Chapter 10

The Importance of Being Quantified: Herbert Spencer in Liberal Italy, and Beyond

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After the great success of the 1880s, a rapid fall in popularity overtook Herbert Spencer’s work in Italy, and the image of a Spencer who had disappeared from the Italian public sphere as rapidly as he had arrived begun to circulate. However, with the new century, there was actually a renewal of interest in Spencer, which was to last until the 1920s: a phenomenon which seems to have escaped the notice of the numerous historians of ideas who have worked on Spencer south of the Alps. When Spencer died on December 8, 1903, the British press reported that Italian newspapers were giving great prominence to the news. In the Italian Parliament, the jurist and university professor Agostino Berenini (1858–1939) delivered a commemorative speech on Spencer, warmly appreciated by the whole assembly. On the same occasion, philosopher Cesare Ranzoli (1876–1926) observed that the cables containing condolences reaching England from south of the Alps had been recognized by the British press as more numerous than those arriving from any other country. It was young philosopher Guglielmo Salvadori (1879–1953), believing the First Principles to be “the most important work of the 19th. Century,” who was one of the main originators of what I call the second wave of the Spencer effect in Italy (Fig. 10.1).

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2 Information drawn from two albums of cuttings from the international press, MS 791/356, 1 and 2, Spencer Papers, Atheneum and University Library, Senate House, London (hereafter HSP).


Figure 10.1 Cover of *L’evoluzione morale* (Moral Evolution, Turin, Bocca, 1909) by Herbert Spencer, Italian translation by Guglielmo Salvadori, from the first volume of Principles of Morality (private collection).