in analyses of society and politics. Although its topic is narrow, the book is relevant to historians interested in Social Darwinism, positivism, early social science, and comparative history. It also provides a case study for scholars of the reception and transformation of ideas.

Beck's thesis in *La gauche évolutionniste* is that although Spencer was incredibly influential, his readers in France and Italy ended up repurposing his ideas in support of views that directly opposed his liberal individualism (p. 11). Since many of these readers saw him as a positivist, Beck begins her first chapter with a comparison of Spencer and Auguste Comte, pointing out that both thinkers were attempting "to construct a global system in which science occupies the principal place" (p. 28). She then argues that Spencer's evolutionary approach was developed in the service of liberal individualism and a politics of *laissez faire*.

Her second chapter looks at the early diffusion of Spencer's ideas. A key figure in France was Théodule Ribot, whose translation of Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* appeared in 1874. Ribot praised Spencer in several books of the early 1870s, claiming that his merit was "to have substituted for a subjective, metaphysical method—that of Hegel—an objective, scientific method—that of naturalists" (p. 59). Beck shows that the new generation of French positivists, Ribot among them, were attracted to Spencer's evolutionism (p. 63). In Italy, Spencer's work was also seen as positivist—as complementing, for example, Roberto Ardigò's *Psychology as a Positive Science* (1870). By the mid 1870s in Italy, Spencer was fast becoming "the symbol of the new scientific philosophy," and translations of several major works appeared in the early 1880s (pp. 73–74).

In the final three chapters, Beck supports her thesis by demonstrating how Spencer's ideas were "adapted to the needs of French and Italian intellectual environments" (p. 75). The common thread of this adaptation in France was an emphasis on social solidarity via a reinterpretation of Spencer's "organic analogy" (the idea that society is an organism). For instance, while in his *Animal Societies* (1877) Alfred Espinas followed Spencer in arguing that human and animal societies differ only in degree, he also gave the organic analogy a more literal reading, emphasizing the importance of social sentiments and collective consciousness (p. 79).

More detailed modifications and criticisms along these same lines appeared in the work of early French sociologists. Alfred Fouillée argued for a middle way between the social organism and the social contract, claiming that the highest goal of sociology was "to show this synthesis of the ideas of liberty and solidarity" (p. 95). Attacking Spencer throughout *On the Division of Social Labor* (1893), Émile Durkheim claimed that altruism was the fundamental basis of social life rather than its evolutionary end point (p. 131). In that same year, the economist Charles Gide declared that if "the republican slogan 'liberty, equality, fraternity' were redone, our word ['solidarity'] would take the place of one of the three terms" (p. 150). By century's end, solidarism—a third way between liberalism and socialism—had become the official policy of the Third Republic (pp. 153–154).

In Italy, Spencer's readers also pushed his ideas in a collectivist direction—toward socialism. "Does it not seem to you," asked Pietro Siciliani, "that the doctrine of Individualism contradicts a sociology with such a frankly physiological tendency as Spencer's?" (p. 98). Although some positivists supported Spencer, many opposed him from the left. Achille Loria claimed that Marx was the better theorist of social evolution; the social inequalities defended by Spencer were not "a necessary product of the evolutionist system, but an exaggeration of some of its aspects" (p. 110). In the 1880s, the criminologist Enrico Ferri declared himself an evolutionary sociologist in the Spencerian tradition. After joining the Italian Socialist Party, however, he published *Socialism and Positive Science* (1894), arguing that Marx's work finished what Spencer's had started: "the victors of the struggle in a corrupt environment are not the 'best,' only the most adapted to their environment. Only socialism, guaranteeing equal conditions of existence to all members of society, will be capable of assuring that the fittest are also the best" (p. 142).

My main criticism is that Beck sometimes oversimplifies Spencer's views, underestimating the collectivist tendencies in his thought. She also downplays the fact that he anticipates many of the criticisms of his organic analogy. Nevertheless, Beck's convincing analysis breaks new ground in showing that readers in France and Italy absorbed Spencer's ideas and took them in new directions.

**Trevor Pearce**

*Trevor Pearce is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He studies the history and philosophy of biology, focusing on the idea of organism–environment interaction, and is working on a book about how biology shaped American pragmatism.*