Chapter 1

“What a Go-a-Head People They Are!”: The Hostile Appropriation of Herbert Spencer in Imperial Russia

Michael D. Gordin

There was no reception of Herbert Spencer in Imperial Russia. Certainly, the English sociologist, philosopher, and universal theoretician never set foot on lands governed by the Romanov Tsars, and he even refused his one chance to be received by Emperor Alexander II in May 1874 at the British Foreign Office, ostensibly because he disliked wearing formal dress. Hence, no literal reception. But also no metaphorical reception in the sense used by intellectual historians and historians of science of yesteryear, a sense that has been largely superseded, with good reason. According to this older model, intellectual creations such as scientific theories were born in one place and then distributed around the globe like so many parasols, unchanged by the pressures of transit and unaffected by the beliefs and commitments of those who received them in Kuala Lumpur or San Francisco. The picture we now have is richer and more multifaceted: a scientific theory is not passively received; it is actively appropriated. That is, specific books are selected to be read or translated because of interests or beliefs of the consumers, and the way the theories are understood depends strongly on prior training and the intellectual practices by which they are adopted and adapted. Herbert Spencer’s work – or, rather, a subset of his

1 I would like to thank Bernie Lightman, Greg Radick, and Hans Hjermitslev for helpful comments on the framing of this project. Transliteration for all names and terms except common ones (like intelligentsia) follow the modified standard Library of Congress system. All unattributed translations are mine.


3 That this is true even within the same national context has been amply demonstrated, for example, in the case of Britain by James A. Secord, Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Andrew Warwick, Masters of Theory: Cambridge and the Rise of Mathematical Physics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The varieties of appropriation become even more complex and multifaceted when the text/theory/object in question travels beyond national and/or linguistic borders.
work, for who could hope to encompass the entirety of that gargantuan corpus? – met no simple reception by the Russians.

Neither, however, was it simply appropriated. I do not mean that Spencer was not read by the intelligentsia of St. Petersburg, Moscow, and places further afield. On the contrary, Herbert Spencer was literally everywhere on the pages of the “thick journals” (tolstye zhurnaly) that comprised the dominant form of intellectual interchange in the late nineteenth-century Russian Empire, and essentially everything Spencer wrote was translated into Russian, often earlier and more extensively than in any other European or non-European language (see Table 1.1 at the end of this chapter). But Spencer’s ubiquity did not necessarily imply endorsement, or even popularity. Rather, one of the most striking things about the engagement with Spencer in the 1860s and 1870s – the decades after his first translation into Russian, but before the advent of Marxism in Russian space unmanageably complicates the picture – is how negative, even hostile, those intellectual appropriations were.

In this essay, I use the case of Imperial Russian Herbert Spencer (an oxymoron of truly Spencerian grandeur) to explore the phenomenon I call “hostile appropriation.” There are many ways of appropriating a new idea. The simplest, which one used to call “reception,” is to endorse the ideas lock, stock, and barrel, and become a devout “Spencerian.” This did not happen in Petersburg’s dominion, even though intelligentsia practices could be enormously faddish, and there were times when you could not (metaphorically) swing a cat without hitting a Left Hegelian, a Right Hegelian, a Darwinist, and a Proudhonist. Nor am I merely referring to what we might think of as “negative appropriation,” whereby individuals read Spencer and found him not to their tastes and set him aside, perhaps with an acerbic review or two. “Hostile appropriation” goes a step further. In such cases, the new idea was not simply rejected, but the arguments for rejection became a template upon which an alternative vision was built. For many thinkers in Imperial Russia, Herbert Spencer was neither accepted nor rejected, but critiqued so thoroughly that he became the – sometimes unacknowledged – photographic negative of new intellectual visions. Spencer’s work was so copious, and so amenable to different interpretations, that he was hostilely appropriated for diametrically opposite purposes. Here, after a brief description of Spencer’s involvement with Imperial Russia and his initial translation into Russian, I will focus on two quite different cases: radical