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Source: *Science & Society*, Fall, 1947, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Fall, 1947), pp. 305-326

Published by: Guilford Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40399857>

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BERNARD SHAW'S SOCIALISM

E. J. HOBSBAWM

I

THE textbook phrase about the "Rebirth of British Socialism in the 1880's" requires a good deal of commentary. The phenomenon was, to begin with, predominantly non-proletarian. It is true that long-term factors were already driving the working class itself toward socialism, though they were not to show themselves to any extent until the end of the decade. It is true, also, that a very small section of the skilled artisans, chiefly in London, with its tradition of independent labor politics, had pushed the program of left-wing, secularist, republican, anti-imperialist, bourgeois radicalism to a point where it verged on socialism. Yet it was, on the whole, in bourgeois and bourgeois-intellectual circles that the consciousness of a "Great Depression," of a profound crisis, a turning point, the "dawn of a revolutionary era" really existed in the early 1880's.

The background of this consciousness of crisis cannot be analyzed in detail here, though readers may like to be reminded of Mrs. Helen Lynd's suggestive comparison of Britain in the 1880's with the United States in the 1930's and 1940's. The structure of British economy, society and politics was changing, as it was elsewhere. Yet this change appeared much more profound to the British middle class, for it had become accustomed, in generations of world industrial monopoly, to regard its specific, and extreme, form of laissez-faire, small-scale, highly competitive capitalism as the only form of the system. Around it, it had built a "British way of life" typified by the god-fearing, labor sweating non-conformist manufacturer whose prototype was John Bright. There he stood, a Liberal in politics, a religious opponent of any kind of state action—especially tariffs—a believer in technical progress and the laws of political economy; a distruster of aesthetics and abstract theories, an autocratic pater familias: firm on the middle rung of the social ladder, with the skilled, non-conformist, liberal artisan below him (a small-scale edition of himself) and the idle, land-owning Church of England aristocrat above, representing privilege and leisure-class values.

The absolute changes in British economy were small—so small as to lead some modern historians, in the teeth of massive contemporary lamentations, to pooh-pooh the extent of the capital concentration and technical change then taking place. However, they were quite rapidly reflected in social structure, and moreover seemed vastly magnified through coinciding with two striking challenges to British capitalism. In the decade 1867-75 the industrial middle class had more or less completed its reform program—as usual, borne upon the back of a great popular agitation, and as usual with the result of having to face a newly enfranchised working class whose political demands were bound to clash with its own. Laissez faire as a policy and a theory was under heavy fire. Hardly had the debate on the political implications of the working-class votes penetrated outside a small circle of academic thinkers, when the Great Depression hit the country, temporarily shocked British businessmen into a realization of the end of their world monopoly, and wrecked agriculture—the social basis for the landowning patriciate which still provided the bulk of the governing personnel.

It was in this atmosphere that British socialism was reborn. As in New Deal times, the “Progressives” were a very mixed crowd, united mainly in the consciousness of crisis, and in their opposition to the theory and practice of absolute non-interference, which barred all hope of advance. Demands for the supersession of capitalism were only imperfectly disentangled—even in the minds of individuals—from demands for its reform. Monopoly capitalism and imperialism, just because they were not laissez faire, sometimes seemed like steps toward socialism (or the other way round).¹ In due course, with the rise of political labor parties on the one hand, political imperialism on the other, they were disentangled, though the Fabians, led by Shaw and Webb, tried hard to act as though they had not. This was only natural, since they appealed largely to imperialists, financiers and socially conscious liberal and conservative politicians to carry out instalments of “socialism” as a sound business proposition. We find (especially from 1895 to 1905) in Shaw’s pronouncements, as well as in the Webbs’, an abstract

¹ Cf. H. M. Hyndman, *Commercial Crises in the 19th Century* (1892), p. 165 f.; or the social reformer H. S. Foxwell’s defense of monopolies at the British Association (Bath, 1888).

tenderness for big business as against little business, imperialism as against isolationism, together with a concern for the competitive efficiency of British industry as such.² This attitude had its parallels on the imperialist side. There was an emotional quality in the concern for social welfare of such passionate imperialists as Lord Milner, which was later to bring him close to the Labor Party. In the early 1880's, however, this confusion between anti-capitalism and imperialist reformism was not confined to marginal groups of politicians; it was universal. Moreover, at that time it found expression not so much in any precise positive policy, as in a concerted attack on *laissez faire*, and, on the extreme left, on the "British Way of Life" as a whole. This revolt spread with particular rapidity on the fringes of the old middle classes, among the new professional white-collar workers—civil servants, journalists, etc., whose numbers were rapidly expanding (as indeed were those of all other kinds of white-collar workers); among emancipated middle-class women, academic intellectuals, artists, and so on. For a time a revolt against one aspect of the "British Way of Life" seemed to imply a revolt against all, so unstable did the system seem, and even "pure" aesthetes like Oscar Wilde found themselves swept into sympathy with socialism, while other artists, like William Morris and Bernard Shaw, became active political revolutionaries. The end of the "Great Depression," the bourgeoisie's recovery of nerve, and the onset of active imperialism in the 1890's ended this state of affairs. Most artists, for the next fifteen years, confined their revolt to the purely aesthetic; but without much success, for the Wilde case showed that with regained confidence, bourgeois opinion would not stand for even that much deviation from the norm.

Of course the individual qualities which predisposed a man to turn socialist in the early 1880's are not of major historical importance, though the fact that a number did turn socialist, is. Shaw's case is not in itself peculiar, though his Irish background, and his acute consciousness of being declassed, the "shabby gentility" on which he continually harps³ may have made him abnormally sensi-

² Cf. Shaw's *Fabianism and the Empire* (1900), *Fabianism and the Fiscal Question* (1904), and Webb's *Twentieth Century Politics* (1901), *passim*. (References to Shaw are to the *Collected Works* unless otherwise specified.)

³ E.g., Preface to *Immaturity*.

tive. Like so many others, he was powerfully affected by the newly aroused guilty conscience of the British middle class (doubly stimulated by the advent of the working-class voter and the Great Depression). Elements of artistic, of emotional discontent doubtless helped him to find his way into rebellion,⁴ and the evident crisis of the system made his rebellion more confident, more sweeping, and above all, led him, like Morris and others, to work actively for complete social revolution. Moreover, like most other intellectuals, whose mental background had hitherto been that of left-wing liberalism, he also found himself approaching socialism by way of a logical extension of the doctrines of middle-class radicalism. Most future socialists broke with liberalism over the imperialist policy of the Gladstone government (ca. 1880-82); Shaw, as an Irishman, already stood outside it. Virtually all of them approached the problem of capitalist exploitation through an extension of the familiar and accepted doctrine of landlord exploitation: hence the immense temporary popularity of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* in Britain. Shaw too, an early Henry Georgeite, still shows traces of his origins in his economics.⁵ Again, like most others who had pushed the orthodox radical critique of society to its uttermost limits and wanted to push beyond, Shaw became a Marxist, Marxism being then the only effective socialism on the horizon.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of the young Shaw as a Marxist in the present sense. He seems to have been struck in the main by two aspects of Marx: the tremendous literary power and documentation of his indictment of capitalism, to which he refers again and again,⁶ and the inspiring historical perspective which promised final victory to socialism.⁷ It is noteworthy that as Shaw lost faith in the

⁴ Cf. Morris' account of his conversion, "How I Became a Socialist."

⁵ E.g., the identification of landlordism and capitalism in *Intelligent Woman's Guide*, p. 111; also his "Fabian Essay" and M. Dobb's discussion in *Shaw 90* (London, 1946).

⁶ The famous "Facts for Socialists" propaganda of the Fabians was, Shaw points out, directly inspired by Marx' example in *Capital*.

⁷ Cf. his review of *Capital* in the *National Reformer* (1887): "To Marx capitalism with its wage slavery is only a passing phase of social development, following primitive communism, chattel slavery, and feudal serfdom in the past. He never loses consciousness of this movement; herein lies one of the secrets of his novelty and fascination of his treatment. He wrote of the 19th century as if it were a cloud passing down the wind, changing its shape and fading as it goes; whilst Ricardo

impermanence of capitalism, he abandoned his admiration for historical materialism (or rather the mechanistic determinism with which he confused it). In the preface to the 1908 edition of *Fabian Essays* he speaks of Marx as "a bit of a Liberal fatalist" and suggests that "we should also probably lay more stress on human volition, and less on economic pressure and historical evolution as making for Socialism"; and by 1928—in the *Intelligent Woman's Guide*—he dissents from the materialist conception even more strongly. Doubtless he might have got the two other characteristics of his early socialism—the belief in class antagonism and class struggle, and in the capitalist exploitation of the proletariat—elsewhere. As it was, however, he got them from Marx, and continued to cherish them in his way. True, he readily abandoned the labor theory of value under the influence of orthodox economists (chiefly P. H. Wicksteed), and had shown some uncertainty about it at a very early stage; yet he continued to go out of his way to use the phrase "surplus value,"⁸ though he now derived it from a marginal utility argument based on Ricardo's Law of Rent. He was never to attempt to get rid of the concept of exploitation altogether, or to water it down to one of "unduly high interest," as some later reformists were to do.⁹ For Shaw capitalism was never maladjusted: it was fundamentally unjust and wrong. As for the class struggle, Shaw, unlike his colleagues Webb and Wallas, never wavered in his belief that the holders of economic and political power were, in effect, irreconcilable enemies of socialism, who would listen only to force, never—as a class—to argument.

It is important to bear this in mind. When Lenin spoke of "a good man fallen among Fabians," perhaps even when Engels described him as "a brilliant literary man, a useless economist and

the stockbroker and De Quincey the high Tory sat comfortably down before it in their office chairs, as if it were the great wall of China, safe to last until the Day of Judgment with an occasional coat of whitewash. . . . This unsleeping sense of the transitory character of capitalism, and of the justice of equality, is the characteristic spirit of Marx, the absence of which so disgusts his pupils when they read ordinary treatises. . . . Marx keeps his head like a God. He has discovered the law of social development, and knows what must come. The thread of history is in his hand."

⁸ *Fabian Essays*, p. 27; as late as 1928 he pointed out that "Marx' category of surplus value . . . represented solid facts," *Intelligent Woman's Guide*, p. 523.

⁹ E.g., J. Ramsay Macdonald, *The Socialist Movement* (1910), p. 61-64.

politician, but honest and no careerist”¹⁰ they were recognizing that, whatever his declared views, Shaw was at bottom a rebel. He was not, and never became a Marxist or near-Marxist revolutionary, like his fellow-artist and socialist William Morris. His rebelliousness had a purely emotional quality, which made him reject the status quo of 1880 en bloc, including even those aspects of it to which other socialists gave a qualified assent: Darwinism and representative democracy, for instance. In this he agreed with Samuel Butler, whose favorite technique of inverting orthodox mid-Victorian values he was to develop, as well as to advertise widely. Yet in fact, however partial the intellectual integration of Shaw’s emotional socialism was, he had taken the vital step which was to distinguish him from the vast mass of writers and artists, from Barrès to Wilde, who fleetingly identified their personal revolt with the workers’, and whose names litter the history of the last twenty years of the century. He had a socialist theory, to which he devoted a lifetime of active political work—almost full-time work for long periods in the eighties—unpaid, unadvertised¹¹ and devoted. That its positive results were meager, is another matter.

II

Until the middle eighties there seemed to be, in the ranks of the professing socialists, no “moderates.” This optical illusion was largely due to the fact that capitalism, in the throes of the Great Depression, seemed at the time to be clearly on the verge of collapse or overthrow, that the question of reforming it by gradual means seemed academic, and the gradualists therefore remained quiet. In a series of discussions from 1885 to 1888, however, some of which have been preserved in the files of contemporary periodicals,¹² the

¹⁰ A. Ransome, *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*, p. 78; Kautsky, *Aus der Fruehzeit d. Marxismus* (Prague, 1935), p. 338.

¹¹ That is, until he became a public attraction in his own right. Even then the greater part of his political work remained anonymous.

¹² Notably *To-Day* and *The Practical Socialist*.

formation of an openly reformist, gradualist wing took place.¹³ On temperamental grounds one should have expected Shaw to come out on the revolutionary side. Yet in fact we know that henceforth he became for two generations the chief public champion of the most right-wing group of the moderates; and, moreover, the one which gloried in accepting current bourgeois orthodoxy on as many points as it possibly could.¹⁴

We can, I think, distinguish two elements in Shaw's conversion to gradualism. The first was the "middle-class consciousness" of the early reformists. That they were, one and all, acutely conscious of their middle-class, or to be more correct, of their white-collar, status, is abundantly clear. (I speak, of course, only of those reformists organized in professedly socialist societies.) My feeling is that this accounts largely for their rejection of Marxian economics, which provided no independent place for them outside the ranks of the working class. Thus the effect of their economic analysis was to replace "capitalists exploiting proletarians" by "appropriators of rent and interest exploiting the working population"; and they certainly laid abnormal stress on the managerial concept of the "rent of ability" which they adopted from the American economist F. A. Walker. However, this is not the place to argue a controversial case in detail. It is, however, clear that both Shaw and the other Fabians resented the view that only the proletariat was revolutionary, and that the best the non-proletarians could do was to join on to it.¹⁵ There was much talk of an intermediate class, and in later years Shaw was to make constant efforts to build a completely independent middle-class socialist party, anti-capitalist in its own right as a separate class of the exploited.¹⁶ Of course the practical importance of this "middle-class consciousness" was negative rather than

¹³ The Fabian Society, in existence since 1884, had not been identified with gradualism. Its leaders were in part, revolutionary social-democrats, like Hubert Bland, Annie Besant, Sydney Olivier and W. de Mattos, though hardly Marxists. The Society did not become "Fabian" in its later sense until 1886-87.

¹⁴ "The Fabian Society . . . has no distinctive opinions on the Marriage Question, Religion, Art, abstract Economics, historic Evolution, Currency, or any other subject than its own special business of practical Democracy and Socialism," *Report on Fabian Policy*, 1896, drafted by G.B.S.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6 f.

¹⁶ *The Fabian E. C. Report* (Nov., 1906), p. 45 f., and throughout the controversy within the Fabian Society (1906), p. 14.

positive. As their remoteness from the working class had originally led to illusions about its readiness for revolution, so it was now to lead some of them into the opposite error. The belief in a H. G. Wellsian revolution of the middle class intellectuals did not as yet exist; its place being taken (not with Shaw, however) by a faith in the gradual spread of benevolence and enlightenment all round. In any case, the decisive factor in the attitude of middle-class socialists now was their loss of faith in the imminent collapse of capitalism, and in the revolutionary possibilities of the workers.

The early view of Shaw, and most of his comrades, was simple: one day conditions would become intolerable, and a mass uprising of the workers would end the system. As capitalism reeled helplessly from one crisis to the next and worse, the moment must surely approach soon. Now as the initial shock of the two bad bouts of the Depression (1879-80 and 1885-87) wore off, this picture seemed less convincing. Capitalism no longer seemed on the verge of collapse. It might even be set for a long lease of life, horrible though this prospect might appear. The British working class was plainly not revolutionary. Its politically conscious minority was largely anti-socialist, the others, while on occasion ready to go on unemployed marches, too demoralized and apathetic to be a serious force. Moreover, the introduction of a really wide franchise in 1884-85 had disappointed the lively expectations of its socialist supporters, and was to disappoint them more as time went on.¹⁷ Reformists were therefore encouraged to come into the open as such. For the revolutionaries, hitherto buoyed up by the consciousness that the great day was at hand, a period of doubt and uncertainty began. It was precisely then that an incident, small in itself, affected them profoundly: the Trafalgar Square riot of Nov. 13, 1887, commonly known as Bloody Sunday. The fiasco of the mass attempt to rush the square against relatively weak opposition strongly discouraged any belief in the feasibility of an immediate revolution. "I am done with the Socialist League," said a revolutionary the day after. "The Fabians are the men for my money,"¹⁸ and he was not alone. Indeed, the years after 1887 saw a notable recession in the intellectuals' socialism: the Socialist League broke

¹⁷ Shaw, "Fabianism and the Fiscal Question" (1904), p. 6 f.

¹⁸ E. Rhys, *Everyman Remembers* (1931), p. 163.

up and Morris went into semi-retirement to concentrate on his art; Annie Besant and one or two others turned to Theosophy, Edward Carpenter drifted out of socialist agitation, and so on. It is a measure of the profound isolation of the early socialist intellectuals from the working-class movement that this recession coincided precisely with the first wave of genuine working-class rebelliousness since the end of Chartism: the great labor unrest of 1888-93.

Shaw shared this disillusion, which dominates the whole of his subsequent socialist development. His plays, full of feckless lumpen-proletarians mouthing socialist phrases¹⁹ are evidence of how lasting the shock was, even if we did not know with how much heart-searching and reluctance he abandoned the hope of working-class revolution or insurrectionism.²⁰ The reluctance was justified. For if the workers could not or would not overthrow the system, who would? The bulk of the Fabians did not consider this problem in terms of class power, and dreamed of a gradual spread of enlightenment and social solidarity among all classes. Shaw, however, was no liberal reformist. He knew that someone had to overthrow capitalism: indeed now that it seemed unlikely to collapse automatically, a deliberate overthrow was more than ever necessary. Who was to undertake it? In the absence of the workers, he played with two ideas, both the outcome of despair: with the plan of a revolution by white-collar workers and intellectuals and with the dream of the initiative of "great men"—Caesars, Napoleons, Supermen; aided by the professional salaried men, the civil servants about whom the Webbs were then building up their powerful mystique.

Shaw had, in fact, ceased to believe in the possibility of overthrowing capitalism, though he was not to admit this to his political self till long afterwards.

By the end of the century it was apparent to the Fabian Society [*i.e.*, to Shaw] that outside a few municipal reforms which commercialism would presently undo . . . they were powerless before the money, the social and historical prestige and the mountainous inertia of the Brit-

¹⁹ Gunner in *Misalliance*, Snobby Price in *Major Barbara*; the bandits in *Man and Superman*; Drinkwater in *Captain Brassbound*; but see especially the Fabian Election Manifesto of 1892.

²⁰ Two articles on "My Friend Fitzthunder" in *To-Day* (1888), especially for August, give a characteristically facetious version of this.

ish oligarchy and the European Empires. It was impossible for me to foresee that within 25 years the empires would collapse. . . .²¹

III

This pessimism first came into the open about the turn of the century: in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and, fully developed, in *Man and Superman*.²² Most probably it existed, half-acknowledged, from the early nineties. Certainly from 1894, when the private policies of the Fabian Society, which had seemed at one time to promise success, had led to complete failure and the series of *Plays Pleasant* began; almost certainly from before 1892, for one need merely compare the treatment of virtually the same theme in Shaw's last novel (*An Unsocial Socialist*, 1883) and in his first completed play (*Widower's Houses*, 1892) to note the shift from activism to acceptance.²³ What made the situation so poignant for Shaw was that he had no illusions about capitalism. Unlike the Webbs, who at times came close to the view that the captains of big business could be persuaded to establish socialism, as they financed the London School of Economics; unlike Bernstein who argued that, after all, capitalism was making things gradually better for the workers; unlike the empirical reformists who did not worry about socialism at all if they could get small concessions, Shaw never wavered in his loathing of the system. He was on the side of imperialism and the big corporation bosses as against Little Englandism and small firms; yet he was as profoundly conscious of the degeneracy and rottenness of British imperialism as those left-wing liberal democrats who, about the same time, put their revolt against it into memorable words.²⁴ Shaw too was haunted, as he had already been in the *Unsocial Socialist* (chapter 15) by the vision of the villas and seaside resorts of Southern England living on service to the rich, a Britain para-

²¹ Speech at Kingsway Hall (Sept. 13, 1924).

²² Cf. Preface and *Revolutionists Handbook*, e.g., sect. V.

²³ But *Widowers Houses* still purported to be an agitational play: it "is deliberately intended to induce people to vote on the Progressive side at the next County Council election in London" (Preface).

²⁴ Hobson, *Imperialism* (1902), W. Clarke, *The Social Future of England* (Contemp., Jan., 1899).

sitic on millionaires, American or otherwise. Gunnar's cry in *Misalliance*: "Rome fell; Carthage fell; Hindhead's turn will come,"²⁵ is not a facetious anti-climax, but a serious statement of his views. It is true that, while prosperity lasted, the degeneracy of British imperialism was somewhat counterbalanced by the dynamic vitality of its capitalists—the Undershafts and Tarletons of the plays. It was not until *Heartbreak House* (1919) that that spell was broken. But for Shaw the degeneracy was there all the same, all the more horrible for being disguised by the cosmetics of apparent social improvement and prosperity.

Doubtless this vivid, and, within its limits theoretically clear, consciousness of the need to root out capitalism explains why Shaw did not retire from active politics after the ruin of his early revolutionary hopes. It left him, however, with something of a dual personality. The politician and pamphleteer shouted gradualism and revisionism at the top of his voice; the dramatist had no such positive message. That Shaw intensified his Fabianism was only natural. The choice for the British socialist then lay between the Social Democrats, the Fabians and the newly founded Independent Labor Party (or, to be more exact, the left-wing trade union and labor movement of 1888-94). Shaw's scepticism about the workers led him to dismiss the Independent Labor Party and, in practice, the whole of the "new unionist" movement.²⁶ The leading Social Democrats expected a revolution in theory, but in fact acted as pure gradualists like the Fabians, being, in their way, a small-scale caricature of Kautskyan socialism in Germany. The openly revisionist Fabians, however, at least pretended to have some strategy and tactics fitted to the existing situation of a stabilized capitalism. Granted the abandonment of the Marxist historical perspective and the complete lack of faith in the labor movement, Shaw's choice appeared that of a "realist." Not only liberal reformers made it either, for bona fide rebels like Tom Mann also attached themselves briefly to the Fabians before moving on to the more fruitful Independent Labor movement. True, the minority of Fabians who did not thus link

²⁵ Well-to-do Londoners had weekend cottages in Hindhead.

²⁶ It is interesting that neither Shaw nor Webb took any part in the vast labor upheaval in London initiated by the Dock Strike of 1889; plenty of socialist intellectuals did.

their fortunes with Independent Labor had a very much less convincing "realist" case after the patent bankruptcy of Fabian policy towards the end of the century. But by then imperialism was at its most blatant, radicalism and socialism of all kinds at a low ebb, and the question of the end of capitalism apparently a very academic one.

It was perhaps this combination of belief in the stability of capitalism with conviction of the need for its overthrow, which led Shaw into ways of thought oddly similar to the syndicalist, direct-actionist views which, in rather different circumstances, gained ground after 1906. (This explains his phenomenal prestige as master and prophet among the young radical intellectuals of the early 1900's. None of their other socialist elders thought along their lines.) The parallel is not fortuitous. Both Shaw and the syndicalists disbelieved in reformism and in the automatic collapse of capitalism. Both, surrounded by the "fatalist" misrepresentations of Marxism then current in international social democracy, found no answer to their tactical questions. Believing in the strength of imperialism, conscious of the need for its defeat, they cut the Gordian knot by abandoning historical materialism altogether for an irrationalist activism, the vocabulary of which they borrowed from current bourgeois fashion: sheer willpower, initiative in the abstract were to do the trick, whether in the problematical form of Shaw's "great man" or in the more practical, short-term form of Sorel's picture of an endemic, unplanned, spontaneous state of rebellion which would one fine day turn into the great "General Strike." Moreover both assumed a high degree of passivity in the bulk of the masses. The comparison should not be pressed too far. The roots of the well-known incursion of philosophical idealism into the socialist movement go much deeper. Moreover, the background of Shaw's thought is defeat, that of the younger men, hope. Also in spite of an occasional anarchizing phrase about the spontaneity of the mass movements and the helplessness of leaders,²⁷ Shaw's picture of socialism is free from the anarchist influences which stamped the later movement. His is a transitional position on the road to Sorel and beyond.

²⁷ "When a great political movement takes place, it is not consciously led nor organized: the unconscious self in mankind breaks its way through the problem as an elephant breaks through a jungle," *Handbook for Revolutionists*, sect. v.

Hence, while he sympathized with the syndicalists as with every bona fide piece of rebellion against capitalism, he never took them very seriously. The manifestation of Will and Direct Action for which he hoped, was that of the great genius, or "superman," not that of the proletarian elite, the conception of which he ridiculed as a piece of bourgeois sentimentalism.

The Shavian "proto-syndicalism" was never well thought out—how could it be, when the attitude which underlay it was not fully acknowledged? Thus the relation between the "superman" (or his equivalents) and the masses whom he was to save, was vague; though I suppose the figures of the religious heroes and heroines, with which he increasingly experimented, were attempts to clarify it.²⁸ Clearly socialism was a mass movement, and could not be made a matter of the right administrative decrees applied by discreet and right-minded civil servants, as the Webbs sometimes came close to thinking. Hence the need for something like the Sorelian "myth"—for the masses, as such, could understand what they fought for. (According to Shaw at this stage, few except the handful of "accidental supermen" could.)

Socialism, he argues in a fascinating and little-known paper in 1897,²⁹ as it appears in current propaganda, is an illusion. It represents a reality, perhaps a better one than the illusion, though one which few socialists may recognise when it arrives. Myth and reality have one point of contact: they both derive from the "sentimental dogma" of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," and reality will have to "stand or fall by its success in making people livelier, freer and happier than they can be without it [i.e., socialism]." The idealized, unreal picture of socialism is necessary, because the movement advances through popular agitation, and must therefore be popularized through being dramatized. Yet in practice:

Out of the illusion of the abolition of the wage system we shall get steady wages for everybody. . . . By the illusion of the downfall of capitalism we shall turn whole nations into Joint Stock Companies,

²⁸ The religious "hero" appears in *John Bull's Other Island* (1904, immediately after *Man and Superman*), and thenceforth goes from strength to strength until his confession of defeat in *Too True To Be Good* (1931).

²⁹ "The Illusions of Socialism," in *Forecasts of the Coming Century* (Manchester, 1897).

and our determination to annihilate the *bourgeoisie* will end in making every workman a *bourgeois gentilhomme*. By the illusion of democracy or government for everybody, we shall establish the most powerful bureaucracy³⁰ ever known on the face of the earth, and finally get rid of popular election, trial by jury and all the other makeshifts of a system in which no man can be trusted with power. By the illusion of scientific materialism, we shall make life more and more the expression of thought and feeling.

But this mass movement towards socialism took place irrespective of the trend of historical evolution, for clearly such evolution in 1895-1905 seemed to be leading away from socialism. We have already seen Shaw abandon historical materialism (or rather the mechanical determinism which he identified with it), and stress the intrinsic, unconditional power of the human will to change history. The forms which this took—the Superman, the extremes of neo-Lamarckism and its doctrine of the Life Force—were doubtless in part dream substitutes for the strong socialist movement, the confidence that capitalism could be overcome, which was so absent in reality. Moreover, it was the will of an active minority alone which counted. But such a view led perilously close to a denial of the existence of historical (as distinct from biological) evolution. A period of optimism, in which one assumed that the “elite” could succeed in effecting a fundamental change and inspiring the people permanently, and all was well. A moment of pessimism such as the one in which *Man and Superman* is clearly written, and all we see is a series of temporary efforts ultimately defeated by the badness of human nature and by apathy, an eternal series of ups and downs round the mean of human sensuality and stupidity.³¹ We must give Shaw credit for avoiding this philistinism except at moment of evidently intense emotional stress; but the essentially rudderless character of his revolutionism is nevertheless evident.

These reflexions of Shaw's were expressed in terms of that movement of irrationalist, intuitionist, vitalist, religious and at bottom ultra-individualist thought which, for want of any generally ac-

³⁰ The term was one of high praise in the circle of the Webbs, who considered the civil servant the key figure of the future planned society.

³¹ *Handbook for Revolutionists*, sect. vii, “Progress and Illusion.” But the argument applies equally well to other kinds of historical change.

cepted name for it, I propose to call "Nietzschean." This is not the place to analyse this European movement of the 25 years before 1914, though such an analysis is badly needed. We may recall that its connexion with political socialism was short-lived, and, isolated forerunners apart, in general limited to two periods: a passing moment in the late nineteenth century when its champions were swept (like the British aesthetes) close to it, or even, as in Italy, into professed Marxism; and a more serious episode in the last years before 1914, when a serious attempt was made to build a theory of proletarian revolution on it. Its appeal was exclusively to the middle class—to the dissident bourgeois youth revolting against their elders, to the intellectuals, perhaps to white-collar and professional men attempting to assert themselves socially, and of course to those sections of the bourgeoisie in search for slogans of imperialist and militarist expansion, and against liberal, parliamentary democracy. It was a revolt against liberalism, but not in essence an anti-capitalist revolt at all, though it occasionally appeared to be; and its eventual growth into fascism was logical and not unexpected; though it is foolish to conclude from this that Nietzsche and Bergson were Nazis, or Shaw and Sorel other than perfectly sincere supporters of the proletarian side in the class struggle.

We have already noted two factors which might attach this unlikely movement to political socialism. In Shaw's case, I think, we find both combined. His original "Nietzscheanism"—expressed, it is true, in terms of Wagner, Ibsen, Bunyan, Shelley, Schopenhauer and Shaw, well before Nietzsche himself was known to him,³² was little more than a highly personal version of the middle-class revolt which, in Britain, normally took the form of aestheticism. Nor was he quite isolated: among his colleagues in the early socialist movement at least one other, Hubert Bland, showed similar symptoms. Certainly, in spite of its common roots with aestheticism, "the experience of the sensitive individual for its own sake," Shaw's version of ultra-individualism³³ was not easily expressed in aesthetic terms. Yet the picture he is so fond of drawing has no inherent connections with socialism other than a common opposition to mid-Victorian values: the isolated "special" man, rejecting the shams of

³² In 1891. But Nietzsche is not much mentioned until about 1898.

³³ "Protestant Anarchism" he calls it, *Sanity of Art*, p. 322.

illusion and convention and not "afraid to look life straight in the face and see in it, not the fulfillment of a moral law or the deductions of reason, but the satisfaction of a passion in us of which we can give no rational account whatever"³⁴; the hero aware of his fate whatever it may be; the leader recognizing the need to break through old law and morality in the interests—which he alone discerns—of a newer and higher law and morality.³⁵ It is a conception which might just as well lead to the imperialism of Henley and Kipling, with whose heroes it has some unexpected affinities. That the higher law is for Shaw one of communism, is a personal accident. Nor is there any connection between it and the tactics by which the higher stage of mankind is to be brought about: the orthodox ones of revolutionary or reformist socialism. It is only later, when Shaw faces his political dilemma, that Nietzscheanism becomes part and parcel of his socialism, and itself provides the elements of its political theory; much as it was to do among the younger intellectual syndicalists.

The earlier romantic individualism—for it was romantic, in spite of its anti-romantic airs—Shaw shared with several others; but in his generation only he seems to have tried to convert it into a political theory, though admittedly a fragmentary and very academic one.³⁶ For he was genuinely isolated. Other "rebels" carried on within the labor movement—sunk in the routine of Marxist propaganda like the Social Democrats; varying the fight in Britain with travel and emigration like James Connolly and Tom Mann; throwing themselves into the Independent Labor Party and the anti-imperialist Boer War campaigns. Shaw, despairing of the working class and the doom of capitalism, stood outside, while insisting on the need for revolution. It is not surprising that he should have evolved a special theory, though it may be remarked that such was its isolation and defeatism, that it was too academic even to be seriously utilized by the theorists of the labor unrest of 1907-14, as Sorel's theory was.

We see Shaw, then, in the years from 1890 to 1918, a complex mixture of private and social revolt, of political pessimism and the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323 f.

³⁵ *Quintessence of Ibsenism, passim.*

³⁶ I neglect one or two very minor figures, sometimes admirers of Shaw, e.g., G. Samuel, a columnist in socialist journals,

conviction of the need for revolution. Perhaps it is this which gives his plays their peculiar quality. *Major Barbara* is a confession of defeat; yet the intelligent French contemporary could with equal logic regard it as a call to arms.³⁷ The *Revolutionists Handbook* and the Preface to the 1908 edition of *Fabian Essays* are affirmations of gradualism, and of the uselessness of revolution, yet in terms which make it quite clear that only revolution will in fact overthrow capitalism. Capitalism is the final evil—yet its representatives, the Undershafts and Broadbents, are strong and admirable, while its enemies, where they are not contemptible lumpenproletarians, or weak vessels like Candida's Morell, are saints like Father Keegan of *John Bull's Other Island*, even though they gradually attempt to evolve toward the fighting, crusading sainthood of Lavinia in *Androcles* and *Saint Joan*. Yet the call for saints to defeat capitalism was only another version of the call for supermen, a call without hope.

IV

We need not follow Shaw through his numerous attempts to reconcile such views with the orthodox reformism of the Fabian Society, whose chief official spokesman he remained throughout. But with the coming of the first world war, and the general crisis of capitalism, his vicious circle seemed broken at last, and hope reappeared. Capitalism was proved vulnerable after all; worse, it proved inefficient, fumbling, blundering, above all uncertain of itself. Shaw's immediate reaction to the war was still the old one: practical defeatism combined with a theoretical call for revolution.³⁸ Yet as the war went on, the picture of invincible imperialism disappeared, and only that of its helplessness and degeneracy remained in *Heartbreak House*. But even though he welcomed the October Revolution, when other reformists were less than lukewarm, there is no sign that Shaw grew any more optimistic about the political abilities of the working class. Moreover, the Soviet Revolution, admirable

³⁷ Elie Halevy in *History of the English People* (1895-1905).

³⁸ *Commonsense About the War* says: "No doubt the heroic remedy . . . is that both armies should shoot their officers and go home to gather in their harvests in the villages and make revolutions in the towns," but no one was more surprised than Shaw when in 1917 one army actually did this.

though it was, seemed to the Webbs (whose influence on Shaw was immense throughout) a fundamentally romantic and inefficient enterprise with a good deal of that phrase-mongering and lack of attention to practical detail which the Fabians had always despised in British socialism. They were in due course to change their mind. It was a sign that liberal capitalism was weakening, that was about all. Perhaps, indeed, this weakening gave Shaw a moment of genuine, if wild, faith in reformism. The Fabians had always put their faith in the enlightened capitalist. Though now not even the Webbs could deny the profundity of class antagonism,³⁹ would not the evident failure of capitalism automatically give them their chance? "Capitalist incapacity has been demonstrated," announced Shaw in 1924.⁴⁰ Other alternatives were being tried elsewhere—in Russia, in Spain, in Italy. Yet none of these "are more tempting to a bewildered bourgeoisie than a Fabian government. And so, hopeless as it all seemed, when Capitalists fell out, Fabians came by their own."

Yet it was inevitable that the last hope of the old gradualist should be snatched away. The dismal fiasco of the two Labor governments (1924 and 1929-31) and the 1929 slump completed his (and the Webbs') disillusionment. Meanwhile the Soviet Union was actually building socialism. The Five Year Plan and collectivization convinced Shaw and the Webbs, who had been vaguely seeking a way out of their impasse by plans to reform the British party system and other similar devices, that a working alternative to gradualist socialism now existed. Indeed, Soviet communism was now the only choice, as gradualism had revealed its hopelessness. Shaw and the Webbs therefore (they had arrived at a somewhat more radical point of view by a parallel route to his) took the unprecedented step for lifelong reformists in their seventies, of publicly breaking with their political past. As usual Shaw formulated this with rigorous logic in a speech after the Labor debacle of 1931:

I want to make you aware that with the success of the Russian experiment has occurred a sort of revolution which we must recognize in our terminology. . . . Up to the present you have had Fabianism, Social Democracy, Collectivism, Socialism and so on. All that has

³⁹ *Decay of Capitalist Civilization*, p. 175-7. The echoes of Shaw are quite loud in this book.

⁴⁰ Speech in Kingsway Hall (Sept. 23, 1924).

gone. There is nothing now but Communism, and in future it is quite futile to go about calling yourself Fabians. . . . From henceforth, owing to what has happened in Russia, you are either a communist, or what Macdonald and Snowden are, whatever exactly that may be.⁴¹

Actually this did not mean a complete abandonment of Fabianism, for Shaw claimed (and still claims) that it was the U.S.S.R. which had carried out the program of the Fabians, through its adoption of those methods of political realism, administrative efficiency, and absence of phrase-making which the Society had always regarded as its special preserve. However, the distinction is verbal.

Yet it would be wrong to read as much into Shaw's "conversion" to Soviet communism, as for example, into Beatrice Webb's, which was to lead her towards complete Marxism. Shaw merely reverted to his original, but far from Marxian revolutionism; nor are there any signs that he modified his judgments of the labor movement. The success of the Soviet Union seemed to him the achievement of some very great men—Lenin and Stalin—and their efficient and devoted experts, differing from Mussolini and Primo de Rivera in the happy accident that these great men were revolutionary socialists, but not otherwise dissimilar. He recognized, it is true, the peculiar role of the Communist Party, though his rather extended comparison of it with the "Church System"⁴² argues that he did not appreciate the exact nature of its relations with the masses, or its character as an engine for fundamental social change. He had doubted the possibility of a successful revolution; now, through processes which, one suspects, had for Shaw the air of a series of lucky historical surprises, one of them had succeeded. As a realist, who defined socialism by its relation to human freedom and welfare, and not to abstract dogmas, he had, of course, no difficulty in welcoming it, unlike those Social Democrats who opposed it, because it had not come to power in due form. As a rebel and a fighter for socialism, he would support it against attack, all the more as it was increasingly businesslike and successful. He would even place his hopes for the future of humanity in it. But it did not seem to him to necessitate the revision of his political theories.

⁴¹ Speech in Kingsway Hall (Nov. 26, 1931).

⁴² Preface *Too True To Be Good*.

V

The first post-Chartist generation of British socialists has produced three theorists of international stature—four, if we also include a man of rather different background, James Connolly: William Morris, Shaw and the Webbs. Of these Shaw is certainly not the greatest; yet one cannot escape the impression that he was, intellectually, the most gifted. Why, then, is it that his contribution to socialist theory is so curiously scattered, contradictory and unsystematic that it is frequently underrated? It is fortunately unnecessary to summarize his views. Such summaries usually have the purpose to save the reader the trouble of going to the original and in Shaw's case the originals are, with the exception of a number of fugitive and anonymous writings,⁴³ easily available, and no trouble at all to read. The elusiveness, the proverbial impishness of Shaw are present in all, except a certain number of his straight-forward early polemics against capitalist economics.⁴⁴ For though the Shavian duality which we have attempted to trace, finds its clearest expression in the dialectic of his dramas, it also runs through his straight political writing. Against a background of the general bourgeois-intellectual revolt of the early 1880's—not specifically a socialist revolt—the revolutionary and the reformist are mingled. To be more exact, the reformist attempts to build up his apparently orthodox Fabianism on a substratum of revolutionary consciousness. His reformism is therefore not the coherent theory it pretends to be, but a very eclectic mixture of bits of realistic observation—isolated trains of argument and opportunist debating points. As a result, few of Shaw's later arguments are all of one piece. The revolutionary logic is brought up short by the "impracticability" of its conclusions and

⁴³ The most important of his drafts for the Fabian Society are the 1892 Election Manifesto, the 1894 "Plan of Campaign for Labor," the 1896 "Report on Fabian Policy," the Boer War and Tariff Reform manifestoes (1900 and 1904) and the various official Fabian statements in the Wells controversy (1905-08). All except the last are printed as Fabian Tracts. The *Collected Works*, however, contain all the necessary matter for a study of Shaw—especially the volumes *Essays in Fabian Socialism* and *Intelligent Woman's Guide*, as well as the prefaces to *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, *Too True To Be Good*, *The Apple Cart*—to name only a few.

⁴⁴ E.g., *Socialism and Superior Brains* (1894); the speech at the Industrial Remuneration Conference (1885), the *Unsocial Socialist* (1883).

escapes lamely into gradualism; the orthodox gradualist argument seems so naive that Shaw buttresses it with his own revolutionary ones, making it into something fantastic and improbable. Every now and then the young man of 1880 determined to "*épater le bourgeois*" at all costs, pokes up his head. The result is disconcerting to one and all, though we are today able to appreciate it more calmly, being far enough removed from the controversies of Shaw's hey-day.

But there is a more serious criticism of Shaw's theory: it is barren. In effect Shaw was able to continue his acrobatics on the tight-rope between reformism and revolution only by shutting his eyes to reality. As soon as he made the attempt to apply his ideas in practice, as a "socialist" policy, the result was abnormally unrealistic, in striking contrast to the machiavellian pride in realism of the theory. Shaw suggesting that the mining magnates who had pressed for the South African war should make peace by nationalizing the mines (as against the "unrealism" of the opponents of the war who wanted to act as though Britain did not possess an empire, and who were swimming against the stream anyway); Shaw dreaming of a parliamentary Socialist Party formed by a handful of dissident conservative and liberal intellectual members of Parliament (as against the "unrealism" of those who expected the trade-union-bound Labor Party to develop into it)—I quote these cases⁴⁵ not to score cheap points off Shaw, but merely to demonstrate the width of this gap between theory and practice, which makes his extremely able theory almost useless except as a quarry for individual, brilliant, aperçus. The truth is that Shaw's defeatism fatally disabled him—against his will—from waging the active fight for socialism. He became increasingly the brilliant artist and prophet, always ready to lend his prestige to the advertisement of the great cause, to work for it as devotedly as he could—but not in it. We cannot here analyze the strange frustration of the political career of the most brilliant man in the British socialist movement, in it from the very beginning, gifted as an orator, a negotiator, and a propagandist; the man who could certainly have occupied any political position he liked, and who never became more than a short-lived

⁴⁵ They occurred in 1900 and 1911.

borough councillor, co-opted through the agency of friends. The literary public may not worry over-much about this. But it must be pointed out that Shaw himself did. "The author, though a professional talk-maker, does not believe that the world can be changed by talk alone," he points out in the preface to *Too True To Be Good*; and the saving of the world is undoubtedly the object to which Shaw has devoted his life. The revolutionary leader is his hero; the preacher and propagandist—often saying what he does not intend—is his achievement; which he sometimes tries to justify, somewhat to exalt, sometimes to denounce. But it is not what he consciously set out to do.

The final word must still rest with Lenin: "A good man fallen among Fabians," whose active political life coincided with that period of British imperialism when revolution seemed least likely, and revolutionary politics least fruitful. When it passed, he was too old to change. It was a lean age for rebels in England. The choice appeared to be between a lifetime of unrewarded agitation without noticeable result—the life of the social-democrats and socialist rank and file—and acceptance of the capitalist system. Shaw attempted desperately to avoid this alternative; for to him the life of the Marxist agitators genuinely seemed to be a labor of Sisyphus, a heroic, but pitiful waste of the noblest energies. His own complicated attempt to square the circle was of no practical importance; but at any rate it enabled him to keep his private red flag flying through a period of black despair, and to produce the most remarkable running critique of imperialist civilization from within, that has so far appeared. It has also enabled him, one of the very few of the generation of the founders of the Second International, to find his way back to the fighting socialist politics of his youth, and to regain optimism, and a faith in the powers of humanity to change the world. The very junior generations of socialists must salute him with respect, and considerable affection, even when they disagree with him.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ In analyzing the plays, I have been much indebted to E. Strauss, *Bernard Shaw, Artist and Socialist* (London, 1942), while not sharing all his conclusions. I have made no attempt to trace the extremely close intermingling of Shavian and Webbian ideas, which has resulted from a lifetime of friendship. However, I do not think my conclusions are materially affected by the omission.