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R. H. TAWNEY'S EARLY POLITICAL THOUGHT *

R. H. TAWNEY'S EARLY POLITICAL THOUGHT WAS A PROFOUND critique of the Fabian tradition in British socialist thought. Conflict in society was, in Tawney's view, a reflection of collective moral disorder, rather than primarily a function of class or political antagonisms. Social unrest was traceable to the absence of a guiding moral standard by reference to which a nation should order its affairs to approach, if not to achieve, social peace. Tawney's social theory was derived from his examination of the problems of capitalist society in the light of Christian ethics. His analysis of capitalism probed beneath the surface of social institutions to the ideas and assumptions which gave them form and which underlay their development.

His work and thought illustrate his belief that socialism was a stage in human development towards greater maturity and morality in social affairs. Not only was a coherent set of political ideas essential to socialism, but just as important was the education of the men who would live and act by them. Political organizations alone, without an intellectual base in the popular ideas which inform political behaviour, could not effect significant social change.

The Webbs could take exception to none of these points, but Tawney still believed that their institutional socialism was an inadequate and insufficient challenge to the assumptions which underlay capitalism. He felt that they did not understand the causes of social conflict and thereby mistakenly prescribed administrative remedies for moral disorders. They dealt with committees and parties rather than with the individual men and women who must make socialism a reality. By concentrating their attention on the State and its institutional powers, they neglected the fact that the key to social

* I would like to thank Professor D. M. Joslin of Pembroke College, Cambridge, who is editing a collection of Tawney's articles on economic history, for his assistance and encouragement of my research. Dr. H. M. Pelling of St. John's College, Cambridge, who has supervised my work on British socialist thought, of which this article is a part, offered numerous helpful criticisms, as did Mr. David Newsome, Mr. N. B. Harte, Mr. Robert Dare, Professor F. J. Fisher and Mrs. Jose Harris. I would also like to thank Tawney's nephew, Mr. Michael Vyvyan of Trinity College, Cambridge, for kindly allowing me to use the papers and lecture notes, and the *Commonplace Book* which Tawney kept before the First World War at Manchester, which are in his possession: these papers etc. are hereafter referred to as the T-V Papers.

change lay in ideas and not in organizations. In the years prior to the First World War, Tawney therefore began to develop a socialist philosophy which would explore more fully the underlying causes of discontent. The primary point of departure for his pre-war thought was, as in the case of the Webbs, the labour unrest.

I

INTRODUCTION

Tawney was thirty years old at the time of the 1911 strikes. He lived in Manchester and Oxford where he worked as a tutor in economic and social history for the Workers' Educational Association, which he helped to build as "An Experiment in Democratic Education".¹ The W.E.A., as it was and is known, was founded in 1903 as a challenge to the class bias in British education, of which Tawney had had personal experience while at Rugby and Balliol. He was determined to help to extend to the working class the educational privileges which he had obtained as the son of a member of the Indian civil service.

His first exposure to educational work was at the University Settlement House at Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel, where he lived prior to and immediately after his leaving Oxford with a B.A. in Literae Humaniores (Greats) in 1903.² William (later Lord) Beveridge has commented on the influence of the Master of Balliol in directing the attention of many socially-conscious students to social work in London. Tawney and Beveridge were both

anxious to join, by way of carrying out Edward Caird's desire expressed to us at Balliol, that when we had done with Oxford studies, some of us should go to Poplar to discover why with so much wealth, there was also so much poverty in London. This advice was the decisive factor in taking both of us to Toynbee Hall, under Canon Barnett.³

¹ R. H. Tawney, *An Experiment in Democratic Education* (Manchester, 1914), a pamphlet reprinted by the W.E.A. from the *Political Quarterly* of May 1914. This essay may also be found in R. H. Tawney, *The Radical Tradition*, ed. Rita Hinden (London, 1964), pp. 70-81.

² Tawney never paid the necessary fee to transform his B.A. into an M.A., since he did not believe in the purchase of academic degrees.

³ The Beveridge Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Box LI 211. Beveridge's notes, attached to Tawney's early letters to him, are undated. On Rugby and Oxford at the turn of the century, cf. J. B. H. Simpson, *Rugby since Arnold* (London, 1967); N. P. Ashley and C. T. Saunders, *Red Oxford* (Oxford, 1933); F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple* (London, 1949); Adam Ulam, *Philosophical Foundations of English Socialism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951). On Canon Barnett, cf. Mrs. S. A. Barnett, *Canon Barnett* (London, 1921), a section of which on Barnett's educational ideas was written by Tawney in 1918; and J. A. R. Pimlott, *Toynbee Hall* (London, 1935). On Beveridge, cf. Janet Beveridge, *Beveridge and his Plan* (London, 1954) and the forthcoming life by Mrs. Jose Harris.

Canon S. A. Barnett was warden of Toynbee Hall from its foundation in memory of Arnold Toynbee in 1884 until 1906. His thoughts on the moral basis of social problems undoubtedly helped Tawney and many others to form their early political opinions. Tawney often sought Canon Barnett's advice and highly valued his friendship which extended until the latter's death in 1914.⁴

Canon Barnett's influence was important in Tawney's choice of profession. Having failed to get a first-class honours degree, he was thankful thereby to have escaped a career in the civil service. He contemplated joining the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.) in August 1903, but was uncertain about where his real vocation lay. An extended visit to Germany in late 1903 helped him to clarify his thoughts about his future, and he finally rejected Charles Loch's offer of a post with the C.O.S., whose methods he dismissed as too "inquisitorial".⁵ Instead, he became secretary to the Children's Country Holiday Fund, one of Canon Barnett's benevolent organizations, through which he met his future wife Jeanette, the sister of his friend William Beveridge.

Charity work, however, was never a real substitute for his interest in education. Tawney admitted to Beveridge in 1906 that "teaching in an industrial town is just what I want ultimately to do",⁶ but he was hesitant about taking a formal university post. He eventually overcame doubts about the adequacy of his preparation, and accepted a position as assistant in economics at Glasgow University, under Professor William Smart, who was then preoccupied as a member (with Beatrice Webb among others) of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress; Smart signed the Commission's Majority Report in 1909. Tawney had no formal training in economics, but with the recommendation of Edward Caird, he began teaching the subject which formed his life-work. As in Arnold Toynbee's case, a second-class degree was not a bar to an academic career. At the University, he shared teaching assignments with Tom Jones, later Assistant Secretary of the Cabinet under Lloyd George and Baldwin.⁷ Tawney also wrote radical leaders for the *Glasgow Herald*,

⁴ See Canon Barnett's article, "Our Present Discontents", *The Nineteenth Century and After*, lxiii (no. 132, Feb. 1913), pp. 328-37, for the similarity with Tawney's ideas.

⁵ The Beveridge Papers, LI 211, letter of Tawney to Beveridge, Aug. 1903, impishly addressed, "Dear Drink". On the C.O.S., cf. C. L. Mowat, *The Charity Organisation Society* (London, 1961). "Inquisitorial" was T. S. Ashton's term, as cited in his obituary notice of Tawney for the British Academy, *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xlviii (1962), p. 462.

⁶ The Beveridge Papers, LI 211, Tawney to Beveridge, 20 Sept. 1906.

⁷ Ashton, "Richard Henry Tawney 1880-1962", p. 462. The Beveridge Papers, LI 211, Tawney to Beveridge, 22 Oct. 1906.

that is until the public response forced the paper, in Tawney's words, to hold up "its hands at my depravity" and to restrict his contributions to signed articles.⁸

But Tawney's commitment to education found a more permanent embodiment in the newly-founded Workers' Educational Association. He became a member of its executive committee in 1905, and accepted the tutorship of two experimental adult classes at Rochdale and Longton in January 1908, both of which were sponsored by the University of Oxford and funded in part by All Souls College.⁹ After his marriage in 1909, Tawney settled in Manchester, where he was able to teach and to pursue his own historical work under the powerful influence of Professor George Unwin.¹⁰ In 1910-11, Tawney taught courses in social and economic problems, economic and constitutional history and economic theories at Littleborough, Longton, Wrexham and Rochdale. By 1914 he had added courses at Stoke on the French Revolution, at Toynbee Hall on modern European history, and at Longton on the secession of the American colonies.¹¹ As with so many other teachers, Tawney's self-education accompanied his teaching responsibilities. His students were of various trades. For instance, his class at Stoke in 1912 included six miners, two potters, three ironworkers, six clerks, one librarian, three teachers, two printers and a warehouseman. As one might have expected, his Longton tutorial class had a higher number of potters, eleven out of thirty-three in 1913. Nine of the same group had attended tutorial classes since they had begun six years earlier.¹²

The close personal relationships in these extra-mural classes profoundly affected Tawney. His pre-war view of the workingman's limitations and potential for improvement was largely a product of his tutorial experience with what was undoubtedly an unrepresentative sample of the working class. But more importantly, his W.E.A.

⁸ The Beveridge Papers, LI 211, Tawney to Beveridge, 29 Apr. 1907.

⁹ T-V Papers, letter of W. R. Anson, Warden of All Souls, to Tawney, 4 Mar. 1913. On the W.E.A., cf. *The W.E.A. Education Yearbook* (Manchester, 1918), p. 305; Mary Stocks, *The Workers' Educational Association* (London, 1953).

¹⁰ On Unwin, cf. Tawney's own introductory memoir in his 1927 edition, *Studies in Economic History: The Collected Papers of George Unwin* (London, 1927).

¹¹ *The Highway*, vol. iii, no. 26 (Nov. 1910), pp. 29-30; vol. iv, no. 38 (Nov. 1911), pp. 27-9; vol. v, no. 50 (Nov. 1912), pp. 26-9; vol. vi, no. 62 (Nov. 1913), pp. 27-8; notes for the lectures he gave on the French Revolution to his Longton students are collected in a box under that title in the rather haphazard collection of Tawney's lectures which is kept at the Brit. Lib. Pol. Econ. Sci.

¹² From Tawney's own list in T-V Papers.

classes came to represent a microcosm of the type of community of belief and common work which he envisaged in his socialist writings. These classes were voluntary groupings of men and women who came together out of their belief in a moral principle — the pursuit of knowledge, which was in Tawney's view one of the gifts of God. Not all his students need have been Christians, but in adult education they joined in a society of equals in the widest sense of the term. In the *Commonplace Book* which he kept at Manchester from 1912-14, Tawney stated this idea in simple terms. His work in the W.E.A. was an expression of his belief that men should "think of knowledge, like religion, as transcending all differences of class, and wealth," since "in the eye of learning as in the eye of God, all men are equal because all are infinitely small".¹³

It was clear to Tawney that a class-ridden system of education, catering for the more fortunate citizens, was a reflection as well as a major cause of that society's social problems. In other words, English education was corrupt to the extent that it was bound by the values of society, which is to say, the values of capitalist materialism. "To sell education for money is the next thing to selling the gifts of God for money," and just as intolerable, in Tawney's view.¹⁴

But education was really a long-term solution to problems which required immediate action. Here Tawney did not offer many specific suggestions. Earlier, during his two years at Glasgow, he had concluded pessimistically that mechanical remedies to unemployment and distress, such as labour exchanges and the Poor Law, were woefully inadequate. The pattern of working-class life, with few hopes and fewer chances, had already been firmly set by the time a man joined the labour force. Tawney wrote to Beveridge in 1907 and suggested a trip to Germany to compare the substance of social policy in the two countries. He then commented: "Personally, when I survey the class of men who applies here", that is, to the Glasgow labour exchanges, "I am rather hopeless about doing anything with them now that they have grown up, . . .".¹⁵ Not all working-

¹³ R. H. Tawney's *Commonplace Book*, entry for 30 October 1912, in T-V Papers. Hereafter cited as CPB.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The Beveridge Papers, LI 211, Tawney to Beveridge, 13 Apr. 1907. Tawney did visit Germany in 1909-10. His thoughts are to be found in his article "Municipal Enterprises in Germany", *Econ. Rev.*, xx (Oct. 1910), pp. 432-7; and in his "Report of a Visit to Germany", *The Highway*, vol. ii, no. 18 (Mar. 1910), pp. 90-1. Beveridge's work on labour exchanges made him particularly sensitive to Tawney's remarks.

men had the motivation or the ability to profit from such schemes as the W.E.A. Primary and secondary schooling needed systematic reorganization, too. Education at all levels was, in his view, the most important key to social change.

After a few more years' experience in teaching, he was less depressed, since his W.E.A. work had proved so fruitful both in the response from his students and in his own intellectual development. In April 1912 he published his first major historical work, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*. He dedicated the book to William Temple (later archbishop of Canterbury) and Alfred Mansbridge, respectively the President and Secretary of the W.E.A. In his preface, he thanked the members of his tutorial classes for their assistance. He admitted that "the friendly smittings of weavers, potters, miners, and engineers, have taught me much about problems of political and economic science which cannot easily be learned from books".¹⁶ In terms of his thought on contemporary society, his sense of personal debt was even more pronounced. "My views such as they are", he wrote in 1912 or 1913 "have been formed by intercourse with working people".¹⁷

II

THE LABOUR UNREST

Tawney's contact with and involvement in working-men's lives rather than the political manoeuvrings of their leaders, his rejection of mechanical solutions to problems which involve the deepest issues of human values, and his underlying religious faith led him to a distinctive interpretation of contemporary events. Nevertheless, Tawney shared the view of the Webbs and other socialists that the pre-war labour unrest was a crucial step in the development of the British working-class movement. "The period of acute industrial conflict from 1910 to 1914", he wrote in later years, "was marked by the emergence of issues which, if not novel in principle, had not previously been formulated with equal sharpness".¹⁸ On immediate reflection at the time of the strikes, he was still more emphatic. Indeed, he saw the discontent as but the outward manifestation of an

¹⁶ R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912), p. ix.

¹⁷ From draft of a speech probably on the labour unrest, in T-V papers, ff. 35-40. The numbering is mine.

¹⁸ R. H. Tawney, *The Attack* (London, 1953), p. 121, from his British Academy obituary notice of Beatrice Webb, *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xxix (1943), at p. 303.

inner revolution in British politics. He shared with the Webbs the sense of a profound change in political ideas, in "the conception which men take of themselves and their place in society".¹⁹ Here as always, Tawney's eyes were firmly fixed on the world of ideas, in which he saw, much more than did the Webbs, the causes and remedies of social conflict. Tawney wrote in 1914 that

The minds of an ever-growing number of men and women are passing through one of those mysterious bursts of activity which make some years as decisive as generations, and of which measurable changes in the world of fact are the consequence rather than the cause.²⁰

The political implications which followed were far less clear to Tawney than to Sidney Webb. The impact of the pre-war discontent on Trade Union or party politics was not its most interesting aspect. Tawney was convinced, characteristically, that the labour unrest presented, rather, striking evidence of the growth of a wide-spread "determination that there shall be a radical reconstruction of human relationships",²¹ a renewal of

The human connections, loyalties, affections, proud bonds between man and man which express a man's personality and become at once a sheltering nest for his spirit and a kind of watchtower from which he may see visions of a more spacious and bountiful land.²²

Not class relationships, not political relationships, but rather human relationships — the encounter of moral beings in a world which ought to be based not upon domination, but upon the principles of service and human dignity — are at the heart of Tawney's pre-war vision of socialism. Ideas were real things to him, powerful factors the neglect of which distorts any true idea of historical change and conflict.

He saw the labour unrest with the eyes of a platonic idealist. He was convinced that the "dominant motif" of the "first two turbulent decades of the twentieth century" was to be found

less in the world of political and economic effort than in the revival among the large masses of men of an Idea . . . of the sacredness of human personality . . . which is a kind of lamp by which a host of squalid oppressions are being examined.²³

These oppressions had existed for generations. What had changed in the pre-war years was not the material world, but rather the way men approached political issues. The consciousness of injustice was growing apace.

¹⁹ Tawney, *An Experiment in Democratic Education*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² CPB, 10 June 1912.

²³ Tawney, *An Experiment in Democratic Education*, p. 3.

Before the First World War, the public conscience was beginning to awaken, in Tawney's view, to the contradiction between the dominant pattern of social and economic organization and "what men feel to be morally right . . .".²⁴ Here was the underlying cause of the labour unrest. Men had come to "believe that their external arrangements are not (like a bad harvest) the action of natural causes, but due to human action, and capable of being altered".²⁵ Discontent grew as men continued to awaken to the wide gap between social practice and the political ideology, and determined to act on the basis of their beliefs.

The strikes were concerned only superficially with wages and hours. Principles were at stake. The discontent was an inevitable outcome of the growing "consciousness of a moral wrong, an outrage on [that] which is sacred in man",²⁶ and this crime — wage slavery — seemed to be intimately related to the very organization of capitalist society. What had happened in the pre-war years was that Englishmen were beginning to extend their

conception of slavery from legal rightlessness to practical helplessness, from property in human beings to property in the labour of human beings, and to feel the same moral abhorrence at the latter as [they] do of the former.²⁷

A mere increment in wages would not meet this fundamental point. Men had come to see that where one man is oppressed, the freedom of all is diminished. "This is why thousands of men strike in order that justice may be done to a few, when they have everything to lose and nothing to gain by striking".²⁸

Tawney believed that the workers were no longer prepared to accept a social system which reduced them to "cogs in a devouring machine which grinds material wealth out of immortal spirits".²⁹ It took years for this "corroding discovery" to move the industrial population. The realization of the dimensions of the problem of "economic privilege and economic serfdom" had not come easily. No man likes to admit that he is a slave. But that conclusion had been reached, with "silent despair in some", and with "what bitterness of heart and angry determination in others, let him who has not seen imagine". Tawney urged no man to under-

²⁴ CPB, 6 May 1912.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ CPB, 10 June 1912.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.* In the same passage he argued that most workers did not see the workers as "Quixotic" but rather as rational men, despite the outcome of the strikes.

²⁹ Tawney, *An Experiment in Democratic Education*, pp. 3-4.

estimate "the mine" which had been dug "beneath economic arrangements" by this popular awakening which was reflected in the labour unrest. For "it is in relation to economic affairs that the objective order of society is most violently in contradiction to men's conception of right".³⁰

Tawney's views rested on his belief in the progressive character of social thought. He held that the "spiritual level of society" is not fixed and immutable. It changed as "the view which [society] takes of man and his claim to the universe"³¹ changed. Discontent reflects such movements of thought. Thus slavery was abolished when men came to see that legal bondage violated any belief in the intrinsic value of human life. As in the case of chattel slavery, it had taken years for the abolition of wage slavery to acquire a popular base. What had finally broken down was the society's willingness to tolerate the existence of widespread exploitation.

Hence it was with excitement and hope that Tawney greeted the pre-war militancy. He further believed that the working-class rebels had distinguished ancestors, whose struggles served as the focal point of Tawney's scholarly interest. In the *Agrarian Problem*, published in 1912, he similarly applauded the rebellious spirit of the protests against enclosures. There he found "the last great literary expression of the appeal to the average conscience, . . . the cry of a spirit which is departing, and which, in its agony, utters words that are a shining light for all periods of change",³² especially the contemporary period, of course. There too he noted that, "Discontent travelled across the enclosing counties as it does today in a Welsh mining valley, outcoursing oppression itself", and ending with a characteristically Biblical touch, "like Elijah running before Ahab into Jezreel".³³

Three centuries later, the moral issues retained the same force and urgency. The spread of political education in Tawney's opinion accounted for the fact that men were becoming more responsive to arguments about the causes of social conflict. The rhetoric of radical politics, socialist and non-socialist alike, stressed the inter-connection of issues and the need for action. He believed that the furor over the reform of the house of lords would lead to consequences quite unforeseen by the Liberal ministers. They were unwittingly contributing to an atmosphere of political debate in which

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem*, p. 348.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 321. He noted also that, "Such movements are a proof of blood and sinew and of a high and gallant spirit Happy the nation whose people has not forgotten how to rebel" (p. 340).

their own assumptions would be examined and ultimately found wanting. Political enlightenment was not a process which one could suspend like an ordinance, at will. It often embarrassed the forces which set it in motion in the first place. Hence Tawney's appraisal of the course which political affairs appeared to be taking was optimistic. On 29 April 1912, he wrote:

This has been a wonderful year. I think the cause of the unrest is mainly that the street-corner preaching is at length beginning to have effect. And the Tories are right in saying that Lloyd George's speeches have contributed to it. A man who doesn't pay attention to a socialist orator is caught by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.³⁴

But at the same time, Tawney held that the strikes were a rejection of mechanical remedies to labour problems. The labour unrest completely overshadowed the passage of the National Insurance Act of 1911, and the continued militancy in 1912 stamped Lloyd George's reforms as irrelevant to the real demands of labour. He believed that the working class opposed an increase in state intervention in the form of inspectors whose sole purpose seemed to be to interfere in other people's lives.³⁵ The Minimum Wage Act of 1912 for the miners was too little and too late. By then labour thought had turned from questions of poverty and state regulation to the control of industry. On 22 October 1913, in his inaugural address as director of the Ratan Tata Foundation, endowed by an Indian steel and electricity magnate as an "inquiry into the problem of destitution",³⁶ Tawney commented that

The most conspicuous result of the general restatement of problems which has taken place within recent years has been the diversion to questions of social organisation of much of the attention which, a generation ago, was spent on relief.³⁷

Indeed, between the time of the Poor Law Commission Reports of 1834 and 1909, the central concern of those interested in the condition of the people had shifted steadily from pauperism to poverty, then to the distribution of wealth, and finally to the control of industry. The Poor Law Report of 1909 explicitly demonstrated the need for a new

³⁴ CPB, 29 Apr. 1912.

³⁵ Cf. Tawney's conversations with his W.E.A. students, CPB, 19 Apr. 1912. He mentions reading Stephen Reynolds and Bob and Tom Woolley, *Seems So! A Working Class View of Politics* (London, 1911), which discusses working-class hostility to State intervention. On the same point, see Henry Pelling's essay "The Working Class and the Origins of the Welfare State", in his *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), pp. 1-18.

³⁶ The Passfield Papers, Brit. Lib. Pol. Econ. Sci., Beatrice Webb's unpublished diary, vol. 31., 10-15 Apr. 1912.

³⁷ R. H. Tawney, "Poverty as an Industrial Problem", *Memoranda on the Problems of Poverty*, no. 2, 1913, p. 12.

attitude to poverty, but, in Tawney's view, neither the Majority nor the Minority Report formulated the basis for this new approach.³⁸ So much for the Webbs' Crusade against Destitution: as analysis, it was useful; as synthesis, it failed to break any new ground.

The title of his Ratan Tata lecture, "Poverty as an Industrial Problem", reflected his belief that the causes of distress were implicit in the private ownership of the means of production and the oligarchic control of industry. Reform of the Poor Law, insurance schemes or training programmes would do very little to change the wider problem. Despite their protests to the contrary, Tawney believed that Mrs. Webb and the other Minority Commissioners still dealt with symptoms rather than causes just as much as the Liberals whom they attacked.

The causes of widespread suffering and oppression were rooted, Tawney argued, in the development of British industrial society. He hoped to show in his future work with the Ratan Tata Foundation that the penalties which the working class paid for the capitalist organization of society were not inevitable. He intended to refute the view, in his words, that

economic classes and institutions had stepped out of a kind of political Noah's Ark, sharply defined, highly coloured, with an unalterable destiny graven upon each wooden feature, and once the English upper classes had, like Shem, Ham and Japhet, divided the world between them, their inferiors were to accept the misfortune of subordination as the dispensation of Providence itself.³⁹

Without the aura of historical determinism, capitalism would be shown to be as transitory an arrangement of social affairs as any other. Thereby one of the major obstacles to social change would be overcome.

Thus the scholar and the striker both applied themselves to the solution of the same problems. But the practical application of the results of his research were not the direct concern of the economic historian, in Tawney's view; still, he hoped that "by changing the pre-suppositions by which such conclusions are tried", such work will cause "a silent evacuation of many fortresses which long resisted a direct attack".⁴⁰ In the next two years he conducted detailed investigations into the operation of the Trade Boards Act of 1909 in

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ The same point was a subject of fierce debate among German sociologists at the same time: cf. Ralf Dahrendorf's essay, "Values and Social Science", in his *Essays in the Theory of Society* (London, 1968), pp. 1-18.

the chain-making industry and in the tailoring trade.⁴¹ In both cases he systematically refuted the objections brought against the establishment of legally enforceable minimum rates, and concluded from the testimony of employers themselves that invariably “legislative interference with an industry” had “led employers to introduce improvements in organisation and equipment which would not otherwise have been made”.⁴² His detailed study of “the social and economic effects produced by the intervention of a public body” in the problems of industry was the best challenge to those who could not conceive of any practicable alternative to unregulated capitalism.

Legislative interference as a principle of political strategy, however, was only a superficial step. Laws can prevent worse things from happening, and they can encourage some improvements, but in themselves they are artificial and powerless. Only when large-scale movements of opinion took place, such as Tawney saw in the labour unrest, could statutes change society or rather register a change which had already occurred. “A good law”, in his view, “is a rule which makes binding objectively conduct which most individuals already recognise to be binding subjectively”.⁴³

Ethical perceptions had as well to harness the energy released in periods of discontent. Protest for its own sake, conflict without moral justification, was indefensible and pointless. This is why Tawney insisted that the rage which must follow from a deepened social consciousness needed guidance from an objective morality, or in other words from a political (and by definition, moral) philosophy. The labour unrest did raise real issues of the utmost importance, but its effect was in doubt precisely because the working-class movement lacked an ideological base. In 1914 he wrote:

At present the agitation of the workers is like the struggles of a man who feels that he hears a message of tremendous significance, but who cannot find words in which to express it. He gesticulates, he struggles with himself, he is borne by the spirit. But the fire within him finds no expression in speech, and consumes himself instead of quickening others.⁴⁴

Despite the fact that, in the pre-war decade, “economic struggles have

⁴¹ R. H. Tawney, *The Establishment of Minimum Rates in the Chain-making Industry under the Trade Boards Act of 1909* (London, 1914); and *The Establishment of Minimum Rates in the Tailoring Trade under the Trade Boards Act of 1909* (London, 1915). A further study of the box-making industry by Tawney’s secretary, Miss M. E. Bulkley, was also published in 1915. But all the research was completed before the outbreak of the war.

⁴² Tawney, *The Tailoring Trade*, p. 137.

⁴³ CPB, 29 July 1913.

⁴⁴ T-V Papers, ff. 13-14.

occurred on a scale unprecedented since the birth of Chartism", Tawney noted that

neither among the rebellious working classes nor among the half-repentant middle classes has there been produced any body of ideas sufficiently general and coherent to crystallise their uneasiness or to focus their efforts at reconstruction.⁴⁵

He cautiously commented that "whether Syndicalism will furnish the labour movement with a philosophy, it is yet too early to say".⁴⁶ But certainly he did not reject it after a brief reflection, as the Webbs had done. He was prepared to consider all efforts to question the basis of capitalist society, and then to draw the valid critical judgements together to form a philosophy of British socialism.

III

TAWNEY'S POLITICAL THEORY

Social conflict arose, in Tawney's view, when men saw oppression in the same way that they saw sin, that is as a violation of moral standards which applied to groups as well as to individuals. His model of conflict is a classical one:

Just as the individual suffers (in Fox, Bunyan) when his habits of conduct are in contradiction to his conscience within him, so society suffers when its objective institutions outrage the best ideals of the age⁴⁷

Injustice and oppression are collective moral failures, in Tawney's view, for which all members of society must share responsibility. Here again his thought is Platonic, in the sense that men innately know what is just and must be shaken out of their slumber to see and act on what is right. Implicit in this view, as is the case in most Christian thought, is the assumption that "Truth" exists and can be known.⁴⁸ Similarly Tawney never questioned his belief in the existence of God. On 12 July 1914 he wrote in the *Commonplace Book of the immanence of Deity*:

That fact, in my view, is a fact of experience, by which I mean that consciousness of contact with a personality, or with a source of right and emotion, is a fact of direct experience, infinitely more immediate than reflection on an absent but existing person, and analogous to the consciousness of the presence of the person in the same room as oneself, whom one is not at the moment looking at, and with whom one communicates nonetheless easily on that account.

In Tawney's view, if Christianity does not speak to men in their social

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ CPB, 6 May 1912.

⁴⁸ CPB, 30 Oct. 1912.

and economic conditions, its message is pointless. He was perfectly prepared to admit that his standard of personal and social behaviour was “really a transcendental, religious or mystical one.”⁴⁹

The analogy with individual conduct, which is central to Tawney’s political thought, was derived from his religious beliefs. His faith also accounts for the extent to which the component of personal guilt for the problems and failures of his society informed his thought. In a sense he judged himself by indicting his society. Indeed, Tawney’s sense of ethical conflict in society is related to his own very intense feeling of sin, the belief “that what goodness we have reached is a house built on piles driven into black slime and always slipping down into it unless we are building day and night”.⁵⁰

The Pilgrim’s Progress, the spiritual journey of the individual Christian, was his model of social as well as personal conflict. The labour unrest was one indication, as Tawney saw it, that the day was nearer when arguments about expediency would no longer be a substitute for a sense of sin, and concern for social welfare a substitute for conscience, when the world would come to behave “like a miserable sinner, flying from the city of destruction” and come to establish “rules of life which are approved as just by the conscience of mankind”.⁵¹ Personal and collective moral conflict; personal and collective salvation: these are the terms of reference in Tawney’s pre-war social philosophy.

Through his Christianity, he came to understand that conflict is a given factor in human and social relationships, incapable of relief through mechanical changes. At best strife could be regulated, never fully resolved, as long as men (and by analogy, institutions) remained imperfect. Since Tawney believed in Original Sin, he would not construct a vision of Utopia or accept the vision of others.⁵²

But it did not follow that men must tolerate abuses even in this imperfect world. God had given men moral judgement, which, Tawney believed, must be applied to all aspects of life. Hence he was predisposed to see the socialist challenge as more philosophical than specifically political, more concerned with the development of ethical premises than of social organizations. It followed easily, therefore, that the crucial task for socialists in pre-war England was, in Tawney’s words, to “deepen our individual sense of sin” and to “objectify our morality”.⁵³

⁴⁹ CPB, 12 July 1914; 29 July 1913.

⁵⁰ CPB, 10 June 1912.

⁵¹ CPB, 18 Sept. 1912 and 22 June 1912.

⁵² CPB, 10 June 1912.

⁵³ CPB, 6 May 1912.

On these premises, Tawney attempted to construct a coherent political theory before the outbreak of the First World War. The main axiom of his position was that a set of ideas was the only possible foundation for institutional action. Without a socialist philosophy to unite progressive thought both in Westminster and in the nation as a whole, he believed, little could be expected of parliament. The true seat of power was fixed in the ideas which control men in their daily lives, and the real task for British socialism was to develop a theory of society which went beyond politics to express the moral vision without which socialism was hollow and misconceived. On 16 June 1914, he elaborated these views:

What I mean by a society needing a philosophy is this. No machinery whether of the state or minor corporations, can apply ideas which do not exist in society. They must always act at second hand. They must always be led from without. All that a statute can do is to reduce a philosophy (important or trivial) into sections which are sufficiently clear to be understood even by lawyers. Hence the great days of a Parliament are when there is outside Parliament and in society a general body of ideas which Parliament can apply. It has no creative force. There is no creative force outside the ideas which control men in their ordinary actions. There is no *deus ex machina* which can be involved though men are always trying to discover one. Nor is the modern futility of Parliament due to mechanical difficulties, which can be removed by mechanical remedies, such as revolution. It is due to the absence of any generally accepted philosophy of life. Our principle task is to create one.⁵⁴

A *coup d'état*, a change in the ruling élite, a rash of new faces or new offices in government: why should anyone expect any alteration in the pattern of domination and oppression from these actions or from any political movement which left ideas untouched? Here is Tawney's challenge. A revolution only deserves the name if it leads to a "new conception of human possibilities". Indeed, a revolution is only possible, in Tawney's view, if prior to it there exists "a new system of ideas based on new standards, without which material injustice would not have been revealed as so intolerable, . . .".⁵⁵

Tawney rejected the view that "the necessary changes" in social arrangements "can be brought about without any serious alteration in the structure of society and without any violent disturbance of vested interests".⁵⁶ This apparent acceptance of conflict, possibly violent, as a necessary factor in social change, clearly distinguishes his position from that of the Webbs. Indeed, he believed that their political orientation reflected the widespread "anti-revolutionary character" of contemporary political thought.⁵⁷ Tawney's conflict

⁵⁴ CPB, 16 June 1914.

⁵⁵ CPB, 6 July 1913.

⁵⁶ T-V Papers, f. 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

theory could not accept the Webbs' view of the approach to social peace through State intervention.

On the other hand, Tawney rejected the Marxist theory of social conflict on the grounds that it was as materialistic as the capitalist system it opposed. His critique is in line with the tone of Marx's early philosophical manuscripts, but not with later versions of his thought. What was wrong with all types of materialism, Tawney contended, was its reduction of human behaviour into mechanical units of value and use. Marxism was therefore no advance at all in its denial of the importance of ideas as the motive force for social change. Indeed, "Marxian socialists are not revolutionary enough", he wrote on 10 September 1913:

They say that capitalist society is condemned because the worker does not get the equivalent of what he produces. He does not. But then why should he? The real condemnation of the capitalist spirit is contained in the suggestion that men should be only what they produced. As though we were shareholders in a gold-mine to be paid according to our holding of stock! A barbarous, inhuman, sordid doctrine that would weigh immortal souls and scale them down because they are not economically useful. God forbid that they should be! This doctrine means that wealth should go to those who care for nothing but wealth, and are therefore least fit to have it.⁵⁸

Marxism over-emphasized and over-valued the material aspects of life, against which Tawney's Christian idealism naturally rebelled.

To the obvious Marxist challenge that he only dealt with the superstructure of society and that he ignored the fact that ideas are merely functions of economic relationships or the interests of the ruling élite, Tawney would be unrepentant. He did not deny that the facts of industrial life induced men to produce a system of ideas which legitimize their exercise of power as inevitable and just. Indeed, no Marxist could have objected to Tawney's statement that, "As a nation's industrial system is, so will its philosophy be".⁵⁹ Where they would have differed was on the question of the autonomy of changes in ideas without a prior redistribution of power over the means of production.

Tawney believed that moral principles, and not class relationships, were "prior to government in logical order" and importance, "though posterior to them in time".⁶⁰ The phenomenon of class resulted, in his view, from systems of thought based on the timeless urge of some men to dominate others. Class struggle, therefore, is merely one type of moral conflict, in which "fundamental human claims" are demanded, not because they are historically necessary or socially useful, but because they are just.

⁵⁸ CPB, 10 Sept. 1913.

⁵⁹ CPB, 20 Aug. 1913.

⁶⁰ CPB, 6 July 1913.

The neglect of fundamental ethical principles is one of Tawney's major criticisms of all contemporary writers on economic questions, Marxist and non-Marxist alike. Too many studies of the social substructure ultimately missed the most crucial aspects of social conflict:

Too much time is spent today upon outworks, by writers who pile up statistics and facts, but never get to the heart of the problem. That heart is not economic. It is a question of *moral relationships*. This is the citadel which must be attacked — the immoral philosophy which underlies much of modern industry.⁶¹

The way out of economic and political strife was to develop a set of ideas to which all men could subscribe regardless of their work or wealth. All men and especially politicians had to realize that "as long as one remains in the sphere of interests, no reconciliation of conflicting claims is possible".⁶² A test of relative strength, of political power or leverage was the modern politician's standard of right and wrong, Tawney observed, and as long as this amoral view was maintained, the roots of social problems would remain and fester.

Moral myopia was particularly noticeable in the Fabian approach to politics. Fabians, like Marxists, were caught up in the difficulties of materialism just as much as were those they attacked. Their strategy as well as their philosophy was flawed in Tawney's view. They urge reform

by explaining that justice (in moderate amounts) really pays, and that what is wrong with the world is not that it is too much guided by selfishness, but that its selfishness is not sufficiently enlightened.

That justice "*does* pay I believe is true", Tawney continued, "Yet to put the matter in this way is to sell the things of God for gold".⁶³

Similarly, by over-emphasizing the rôle of political influence in social change, their strategy of permeation contained the seeds of an obsession with power rather than with right. Doubtless, the Fabians would exercise power more benevolently, but with as little concern as the present leaders of England for the real sources of social conflict. Tawney indicted the Webbs and those who shared their political orientation, in these succinct terms:

Modern politics is concerned with the manipulation of forces and interests. Modern society is sick through the absence of a moral ideal. To try to cure this by politics is like making surgical experiments on a man who is dying of starvation or who is poisoned by foul air.⁶⁴

⁶¹ CPB, 26 Mar. 1913.

⁶² CPB, 29 July 1913.

⁶³ CPB, 6 Feb. 1913.

⁶⁴ CPB, 6 May 1912.

He feared that British socialism, under the influence of the Webbs, had become in the years prior to the First World War merely “a series of minute readjustments of social arrangements in the interests of the working classes”. Instead, what was really needed was “a new conception of social justice”, which was the strength of the early socialist movement.⁶⁵

Thus the political theory of socialism had to avoid at all costs the pattern of materialist thought which capitalism itself embodied and of which Tawney saw reflections in the Webbs’ ideas. He could heartily agree with Beatrice Webb when she summarized her belief in a conversation with Tawney that “the essence of socialism was the substitution of the ideal of service for that of getting on”.⁶⁶ But how this transformation was to come about was far from obvious when one examined the Webbs’ political strategy. Sidney Webb’s thoughts were even less helpful in Tawney’s estimation. Webb remarked to him in the summer of 1912 that “if only one gets rid of the three or four millions at the bottom, the social problem would be almost solved”.⁶⁷ There could hardly be a more materialistic statement, which, in Tawney’s view, totally ignored the ideological (and in his terms, the spiritual) dimensions of the problem.

The Webbs countered in language closer to Tawney’s own. They suggested that the abolition of economic privilege was necessary in order to provide the wealth for all to live decently and to lead a spiritual life, if they so chose. But Tawney insisted that this argument was still beside the point. Economic privilege had to be abolished because it produced wickedness, not because it produced poverty. And without a widespread change in ideas, the same attitude of selfishness would remain even with the collective ownership of industry. Again, socialism is here defined as a shift in human attitudes or no change at all. His argument is simply phrased. Of the collectivist socialist, he asked:

supposing unearned incomes, rents, etc., are pooled, will . . . the world with its present philosophy do anything but gobble them up and look up with an impatient grunt for more? This is the real question.

And he added pessimistically, “It will not be faced in my lifetime”, since

⁶⁵ T-V Papers, f. 26.

⁶⁶ CPB, 31 July to 1 Aug. 1912.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* These are the only examples of Tawney’s public expression of his pre-war political theory. Apparently, the religious beliefs upon which his views were based were so deep and so personal, that Tawney preferred to develop his thought privately. George Unwin may have been one of the few people with whom he shared his pre-war ideas. Tawney’s wife was often ill and convalescing in Europe while he kept the *Commonplace Book*.

as long as the working classes believe, and believe rightly that their masters rob them, so long will they look on the restoration of the booty as the great reform, and will impatiently waive aside more fundamental issues, as a traveller robbed by a highwayman declines to be comforted by being told that money, after all, does not buy happiness.⁶⁸

The fixation with money and the power it buys would not be remedied by collective ownership. Indeed, he flirted with the ascetic view that if the only way "to overcome the power of wealth is to despise wealth"; if the just society is a poor one, then so be it. But he concluded that, "It cannot be the will of God that we should lay down the power and resources we have amassed We cannot recover from our economic position merely by renouncing it",⁶⁹ but rather by seeing wealth in a different light.

Tawney summarized his argument with the Webbs and "State socialism" in his reflections on the development of his early political ideas. When he sketched "the stages of thought about social affairs through which I, and I suppose other people have passed", he approached Fabianism as but one preliminary step in his intellectual growth. Again, it was the materialist assumptions implicit in the emphasis on State action which turned Tawney from the Webbs' position. Tawney began, he believed, along with many others, by seeing poverty as individual misfortune, unconnected "with the main institutions of society".⁷⁰ Since, in this first stage of social thought, social and economic conditions were not seen as reflections of political relationships, there was no point in turning to the State for redress of situations beyond its control. This ideology, which Tawney identified with the Charity Organisation Society, was soon superseded as he began to see the

unity underlying the individual cases of poverty; that they are connected with the social institutions, specimens of a type, pieces of a system, and that this system is, in the first instance, the work of the State and can be altered by an alteration of the law.⁷¹

"This is the stage of the theoretical socialist",⁷² Tawney commented, or in other words, the stage of the Webbs' political thought.

But Tawney had advanced from this view to a third stage of social thought, in which he had come to "realize that the attitude of the State is just the attitude of countless individuals".⁷³ The State, in his pre-war political theory, was as mechanical and inert as any other

⁶⁸ CPB, 22 July 1913.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ CPB, 2 Dec. 1912; 4 Sept. 1912.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

institution. As a collective entity, it was no greater than the sum of its parts. His political (and moral) units always remained life-size, and consequently the orientation of his socialist thought remained fixed on the individual. This is not to say that he neglected the social nature of individual action and thought; to the contrary. But he did insist that political action was one type of human behaviour subject to the same rules and ethical requirements as any other human activity.

Tawney believed as fervently as any socialist that, "The attitude of governments to social questions is wrong, profoundly wrong". But he went on to argue that

it is wrong because the attitude of individuals to each other is wrong, because we in our present society are living on certain false and universal assumptions; and that even when statesmen honestly mean to do well, they will often do harm (apart from bad luck, miscalculations etc.) merely because all their actions, good and bad proceed from a character based on these assumptions.

Thus he could not approve the Webbs' political strategy:

What we have got to do *first* of all is to change those assumptions or principles. This is where I think the Fabians are inclined to go wrong. They seem to think that you can trick statesmen into a good course of action without changing their principles, and that by taking sufficient thought society can add several cubits to its stature. It can't as long as it lives on the same spiritual diet.⁷⁴

Tawney hoped that his political ideas would help to cure this moral malaise and lead to the construction and application of "principles of justice upon which human association for the production of wealth can be founded".⁷⁵

The primary ideological basis for Tawney's political theory was his belief in equality. And, "In order to believe in human equality", he asserted, "it is necessary to believe in God".⁷⁶ Here we see the explicit connection between his religious and his social thought. Briefly, the outline of Tawney's pre-war socialist position may be summarized in the following terms. To emphasize differences between and among men and to base a hierarchical structure of society on the assumption of these arbitrary differences, such as race or class, are wrong and immoral judgements, since all men are insignificant in the eyes of the Lord and equally children of sin. In the light of the infinitely great, surely human differences appear infinitely small. It is only without a belief

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* The resemblance to Platonic ideas on this point is clear: cf. Martin Buber's essay, "Plato and Isaiah", in the collection of his essays, *Israel and the World* (New York, 1948), pp. 103-12. A comparison of Tawney and Buber, both deeply religious socialists, would be a fascinating study.

⁷⁵ CPB, 8 Jan. 1914.

⁷⁶ CPB, 6 Mar. 1913.

in God, then, that men turned to raising false distinctions between their fellows and came to erect artificial standards of moral and political behaviour.⁷⁷

A belief in equality, Tawney went on, is the only possible basis for a stable and just social order. It implies that the seeds of social obligation lie in the recognition of the identity of human nature. It leads to the assertion that the conviction of the individual conscience rather than "wealth or power or numbers or learning is the standard by which conduct must be judged". It requires the rejection of the immoral use of men as tools, for whatever ends however noble, and finally, it demands that

of all revolutionary schemes there is one awful criterion: "It were better that a millstone were hung about your neck and that you were cast into the sea than that you should offend one of these little ones".⁷⁸

This last statement seriously qualified Tawney's support for a violent disruption of vested interests if that were the only means available to bring about equality.⁷⁹ Apparently he hoped that the reordering of society would be specific enough to avoid the danger of damaging the innocent. But since he also believed that the whole society was responsible for its evils, it would be impossible to avoid drawing the entire population into the conflict. No answer to this difficulty appeared in Tawney's pre-war writing.

But however it was brought about, equality would be a stabilizing element in social and political life. Contrary to the opinion of reactionary critics, equality was not, Tawney pointed out, the equivalent of anarchy. Rather

it is the one foundation of human subordination, of order, authority and justice, and it might more reasonably be attacked by those who love license than by those who fear [for] liberty.⁸⁰

Compulsion alone is not the basis of society or even the beginning of political order. Where there is mere compulsion, disorder naturally follows and leads, in extreme cases, to revolution. On the other hand, where there is true order, social constraints — law and the violence which is its ultimate sanction — are the generalization of the individual's sense of right.⁸¹

Such a situation was impossible under capitalism. Indeed inequality was institutionalized and perpetuated in modern industrial

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, and CPB, 29 July 1913: "one may *not* do evil that good should come".

⁷⁹ See the passage cited at note 56 above.

⁸⁰ CPB, 6 Mar. 1913.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Tawney discussed this point with his close friend and fellow W.E.A. tutor, T. W. Price: cf. CPB, 10 Aug. 1913.

society by the system of economic privilege which conferred "payment without corresponding services and produced economic power over the lives of others".⁸² An elaborate set of social norms and expectations supported the power of wealth and transformed it into the sole determinant of authority and ultimately the social measure of human value. Economic domination was not a capitalist invention, but its close connection with the all-inclusive modern State created a new form of absolutism, a form of total social control, whereby he who employed, governed as he saw fit, as the modern equivalent of the feudal lord. Even the medieval baron was obliged to recognize the rights of his inferiors and was their protector and servant in certain matters. The modern capitalist, on the other hand, did not see his rôle in society as "a post, an office" based on public trust. His behaviour need be guided by the demands of private gain alone. Hence Tawney concluded, "economic privileges must be abolished, not primarily because they hinder the production of wealth, but because they produce wickedness".⁸³

Since the opinions of the vast majority of men about the justice of their social and political relationships counted for nothing, and since there was little choice for millions but to submit to a pattern of life over which they had no real control, it made very little sense to Tawney to speak of "liberty" under capitalism. To those who would call this analysis an exaggeration and refer to the workers' right of contract and his corresponding right to withdraw his labour if he saw fit, as examples of "freedom", Tawney answered:

The truth is that the sharp antithesis drawn by modern commercial societies between serfs and the free labourers on whose slowly straightening backs our civilisation is uneasily poised, and emphasised as though it marked a line between hopeless oppression and unqualified liberty, requires to be supplemented by categories derived from a wider and more tragic range of human experience than was open to our forefathers. There are many more ways of living "at the will of the lord" than were known to Glanvill and Bracton, and the utility of contract in the sphere of legal analysis does not save it from being but a thin abstraction of the countless forms of tyranny which spring from the world-old power of one human being to use another as his tool. That dependence on the uncontrolled caprice of a master whom one hates to obey and dare not abandon, which, by whatever draperies it may be veiled, is still the bitter core of serfdom, is compatible with the most diverse legal arrangements; with wage labour as with forced service, with tenure by a competitive money rent as well as with tenure by personal obligations, with freedom of contract as well as with inherited status, with protection by the national courts as well as with its absence.⁸⁴

Furthermore, under capitalism rights were supported by sanctions

⁸² CPB, 2 Dec. 1912.

⁸³ CPB, 27 Feb. 1914; 6 Oct. 1912; 10 July 1912.

⁸⁴ Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem*, pp. 45-6.

only when the claimant possessed wealth and the social status which accompanied it.

The key to the capitalist social system lay, in Tawney's view, in the complex status relationships which accompanied wealth. In other words, capitalism was based on the material valuation of social rôles which leads to an improper distribution of authority in industry, politics and social life. Authority implies both domination and subjection, no less in industry than in politics. In this sense, it was the absolute sovereignty of the capitalist in the nation's industrial life which Tawney challenged.

The quest for economic liberty involved a limitation of that sovereignty, in the same way that the "paternal monarchy" was checked in the seventeenth century. The absolute dictator was undoubtedly the most efficient leader of the complex mechanism of the State, now as then; but such considerations did not make tyranny less oppressive, Tawney countered. And just as the political disruption of the seventeenth century led to the "inefficiency and incompetence" of politics in the eighteenth, so also the overthrow of economic absolutism was likely to interfere with the ordered accumulation of wealth. That was not a valid objection, in Tawney's view. He wrote that

when we cut off the heads of our industrial Lauds and Straffords, we shall probably for a century or so have to put up with political jobbery and ineptitude But if one is asked "Was the Great Rebellion worth while?" there are few decent Englishmen who would not say "yes". And if I am asked whether it is wise to depose the economic oligarchy which rules most of us today at the risk of facing a generation of disorder and inefficiency before the new regime has made its traditions, I answer, "Yes, this too is worthwhile".⁸⁵

Indeed, since England had led the world "into the moral labyrinth of capitalist industry", it was incumbent upon Englishmen to teach the world the meaning of economic liberty in the twentieth century, just as they had "upheld constitutional liberty when all other nations were passing under absolutism . . .".⁸⁶ Tawney did not underestimate the difficulties of the task. As a student of the Reformation, he drew the following comparison: "It took men one hundred and fifty years and two revolutions to arrive at some working conception of religious liberty. It may take us as long to work out our idea of economic liberty".⁸⁷

⁸⁵ CPB, 3 June 1912.

⁸⁶ CPB, 10 June 1912.

⁸⁷ CPB, 21 July 1912.

IV

CONCLUSION

R. H. Tawney's political theory was incomplete at the time of the outbreak of the First World War. His early views were then far more useful as a critique of contemporary social thought and policy than as a basis for programmatic action. In a sense, the major weakness of his pre-war thought — its abstract nature — reflects his view that the preliminary work which would prepare the way for the socialist society had yet to be done. His preoccupation with the intellectual assumptions behind political behaviour was a matter of choice, not of neglect or selective distortion.

The political implications of his early writing were largely unspecified. He favoured the public ownership of land, the limitation of profits and bequests, and the ending of the class monopoly in higher education.⁸⁸ But Tawney failed to work out the practical organization of the attack on the social problems which he posed so eloquently. He dismissed the Parliamentary Labour Party as a tame and harmless instrument of a confused working-class movement.⁸⁹ He rarely mentioned Trade Unions in his theoretical work. The fact of strikes was more important than the groups which led them. Indeed, the only institutional foci for his programme of moral revival were the university and the disestablished church.⁹⁰ But why educated men or the educated society should be more aware of moral claims or more willing to submit to them was never explained. Before the outbreak of war in 1914, Tawney's only direct answer to the question "What is to be done?" seems to have been to live and think and act like a Christian. No socialist could take exception to his claim that

The great problem of our day is to ennoble industry by so arranging it that every man may feel that his work, however humble, is dignified by the fact that he is a free man giving freely to the needs of society, and to humanise culture by making those who teach and study feel that education is not something which separates them from their fellows, but that they, too, are the brothers of those who labour in forge and factory and mine.⁹¹

But the process by which rhetoric, however moving, turns into political action was neglected in Tawney's pre-war work. To some extent, his politics of morality makes sense only by personal example, in the pattern of the exceptional individual's life, which few men are strong

⁸⁸ CPB, 16 Oct. 1912.

⁸⁹ CPB, 29 June 1914.

⁹⁰ For the university, CPB, 30 Oct. 1912; for the church, CPB, 11 Dec. 1913.

⁹¹ R. H. Tawney, *Education and Social Progress* (Manchester, 1912), p. 11: reprint of Tawney's speech on 28 May 1912 in connection with the Cooperative Congress held at Portsmouth.

enough to follow. The strength of his own idealism and his personal sincerity were unquestioned. But the real problem in his pre-war thought is whether the ethical demands of his socialism are hopelessly beyond the reach of all but a handful of men who are unlikely to reach the pinnacle of political power. Politics, in Namier's classic phrase, "cannot wait for the humanization of mankind".⁹²

Furthermore, the complex ethical problems implicit in all political action are obscured in Tawney's political thought. He was a Puritan abolitionist who stopped somewhat short of declaring, in the language of what Weber disapprovingly called "an ethic of ultimate ends", that "The Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord' . . .".⁹³ Tawney did see social conflict in absolute terms, as a "war of beliefs"⁹⁴ in which right and wrong could be objectively distinguished, but he never went so far that he accepted any means as justifiable in the eradication of evil.

Still, he never met Weber's powerful objection to the tradition of Christian moralism, phrased in the following question: "Should it really matter so little for the ethical demands on politics that politics operates with very special means, namely, power backed up by *violence*?"⁹⁵ The equation of individual and collective behaviour is not as simple as Tawney would have had it. Weber insisted with

⁹² L. B. Namier, *In the Margins of History* (London, 1939), p. 76.

⁹³ *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (London, 1948), p. 120. The references are all from Weber's brilliant essay "Politics as a Vocation", which he delivered at the University of Munich in 1918. The comparison between Weber and Tawney on the relationship between ethics and politics in contemporary society and the moral commitment of the historian puts into perspective the somewhat forced comparison between their views on Protestantism and capitalism. For instance, in his introduction to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (London, 1930), first published in 1904, Weber stated his methodological framework which adequately phrased his differences from Tawney: "Fashion and the zeal of the *literati* would have us think that the specialist can to-day be spared, or degraded to a position subordinate to that of the seer. Almost all sciences owe something to dilettantes, often very valuable viewpoints. But dilettantism as a leading principle would be the end of science. He who yearns for seeing should go to the cinema, though it will be offered to him copiously to-day in literary form in the present field of investigation also. Nothing is farther from the intent of these thoroughly serious studies than such an attitude. And, I might add, whoever wants a sermon should go to a conventicle. The question of the relative value of the cultures which are compared here will not receive a single word. It is true that the path of human destiny cannot but appal him who surveys a section of it. But he will do well to keep his small personal commentaries to himself, as one does at the sight of the sea or of majestic mountains, unless he knows himself to be called and gifted to give them expression in artistic or prophetic form" (p. 29). Tawney's view of history was precisely the opposite of Weber's.

⁹⁴ *From Max Weber*, p. 126.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

justification that the reference to physical force as the ultimate sanction of political action made politics ethically "irrational",⁹⁶ a situation which a moralist cannot confront. Weber correctly held that politics rests on moral ambiguity and ultimately on ethical contradictions in the use of violence, the recognition of which raises serious difficulties about Tawney's attempt to construct an "objective" political morality. Tawney's Christian social philosophy never successfully met Weber's profound challenge that

He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence.⁹⁷

Perhaps Tawney's concentration on ideas rather than institutions and the sanctions which give them force reflects his uneasiness when confronted with this dilemma. But it is more likely that he believed that conflict was inevitable in society, and that to ignore politics because it involved violence was tantamount to turning from life because it involved suffering and pain. No one ever claimed that the Pilgrim's Progress was an easy journey, but it was infinitely preferable, in Tawney's view, to abandoning politics to men who could face violence, but cared nothing for justice and human values.

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⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.