

*Socialism**James Alexander*

Socialism is one of the three great ideologies of modern times, along with liberalism and conservatism. All three demand that politics should not be founded on tradition, authority, or religion but on reason. However, liberals, socialists, and conservatives have disagreed for two centuries about what can be derived from reason. To put it simply, liberalism is the view that reason is found in the individual human, who should be emancipated so he or she can carry out his or her own reasonably chosen activities. Socialism is a development of this thought, since it is the view that the human should be emancipated, although collectively rather than individually, for the reason that each human is constituted by his existence in society. And conservatism – odd as it may sound – is a further development of this thought, since it is the view that emancipation is impossible either individually or collectively without a reasoned recovery of the very traditions, authorities, and religions from which reason seems to have emancipated us. Socialists tend not to take conservatives seriously: they were, and are, concerned more to criticise liberals. Either they extend liberalism until it includes socialist recognitions or they dismiss liberalism because it excludes them. These two different attitudes constitute the ambivalence of socialism, which has half the time been for reform and half the time been for revolution. They also constitute the ambivalence of Shaw's socialism.

Shaw is perhaps the greatest socialist that England (or Ireland) has ever produced.<sup>1</sup> Henry Mayers Hyndman and William Morris, the founders of

<sup>1</sup> There have been three generations of scholarly writing about Shaw's socialism. Edward Pease's *History of the Fabian Society* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1916) is representative of the first, controversial generation. Shaw rewrote parts of this book, which was clearly intended to make the Fabian Society seem influential. The second, deflationary, generation is represented by Eric Hobsbawm, 'Fabianism and the Fabian Society 1884–1914', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge (1949), and by A. M. McBriar's classic study, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics 1884–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962). The third generation, more concerned to make historical assessments of Shaw's thought, is represented by, among other works, Gareth Griffith, *Socialism*

two of the great socialist parties in England, considered him their equal; and he was responsible, along with Sidney Webb, for much of the success of the third, the Fabian Society. He edited the first classic work of socialism in English, *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, in 1889. His telegraphic address in the 1890s was simply 'Socialist, London'. He argued for more than sixty-five years that a socialist sensibility was fundamental. Until at least the 1960s there is no question that he was the most read socialist in the English language.<sup>2</sup> He was far more influential than Marx. Yet he was not an originator. He was not of the First International, which under Marx had attempted to establish socialism as a cause, but of the Second International, which expected it to triumph in the modern state. It was a time of great hope. But the hope did not last. The era of the Third International after the Russian Revolution was in a sense the end of a dream. Yet from the beginning, Shaw's socialism was capable of dealing with every disappointment. It should be seen in three stages.

First, in the 1880s, Shaw, as a Fabian, sought to make socialism orthodox rather than heterodox by emphasising its compatibility with standard liberal assumptions. Disagreeing with Marxists about economics, about revolution, and about the state, the Fabians decided that the fundamental work of socialists should be political. They attempted to influence the policies of first the Liberal Party and later the Labour Party, although obvious political success did not come until the first Labour minority government in 1924 – with Shaw's friend Webb as a cabinet minister and the former Fabian Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister – and the first Labour majority government under Clement Attlee in 1945. Shaw was the only original Fabian essayist who lived long enough to see socialism fully at the helm of the state.

But long before this Shaw had attempted to take socialism in a second direction. In the 1890s, after some initial disappointments in politics, Shaw questioned the classic Fabian assumption of a fundamental continuity between liberalism and socialism. He did this by suggesting that socialism might be compatible not only with liberal but also with illiberal assumptions. He sketched this position in an essay 'To Your Tents, O Israel!' (1893) and developed it in two tracts, *Fabianism and the Empire* (1900) and *Fabianism and the Fiscal Question* (1904), where he argued that socialism was compatible with imperialism and protectionism. He wanted the

*and Superior Brains: The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw* (London: Routledge, 1993), and James Alexander, *Shaw's Controversial Socialism* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Griffith, *Socialism and Superior Brains*, 1.

Fabian Society to be independent of not only the Marxism of the Second International but also the Cobdenism and Gladstonism of the Liberal Party. So, having earlier offended Marxists, he now offended Liberals. Many original members of the society resigned. William Clarke, H. W. Massingham, D. G. Ritchie, and others left in 1893 and 1894, Henry Salt, Walter Crane, MacDonald, and others left in 1900, and Graham Wallas left in 1904 – all because of Shaw.

After 1904, Shaw took a third step, which was to declare that socialism was not only tactically but intrinsically controversial. He thought the Fabian Society had gone too far in associating socialism with ‘socialistic legislation’, and so attempted to return to fundamentals by outlining a theory of the ‘equality of incomes’, which he developed in lectures and articles between 1909 and 1913 and wrote up belatedly in his flawed attempt at a masterpiece, *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*. This was the theoretical accompaniment to an increasing willingness to return to a more heterodox, and even revolutionary, form of socialism. Shaw had always been critical of parliamentary democracy for exemplifying the ‘How Not To Do It’ of the Circumlocution Office in Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*. But in his later life he defended Soviet Russia on the grounds that Lenin and Stalin had shown everyone how revolutionary socialism was at last practicable.

One can see from this short history why Shaw exasperated almost everyone. When a British historian asked ‘Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?’ he gave several answers.<sup>3</sup> But the shortest answer to this question is ‘Shaw’.

How did Shaw become a socialist? Within a few years of his arrival in London in 1876 he was a regular reader in the British Library, and began to attend meetings of various radical societies which flourished at that time – the Zetetical Society, the Dialectical Society, the Bedford Debating Society, the Shelley Society, the Browning Society, the Land Reform Union, and the National Secular Society. These were ‘strongly Millite’ for the most part: ‘individualistic, Atheistic, Malthusian, Evolutionary, Ingersollian, Darwinian, Herbert Spencerian’ (*CL* II: 485). More political were the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League, and the Fabian Society: the first led by Hyndman, the second by Morris, and the third not led very decisively by anyone until Shaw joined it. Shaw chose the Fabian Society since he did not want to impose order on the working class, as Hyndman

<sup>3</sup> Ross McKibbin, ‘Why Was There No Marxism in Great Britain’, *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), 297–331.

did, or suffer from the disorder of the working class, as Morris did. 'I am not a friend of the working class', he famously commented. 'I am its enemy to the extent of ardently desiring its extermination'.<sup>4</sup> He thought collaboration would be possible in the middle-class Fabian Society; however, in the early years two other societies were also important. These were the Hampstead Historic Club, where he studied Marx from late 1884, and Beeton's Economic Circle, where he studied economics from late 1885.

Economics seemed to be the key. Shaw began as a radical, full of Mill and Shelley, and eager to get to the root of the problems of the time – the name 'radical' comes from the Latin *radix*, root. The problem for radicals in London in the late 1870s and 1880s was how to respond to the complacency of the Liberal consensus that had established itself after Peel's Free Trade reforms of the 1840s and the destruction of Chartism in 1848. Shaw decided, as many others did, that the basis of radical criticism of the great Victorian settlement should no longer be political but economic. He learnt this from a lecture given by Henry George, the author of *Progress and Poverty*, at the Farringdon Memorial Hall in September 1882. Shaw immediately took up 'a course of economic study' (*CL* II: 476). He soon found that the Marxists of the Social Democratic Federation had not read Marx. So at the British Library he read Marx in French, and then, with Webb's assistance, in German. But by the time the first complete English translation of *Das Kapital* by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling was published in 1887 Shaw had abandoned Marxism. In his review of the translation, he observed that the book was 'Holy Scripture' to its followers – 'the one infallible recipe for the Millennium'. But he thought there was no reason why socialism could not depend on the work of any 'bourgeois political economist'.<sup>5</sup> In discussions at Hampstead and Beeton's, which included not only Webb and Wallas but economists like H. S. Foxwell, F. Y. Edgeworth, and Philip Wicksteed, Shaw came to the conclusion that Marx's economic theories were inferior to those of William Jevons. For some time Jevons's theory of marginal utility, along with Ricardo's theory of rent, were taken to be the elements of a distinctive Fabian theory of socialism. These theories are complicated, and it is not clear that Shaw ever entirely understood them: but the basic idea was that Marx had erred in basing his economics on the view that the source of value is labour.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Practical Politics: Twentieth Century Views on Politics and Economics*, ed., L. J. Hubenka (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Shaw, 'Karl Marx and "Das Kapital"', *National Reformer*, 7–21 August 1887, 84–86, 106–08, and 117–18.

Following Jevons and Wicksteed, Shaw came to see that the source of value is usefulness (or 'utility'). The shift was decisive, since it meant that economics had to be understood primarily in terms of consumption not production, demand not supply. Within a few months of having been one of Marx's sternest apologists Shaw was one of Marx's sternest critics.

The Fabian economics was later abandoned without much fanfare. But it is hard to underestimate its significance in the late 1880s, when all the socialist journals of England – *To-Day*, *Justice*, *The Commonweal* – raged with objections to it. What the Fabians were saying, in effect, was that since the most 'scientific' part of socialism was economics, and since Marx's economics were flawed, there was absolutely no reason for socialists to be intimidated by any other element of the Marxist tradition. Socialism could be based on bourgeois economics. As Shaw often said – and this was no doubt true – this claim put the Fabian Society at the forefront of socialism in England. It certainly established the principle that if socialism were to be spoken of in English politics, it would not be in terms of Marxism.

The major statement of this was found in *Fabian Essays in Socialism*. When Shaw joined the Fabian Society in May 1884, it was still a confused half-poetical, half-political society. Webb hailed Shaw as 'the first Socialist who had recognised that Socialism needed no heterodox theory to support it', and within a few months joined the Society himself, in May 1885.<sup>6</sup> Webb's friends Wallas and Sydney Olivier soon followed, and then Shaw charmed Annie Besant into joining in 1886. Only two of the original Fabian essayists were members of the society before he joined: William Clarke, who was what would later be called a New Liberal (that is, a liberal in favour of socialistic legislation), and Hubert Bland, who, as Shaw put it, was a 'Tory converted to Socialism'.<sup>7</sup> The argument of the essays was simple: it was that socialism amounted to socialistic legislation by the state, that socialism therefore required political activity on the part of socialists, and that socialism of this sort was a natural development of liberalism (or, as they sometimes put it, that collectivism was a natural development of individualism). This argument was tactical, but required enough theory to make it plausible. It was Marxism strained through English cheesecloth: a Whig-Benthamite-Radical doctrine intended to fundamentally transform the British state.

What the Fabian Society wanted was revolution in the sense of a complete transformation, not in the sense of an insurrection. Shaw was

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Webb, *Justice*, 31 January 1885.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Tyson, ed., *Bernard Shaw's Book Reviews* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991–6), Vol. II, 514.

horrified by the 'Bloody Sunday' riot he witnessed in London in late 1887 (*Diaries* I: 314–15). The Fabian policy, as Wallas put it, was 'Postulate, Permeate, Perorate' (*CL* I: 389–90). Unlike other socialists, the Fabians took parliamentary politics seriously. Morris thought that Shaw defended this policy 'as if he were ashamed of himself'.<sup>8</sup> But Shaw went along with the Fabian attempt to 'permeate' the Liberal Party in the 1890s, the Labour Party at times after 1893, and figures like Arthur Balfour, Lord Rosebery, and Winston Churchill after 1900. However, he can hardly be said to have contributed much to either this practice of permeation or the theorisation of the welfare state carried out by Sidney Webb and his wife Beatrice. Shaw admired the book they wrote in 1897, *Industrial Democracy*, and the policy of a 'National Minimum' that Beatrice attempted to impose on the Committee for the Reform of the Poor Law in 1910. He commented on this anticipation of a welfare state: 'It resembles neither the theorising, romancing Socialism which is big without being real, nor the careful, practicable Socialism which is real without being big, and which ends in a string of expedient small jobs which needed not be called Socialism at all. It is big and revolutionary and sensible and practicable at the same time'.<sup>9</sup>

But his own contribution to politics, to quote the last line of *Man and Superman*, was 'Talking!' When he stood as a Progressive candidate for the London County Council in 1904 he 'insisted that he was an Atheist, that though a teetotaler he would force every citizen to imbibe a quartern of rum to cure any tendency to intoxication, laughed at the Nonconformist conscience and chaffed the Catholics about Transubstantiation, abused the Liberals and contemptuously patronized the Conservatives'.<sup>10</sup> No wonder Engels, who never met Shaw, thought him '*talentvoll und witzig*' (talented and witty), but 'completely hopeless' as a politician.<sup>11</sup> Morris once wrote to Shaw to say that while he would print anything he wrote in the *Commonweal* it was better, 'except as a joke, not to have articles which go dead against our received policy'.<sup>12</sup> Yet Shaw probably delivered more lectures on socialism in London and other major cities between 1884 and 1896 than any other socialist. He served for six years in local government in St Pancras. He electioneered for Labour candidates for at least three decades. He was active

<sup>8</sup> Norman Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984–96), Vol. II, 512.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Shaw, 'What I Think of the Minority Report', *Christian Commonwealth*, 30 June 1909.

<sup>10</sup> Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, eds., *The Diaries of Beatrice Webb* (London: Virago, 2000), 278.

<sup>11</sup> Eduard Bernstein, *My Years of Exile: Reminiscences of a Socialist*, trans. Bernard Miall (London: Leonard Parsons, 1921), 202.

<sup>12</sup> Kelvin, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, II, 548.

in the foundation of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 (although at first he was refused credentials because his cleverness was feared by the Labour men), and he enjoyed his 'one historic moment' after the war in 1918 when at a major conference he told the Labour Party to tell Lloyd George (and the Liberal Party) 'Nothing Doing!' – which they did.<sup>13</sup>

For a long time he was critical of Marxism. He visited two Congresses of the Second International, held in Zurich in 1893 and London in 1896, and was thoroughly dismayed by what he saw. The 'men who professed to be able to construct a Social Democratic republic', he said in 1893, had not shown the 'capacity to manage a country post office'.<sup>14</sup> In 1896 he was even more scornful of the 'squabbling little millennial sects who imagine that they have outrun all their contemporaries because they have transferred their old vague visions of the Kingdom of Heaven from the clouds to the earth, with a little rudimentary Liberalism thrown in by way of "palliative" political flavouring'.<sup>15</sup> He hated 'worn-out phrases' such as 'proletarians of all countries, unite'.<sup>16</sup> But he enjoyed the comedy. He depicted some of it in Act II of *Man and Superman*. And in an article written for May Day in 1906, he listed all the leading socialists of Europe – Bebel, Millerand, Guesde, Singer, Hyndman, Webb – and pointed out that none of them could agree: 'How touching this rock-like solidarity! Hail, thou glorious first of May! Proletarians of all lands, follow the example of your leaders, and Unite!'<sup>17</sup>

Shaw's criticism of the original Fabian position made him willing to consider socialism afresh, although he never quite returned to Marxism. The Tory W. H. Mallock noticed in 1890 that the Fabians did not distinguish between socialism and socialistic legislation.<sup>18</sup> The distinction did not trouble the Webbs; but it came to trouble Shaw, especially by the late 1890s when he was finished 'as a systematic and indefatigable propagandist' for the Fabians (*CL* II: 488). What he was to ask for again and again was a 'bold declaration of socialism'.<sup>19</sup> He was not enthusiastic about the establishment of the London School of Economics in the 1890s or of the *New Statesman* in 1913 – two of Sidney Webb's lasting contributions to modern English life – because he thought they did nothing for socialism

<sup>13</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 125.

<sup>14</sup> Shaw, *Star*, 8–12 August 1893. <sup>15</sup> Shaw, 'The International Congress', *Star*, 27 July 1893.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, 'Socialism at the International Congress', *Cosmopolis*, September 1896, 658–73.

<sup>17</sup> Shaw, *Practical Politics*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Mallock, 'Fabian Economics: Second Paper', *Fortnightly Review* (January–June 1894), 393–409. Compare Bax, *Saturday Review*, 3 November 1900.

<sup>19</sup> Shaw to Pease, 21 July 1898 and undated August 1898, letters held in the British Library (BL Add Mss 50557).

(though characteristically enough he got involved in both once they were established). His attempt to define socialism in terms of the 'equality of incomes' was an attempt to be big and revolutionary and sensible and practicable and *socialist* at the same time. But the argument had an obvious weakness. Shaw only thought as far as legislation. He did not consider what would happen after everyone received his or her equal income and then spent it. So the equality of incomes went the way of the theory of rent. It was not even mentioned in his last major book, *Everybody's Political What's What?* (1944).

Shaw remained committed to socialism to the end. But it was difficult after the Russian Revolution to hold the separate elements of Fabian socialism together. In a newspaper article written in the 1920s, he recognised that socialism had a 'twofold task'. One task was to keep capitalism 'up to the mark by legislation'; the other was to 'get rid of it altogether by constructive substitution of socialism'.<sup>20</sup> But he never admitted that these tasks had nothing to do with each other. The first task was taken up by Attlee, Wilson, and Blair, and a Labour Party that gradually ceased to identify itself as distinctively socialist. The second task was taken up by *The New Left Review*, where it became rancorous, ineffectual, and academic. The old scornful dogmatism of Hyndman and Marx returned to English socialism after Shaw's death. Socialists ceased to see the world with Shaw's sense of humour. And it is necessary to ask why this was the case.

Shaw certainly expressed the stridency of his age: he was always more willing to admit insincerity than indeterminacy. T. S. Eliot's judgment of Shaw was that 'by persuading low-brows that they were high-brows, and high-brows that they should be socialist, he contributed greatly to the prestige of socialism'.<sup>21</sup> But he tried more than anyone else to make socialism compatible with a broad sense of what it is to be human. This inevitably led to contradictions. Not for nothing was the title of one of his early novels *An Unsocial Socialist*. In his plays, Shaw dramatised conversation; but in his prefaces, articles, and books he wanted conversation to end so that something could be done. Shaw's writings were as much criticism of socialism as advocacy of it. And this explains why they remain a great contribution to modern political literature.

<sup>20</sup> Tyson, *Bernard Shaw's Book Reviews*, Vol. II, 462.

<sup>21</sup> T. S. Eliot, *To Criticise the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 143.