# EDWARDIAN INTELLECTUALS AND THE STATE:

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SIDNEY WEBB AND J.A. HOBSON

by

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# Edwardian Intellectuals and the State

## Abstract

The genesis of this thesis was a desire to understand the views of Socialists and Liberal Radicals on the state during the Edwardian years in England, from 1901 to 1914. Much has been written about the intellectual roots of the New Liberalism and Fabian Socialism which then prevailed, but all too often in a fragmented fashion which deprives us of an all-embracing historical perspective. The Edwardian era was an age when British intellectuals, dreamers of dreams yet compulsive students of the reality around them, involved all their energies in a struggle to improve society by means of a thorough re-evaluation of the role of the state. In order to comprehend these years, this thesis delineates the intellectual evolutions of two of the most brilliant exponents of these currents of thought, the new Liberal economist J.A. Hobson (1858-1940) and the Fabian Socialist Sidney Webb (1859-1947).

They were idealists, yet pragmatic participators in a genuine crusade to transform the concrete functioning of the social organization of their day. While they are usually believed to have been in disagreement over fundamental issues, this thesis argues that Hobson and Webb not only shared a great deal more than is commonly supposed, but also that they made use of an almost identical language.

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## Résumé

Cette thèse a pour objet l'étude de la vision de l'Etat des socialistes et libéraux anglais durant la période edwardienne, de 1901 à 1914. Bien que les fondements intellectuels du nouveau libéralisme et du socialisme dit "Fabian" qui prévalaient à cette époque aient été souvent étudiés, ce fut trop souvent d'une manière fragmentaire qui empêchait toute compréhension globale de ces phénomènes. Les années de l'avant-guerre constituent un temps privilégié où les intellectuels britanniques, à la fois rêveurs et profondément enracinés dans leur milieu, investirent tous leurs efforts dans un combat pour améliorer l'équilibre social de leur pays par le biais d'une remise en question du rôle de l'Etat. Afin de mieux connaître cette époque, cette thèse retrace l'évolution intellectuelle de deux penseurs parmi les plus brillants d'alors, l'économiste libéral J.A. Hobson (1858-1940) et le socialiste Sidney Webb (1859-1947).

Ils étaient idéalistes, mais participèrent néanmoins à une croisade visant à réformer leur monde. Bien qu'on les considère généralement comme ayant été en sérieux désaccord sur de nombreux problèmes fondamentaux de leur temps, cette étude démontre que Webb et Hobson non seulement partageaient des prises de position, mais aussi qu'ils utilisaient un langage politique similaire.

DEDICATION

A mes parents,

Lorraine et Jean-Marc Lalancette

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De la stagnation de l'esprit en ces deux dernières décennies du XIXe siècle s'était brusquement élevée, dans toute l'Europe, une sorte de fièvre ailée. Personne ne savait exactement ce qui était en train; personne ne pouvait dire si ce serait un art nouveau, un homme nouveau, une nouvelle morale, ou encore un reclassement de la société... Mais partout, des hommes se levaient pour combattre les vieilleries.

- Robert Musil, L'Homme sans qualités, tome I (Paris, 1982), p. 64.

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## Sidney Webb and J.A. Hobson: Crusaders.

At the Memorial Hall in London on October 8, 1910, the Saturday morning session of the conference organized by the Independent Labour Party for the abolition of destitution and unemployment was meeting in order to put pressure on the Liberal Government concerning the necessity of immediate and radical measures against poverty in England. Before an agitated audience of approximately 270 delegates from 150 Trade Unions and Societies, two serious looking, dignified, yet likeable middle-aged men were about to deliver lectures. One discussed "The Causes and Proposed Remedies for Unemployment", and the other was concerned with "The Organisation of the Labour Market". The former was J.A. Hobson, the new Liberal economist, acting as chairman of the session; the latter was Sidney Webb, leading figure of the Socialist Fabian Society, and father of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission (1909),

enthusiastically promoted by the Conference.

According to a witness, Sidney Webb's solutions to prevent unemployment were "to regularize the national aggregate demand for labour year by year ... and trade-union insurance, aided by the State" [1]. J.A. Hobson went on to declare, in a "closely reasoned and thoughtful address [that] the remedy was the more equal distribution of the products of labour" [2]. One way of overcoming the apparent contradictions to be found in Edwardian thought, perhaps, might be to try to discover how the paths of the Liberal Hobson and the Socialist Webb came to cross in this fashion, in an age when Liberals could be more radical than Labour partisans.

In spite of all their disagreements, notably over the crucial problem of imperialism, both men were united in pleading for a better organization of society. According to the philosopher Karl Popper there exist two kinds of political approaches to reform, which he labels Piecemeal and Utopian Engineering. The Piecemeal engineer is

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1. The Times, October 10, 1910.

2. Herbert Bryan, "The Abolition of Destitution and Unemployment", The Labour Leader, October 14, 1910.

one who "though he may perhaps cherish some ideals which concern society 'as a whole' - its general welfare, perhaps - he does not believe in the method of re-designing it as whole"[3]. The Utopian, by contrast, seeks to "/transform/" the 'whole of society' in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint"[4]. Under these terms, both Webb and Hobson can be best described by saying that they were situated somewhere between these two extremes. Like most Edwardian progressive thinkers, they somewhat paradoxically advocated the establishment of an ideal state through gradual and respectable policies. Their ultimate aim was the transformation of British society into an efficient whole, not its destruction.

Earnestly and relentlessly, both men were dedicating their lifework to the creation of a state that would deal in responsible ways with the burning issue of poverty. As Leo G. Chiozza-Money had expressed it in his widely-read book Riches and Poverty:

> ever we must keep before us the causes which bring into being the

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3. Karl R. Popper, The Poverty of Historicism (New York, 1960), p. 66.

4. Karl R. Popper, Ibid., p. 67.

> raw material of our social problems; ever we must have a clear vision of the crime of poverty in a wealthy country; ever we must seek to come to grips with the original sin[5].

He was thus exposing the dismal distribution of wealth in the United Kingdom; for him, poverty was a symptom of the many deficiencies plaguing British society.

Listening to the Edwardian intellectuals and their valiant denunciations of the world as it stood raises many intriguing questions. For instance, in an age when even literature came to be socially oriented, how are we now to understand the Progressives' faith in a "perfect state"? How could they reconcile their general pessimism over the Victorian heritage with a powerful confidence in the future? More simply, why this ever present preoccupation with the state as a potential regulating power of society?

Intellectuals were then everywhere in Europe contemplating the future of what they called, in a mixed tone of optimism and vague fear, the "Great State". The

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5. Leo G. Chiozza-Money, Riches and Poverty (1905), 2nd ed., (London, 1906), p. 323.

way in which the utopian novelist H.G. Wells defines it illustrates perfectly the kind of arguments employed by the Edwardians:

> I would like to underline in the most emphatic way that it is possible to have this Great State, essentially socialistic, owning and running the land and all the great public services, sustaining everybody in absolute freedom at a certain minimum of comfort and well-being, and still leaving most of the interests, amusements, and adornments of the individual life [6].

In The Great Society, devoted to the study of "the human material of our social machinery"[7], the political scientist Graham Wallas even added to it a psychological parallel. It is therefore not surprising to discover that the chapters of this work bear the rather formidable titles of "Organisation of thought", "Organisation of Will" and "Organisation of happiness". Clearly, the Edwardians were shaping a new world for a new man. The difficulty lay for them in finding democratic means, as Wallas admits, of "adjusting the vastness of the Great Society

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6. H.G. Wells, "The Past and the Great State", H.G. Wells et al., The Great State-Essays in Construction (London, 1912), pp. 42-43.

7. Graham Wallas, The Great Society. A Psychological Analysis (New York, 1914), p. 13.

to the smallness of individual man"[8]. Not content with a simple analysis of things as they were, the Edwardians were above all working on what they might, and ought, to become.

This is not to imply that they all agreed on a single vision of the future state, or that it was, in the opinion of all of them, to be built under "socialistic" conditions. Still, a consensus was then clearly emerging over the urgency to transform society. Even a thinker of such conservative turn of mind as W.H. Mallock would accept, in Social Reform, the by then current definition of reform,

> understood by those who regard the principal evils which exist under contemporary conditions, not as sores or bruises which are local or accidental in their nature, but as results of some organic defect in the structure of society as a whole, and as curable only by some similarly organic change [9].

But what was the essence of the social organism that the intellectuals were so fervently willing to

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8. Graham Wallas, The Great Society, p. 337.

9. W.H. Mallock, Social Reform as Related to Realities and Delusions (London, 1914), p. 3.

modify? The historian George Dangerfield, in The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914, has depicted Edwardian England as a doomed play "somewhat wanting in nobility and balance ... hysterical, violent, and inconclusive"[10]. But his description does not teach us anything about the specificity of the early years of the twentieth century in Great Britain, for one can hardly think of an historical period which might have been otherwise than "wanting in nobility and inconclusive". Similarly, the French historian Elie Halévy, author of a masterly History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century, described Edwardian England as: "that intermediate period which though it is not the nineteenth century constitutes its epilogue, and while not yet the anxious and troubled century in which we are living to-day is its immediate preparation"[11]. But did the decade consist in nothing more than the tormented death of the Victorian world? Was it merely, in the words of G.M. Young, the "flash Edwardian epilogue"?[12]

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10. George Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England, 1910-1914 (1935), (New York, 1980), p. 4.

11. Elie Halévy, The Rule of Democracy, vol. I, (1934), (New York, 1952), p. vi.

12. G.M. Young, Portrait of an Age-Victorian England (London, 1977), p. 184.

In reality, these scholars' ideas represent the once prevailing picture of the period, that of a national turmoil condemned to an eventual explosion. Similarly, the "good old days" rhetoric associated with the age also endured: for example, the writer G.K. Chesterton referred in his Autobiography to the "innocence"[13] of the British before 1914, while the Edwardian novelist H.H. Munro wrote in terms which can also be applied to the closing of the era:

> he felt a sense of depression and deprivation sweep down on himself; bitterly he watched his last evening of social gaiety slipping away to its end. In less than an hour it would be over; in a few months' time it would be an unreal memory [14].

The distinctive character of Edwardian England, surely, lies somewhere between the notions of a violently disturbed age and that of a peaceful garden-party, with the British beau monde dressed in impeccable clothing under clear skies. As the writer Douglas Jerrold rightly emphasized, "It is easy and fashionable... to picture

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13. G.K. Chesterton, Autobiography (London, 1936), p. 201.

14. H.H. Munro, The Unbearable Bassington (London, 1912), p. 241.

the pre-war decades as a fool's paradise, a riot of luxury and elegant depravity contrasting with a grinding poverty and a bitter social unrest "[15].

According to Donald Read, "The First World War was only to accelerate a transformation which had already begun"[16]. After all, this was the time when the writer Allen Upward argued in the dynamic socialist review The New Age in 1911, with the typical seriousness of the Edwardians:

> It is a sign of the times that so many of us should be busy in studying the signs of the times. In no other age since the birth of Christianity has there been manifested the same devouring curiosity about the future, and the same disposition to expect a new earth, if not a new heaven [17].

In fact, like members of all generations, the thinkers of the period had the impression of starting everything anew. An acute consciousness of the revolutionary changes

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15. Douglas Jerrold, Georgian Adventure (London, 1938), p. 14.

16. Donald Read, England 1868-1914 (London, 1979), p. 440.

17. Allen Upward quoted in Wallace Martin, The New Age Under Orage (Manchester, 1967), p. 128.

happening around them was to become their characteristic feature. They were neither particularly quiet, nor abnormally agitated: they were simply receptive to the life of their time and its many challenges. Moreover, it is now obvious that Halévy treated his subject from the point of view of someone who looks at the past knowing the end of the story well in advance: in this case, that the First World War was to strike the definitive blow to the long decaying structure of Victorian England. For contemporaries, that shock, which would destroy the last remnants of the belief in man's rationality, was totally unpredictable. But it certainly did not annihilate all they had done.

The writer Henry James, basically a man of the nineteenth century, described the impact of the war on British society as follows: "the tide that bore us along was then all the while moving to this as its grand Niagara... It seems to me to undo everything in the most horrible retroactive way"[18]. Yet the conflict did not fulfill James's sombre prediction. Even if for most intellectuals the war came at first as a traumatic

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18. Henry James quoted in Leon Edel, Henry James - The Master 1901-1916 (New York, 1972), p. 512.

experience that left them momentarily hopeless about the future, it was soon evident that the upheaval was in fact liberating forces of change which had been progressing during the Edwardian period, and the years immediately preceeding it. Indeed, as observed by Beatrice Webb in 1912,

> the England to which we had come back was in many ways a new England, different, as it seemed to us, in a significant manner from the England that we left behind us in June, 1911... undercurrents of thought and feeling that have been for years growing in volume and intensity, have now swept upwards [19].

The Edwardians were definitely not passively witnessing a long sunset.

In spite of the evident vitality of the pre-war years in England, there has never been an all-embracing study of Edwardian intellectual life. Good introductions to the subject can be found however, such as the chapter devoted to "Social and Political Ideas" by C.H. Driver in Edwardian England (1933) and "Social Thought in Britain"

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19. Beatrice Webb, "The Autumn Campaign", The Crusade, vol. III, no. 9, (September, 1912), p. 157.

by A.M. Quinton in The Twentieth Century Mind (1972). Both examples constitute valuable incursions into the different currents of opinions of the time, but their authors seem to be more or less incapable of logically conveying the elements of their argument. They are, in that sense, no more helpful than a mere chronological approach, where we would learn in a jumble that Bernard Bosanquet published in 1899 The Philosophical Theory of the State, that the painter Roger Fry organized the first London exhibition of Post-Impressionists in 1910, or that the Webbs wrote yet another book during the same year. Rodney Barker's Political Ideas in Modern Britain (1978) contains an interesting presentation of the beliefs which then prevailed, but is obviously concerned mostly with political thought.

In The Edwardian Turn of Mind, Samuel Hynes states that "the point is simply that one cannot talk precisely about an Edwardian avant-garde: the advance was being carried in too many different directions"[20]. In other words, he undertook the task of understanding the Edwardian intellectual life by affirming in advance that it is impossible to synthetize it into a coherent whole.

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20. Samuel Hynes, The Edwardian Turn of Mind (Princeton, 1968), pp. 9-10.

In fact, he demonstrates such an eagerness to present the age as one of transition, if not, to paraphrase him, one of ossification, that the result is not surprisingly a rather colourless patchwork. We still have not succeeded in mastering, in Raymond Williams's words, "the structure of feeling"[21] of England at the beginning of the twentieth century. We still do not fully understand why most intellectuals were then longing for order and efficiency amidst a chaotic world. The Liberal Charles F. Masterman, employing his usual sermonizing tone, was saying in In Peril of Change:

> Examination of the actual present can but emphasise evidence of equilibrium disturbed. The study of the past can but guarantee that through rough courses or smooth, heedless of violence and pain, in methods unexpected and often through hazardous ways, equilibrium will be attained [22].

How they hoped to achieve that equilibrium will be the subject-matter of this study.

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21. Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (New York, 1980), p. 64.

22. Charles F. Masterman, In Peril of Change -Essays written in Time of Tranquility (New York, 1905), p. 331.

Having thus considered the questions raised by the general intellectual background of the Edwardian period it is now necessary to explain our choice of protagonists. In order to answer the question "Who were Sidney Webb and J.A. Hobson?", one must firstly examine their writings. For there is more to their lives than the mere narration of what happened to them; as gifted intellectuals, they must be studied in their own terms. Our mission is to discover and unveil what they actually meant by what they said, while avoiding the kind of a priori reasoning that Quentin Skinner denounced for being "a pack of tricks we play on the dead"[23].

The biographical approach is a revealing instrument to utilize in the field of the history of ideas, which has to be primarily a study of meanings. Past ideas were once the thought of living men and were incarnated in their voices. In that sense, they are eminently personal. But they also reflect the dynamism of a particular milieu. Just how important is the writer's relative place in society to the ultimate expression of his ideas? Perhaps the only way out of this historiographical trap might be found in the logical perspective of an

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23. Quentin Skinner, "Meanings and Understanding in the History of Ideas", History and Theory, VIII (1969), p. 14.

individual who, conscious of his social involvement, can nevertheless express himself in his own name. As Carl E. Schorske rightly concluded on the question: "we must now be willing to undertake the empirical pursuit of pluralities as a precondition to finding unitary patterns in culture"[24]. It follows that instead of searching for a theoretical "Edwardian spirit", we must listen to Edwardians.

As J.W. Davidson and M.H. Lytle rightly emphasize, "The past is not history; only the raw material of it"[25]. In other words, history fundamentally consists in a quest for intelligibility. For instance, we know that in 1909 Sidney Webb engaged himself in a campaign to break up the Poor Laws and that J.A. Hobson wrote The Crisis of Liberalism. This is what happened then in the lives of two prominent Englishmen. Bluntly stated like this, these facts are not particularly enlightening. In reality, the fundamental question should be here: Were they not both trying to find

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24. Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-Siècle Vienna-Politics and Culture (New York, 1980), p. xxii.

25. James H. Davidson and M.H. Lytle, After the Fact - The Art of Historical Detection (New York, 1982), p. xxix.

different answers to the same crucial problems? For despite their dissimilar backgrounds they obviously were in immediate contact with an identical social reality. Our purpose here is to understand the intellectual heritage that they shared as Edwardians and the extent of their agreement over the critical issues of their day.

To achieve this end it is essential to bring ourselves to think in their own terms, and an interesting means of doing so is the comparative study of intellectuals. Like all modern decades the Edwardian period had its share of Idealists, Socialists, Conservatives and dreamers of various kinds; beyond their individual peculiarities, it is their responses to the challenge of their time which now help to make them appear so unique and fascinating. Webb and Hobson are relevant figures not merely because they were highly esteemed in their respective spheres of work, but also for their active participations in the Edwardian unrest. As intellectuals they have "interpreted and labelled in such a way as to influence all subsequent thought about them"[26] most of the preoccupations of their

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26. Theodore Zeldin, France 1848-1945, vol. I. Ambition, Love and Politics (Oxford, 1973), p. I.

age. They truly are the historian's témoins privilégiés.

It was not sheer coincidence if the two protagonists chosen here were described as "saint figures" by their contemporaries. The Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, for example, would refer to Sidney Webb in a letter as a "highly-knowledgeable Saint"[27]. And the biographer Mary A. Hamilton vividly presents J.A. Hobson as: "tall, emaciated, pale as parchment, with an eye that on occasion blazed though generally his expression was gentleness itself, [he] looked like a saint"[28]. What was simply implied here was that both Webb and Hobson personified what was best in the intellectual life of their time, their claim to "sanctity" resting mostly on an exceptional dedication to work. But these slightly teasing glorifications of individual merits were to give birth in turn, in the case of Webb, to institutionalization. The guild Socialist G.D.H. Cole would even refer to "Sidneywebbicalism"[29], meaning the

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27. Herbert Asquith quoted in Roy Jenkins, Asquith: Portrait of a Man and an Era (New York, 1964), p. 518.

28. Mary A. Hamilton, Remembering my Good Friends (London, 1944), p. 137.

29. G.D.H. Cole, The World of Labour (London, 1913), p. 3.

vision of collectivism rooted in the 1880's, as preached by Mr. Sidney Webb. A myth, at least partially self-imposed, was taking shape.

Notwithstanding the numerous essays dedicated at least in part to him, Sidney Webb is still an undiscovered man. Among the possible explanations of this paradoxical situation there is, of course, the image of himself he took great care to cultivate: that of a rather faceless, reserved and brilliant work-aholic . The biographer Lytton Strachey, in a typical sharp-witted criticism, described his first meeting with him in the following words: "I'd no idea that the Webb fellow was so utterly without pretentions of being a gentleman"[30]. This remark illustrates the degree to which Webb was successful at posing as a man completely submerged in his thought, and apparently refractory to all contacts with life. He never really dedicated any time to autobiographical introspection, and professed everywhere to be dispassionate, a man "with no inside"[31]. In short, Webb built a wall

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30. Lytton Strachey quoted in Michael Holroyd, Lytton Strachey - A Biography (New York , 1979), p. 559.

31. Kingsley Martin quoted in Margaret Cole, ed., The Webbs and their Work, (Brighton, Engl., 1974), p. 297.

of seeming detachment between himself and the world, and consequently, often appeared as a larger than life, if not inhuman, figure.

'Yet, as we will later see, these facts certainly do not account for the cheers and laughter Sidney Webb provoked while lecturing, and the almost universal admiration associated with his name throughout his life. Nor do they explain the ardent character of some of his writings. This excerpt from an article, "The Moral of the Elections", can demonstrate his usual tone of seriousness. Here we do not merely hear the cold, "expert" civil servant, but also a prophetic voice:

> For Bentham and James Mill a fervent faith in merely political freedom sufficed. But that, fortunately for us, is through vitalising spirit bequeathed by those giants, now a past issue. The problem of our own time is to secure for the whole community not political but economic freedom 32.

Webb represents that rather strange type of individual, the practical idealist: a characteristic feature he shared with most Edwardian thinkers.

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32. Sidney Webb, "The Moral of the Elections", The Contemporary Review, 62 (August, 1892), p. 287.

Of course, there was another factor which contributed to obscure the man Webb: the partnership with his wife Beatrice. Their lifelong friend, the playwright and prominent Fabian George Bernard Shaw, exemplifies the general perception of the phenomenon that came to be known as "The Webbs":

> The Webbs, Sidney and Beatrice... are a superextraordinary pair. I have never met anyone like them, either separately or in their most fortunate conjunction. Each of them is an English force; and their marriage was an irresistible reinforcement... he took to her investigation like duck to water [33].

Indeed, both lives were anchored in a close working collaboration. At times, the observer can get the impression of looking at a powerful and single-minded "we". Yet this is a partial view of reality. In fact, both partners were unique individuals, and Sidney is certainly the lesser known of the two. Our comprehension of him originates from his wife's autobiography and diaries, where he inevitably appears as an echo of their

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33. G.B. Shaw, "The Webbs" quoted in Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The Truth about Soviet Russia (London, 1942), pp. 5 and 12.

author's point of view. Indeed, it is perfectly legitimate to ask to what extent Beatrice was idealising the truth. For example, in March 1918, she recalls Sidney Webb's reaction to the German onslaught as follows: "even Sidney has been disturbed in his usual equanimity, though he does not let his anxiety have any influence on his output of work"[34]. Was Webb merely this efficacious working machine? For all too long, he has been described as a quiet shadow. Still, it would surely be illogical to separate him altogether from the famous partnership: all one has to do is to emphasize his contribution inside it.

Sidney Webb is not a man who can easily be known. In addition to his personality and his near dissolution in the partnership, his writings are occasionally far from limpid, making it even more difficult to comprehend him. Mary A. Hamilton has rightly criticized the Webbs' dual method of writing: "heavy sentences eat up the lively phrases and the apt words, they are lost in the

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34. Beatrice Webb, Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1912-1924, Vol. I, (London, 1952), p. 118..

muffled texture of the whole"[35]. However, the real obstacles which obstruct the path towards a clear understanding of him are to be found in scholarly works. A brief selection among studies can reveal the extent to which his thought has been segmented. Already in 1915, the former secretary Edward Pease wrote his History of the Fabian Society, which may be considered as the starting point of an enduring mythology. Needless to say, it presented Sidney Webb as a kind of founding father. Even H.G. Wells's vengeful novel The New Machiavelli (1910) would have its place in this abiding legend. Furthermore, Webb's links with the Fabians have been examined by Anne Fremantle in The Little Band of Prophets (1960), Margaret Cole in The Story of Fabian Socialism (1961), and A.M. McBriar in Fabian Socialism and English Politics 1884-1918 (1966).

In recent years, he has been described as a defender of efficiency inspired by Comtean ideals in Willard Wolfe's From Radicalism to Socialism (1975), and as the creator of the Welfare State in Maurice Bruce's

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35. Mary A. Hamilton, Sidney and Beatrice Webb (Boston, 1933), p. 182.

The Coming of the Welfare State (1961). David Caute enlists him in the international communist movement in The Fellow-Travellers (1973), and E.J.T. Brennan focuses his attention on Webb's genuine interest in education in Education for National Efficiency (1975). G.R. Searle, in The Quest for National Efficiency (1971), insists on his role in the Efficiency movement, and J.M. Winter, in Socialism and the Challenge of War 1912-1918 (1974) analyses his political thought. Moreover, Ian Britain completes the long overdue destruction of the myth of Webb the cultural philistine in Fabianism and Culture: A Study in British Socialism and the Arts 1884-1918 (1982). Obviously, Sidney Webb was lost somewhere along the way, and his mind carefully compartmentalized. What exactly was he contemplating?

Eric Hobsbawn, in a provocative essay called "The Fabians Reconsidered" (1964), declared that "The Fabian claims are largely mythological and researches on the Society have therefore automatically taken the form, in the main, of their systematic explosion"[36].

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36. Eric Hobsbawn, Labouring Men-Studies in the History of Labour (London, 1968), p. 251.

At that time, a reconsideration of the Fabian legacy was certainly well founded, its adherents having busied themselves for too long with exercises in self-glorification. Still, Hobsbawn's judgement was surely too severe. He seemed to imply that the Fabians played, in reality, an almost negligible role in the socio-political life of England at the beginning of the twentieth century; at any rate, one inferior to that of the new Liberals. This hypothesis now sounds specious. In order to serve a good cause, the argument was carried too far. In fact, as Bentley Gilbert rightly observes:

> Fabian influence was undoubtedly great and the unfortunate modern tendency to denigrate its impact on English politics is as mistaken as were the sweeping statements twenty years ago that the Fabians had practically written the Beveridge report by 1909 [37].

In 1918, the novelist Virginia Woolf referred in a letter to "Old Hobson" [38]. This was not so much a commentary on age alone, as a reflection on character.

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37. Bentley Gilbert, The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain - The Origins of the Welfare State (London, 1966), p. 47.

38. Virginia Woolf, The Question of Things Happening. The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1912-1922 (London, 1976), p. 286.

J.A.Hobson was dignified, serious, and in many ways incarnated the typical gentleman. Margaret MacDonald, the wife of his friend the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald, would describe him in 1896 as a "quiet bookwormy sort of person "[39]. Knowing all this, it may seem as if he was running a very high risk of being hopelessly boring, another representative of the ivory tower intellectual. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. Throughout all his life, Hobson involved himself with things that mattered. He was in South Africa as a journalist during the Boer War, and a critical observer of the Liberal government's social policy after 1906. He himself explained his position as an intellectual in Problem of Poverty, where he defined a

> citizen-student who brings to his task not merely the intellectual interest of the collector of knowledge, but the moral interest which belongs to one who is a part of all he sees, and a sharer of the social responsibility for the present and future of industrial society [40].

If there is a myth surrounding the figure of

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39. Margaret MacDonald quoted in David Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald (London, 1977), p. 48.

40. J.A. Hobson, Problems of Poverty (1891), 5th ed., (London, 1905), p. v.

Sidney Webb, the same is true for J.A. Hobson. Webb has been transmitted to posterity as the father of the Welfare State, and Hobson as the originator of Keynesian economics. Webb is supposed to have been dispassionate, and Hobson is presented at times as overly sentimental. The basis of his most celebrated work, Imperialism-A Study (1902), for example, is described in the following terms by P.J. Cain: "The emotional excitement of his opposition to the Randlords led him...to return to the old radical obsession with financier as demon king, turning what was to be a "systemic" theory into a conspiratorial one"[41]. All too often, Hobson has been portrayed as a failing economist, an unscientific dissenter and a defender of lost causes. For these reasons, he remains an unknown celebrity.

Like Sidney Webb, Hobson never really wrote about himself. His autobiography, bearing the promising title of Confessions of an Economic Heretic, is anything but a confession and reveals little about the motivations of its author. His usual tone of introspection may be illustrated by this quotation from his essay "Towards Social Equality". Speaking about some aspects of Victorian England, he then

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41. P.J. Cain, "J.A. Hobson, Cobdenism, and the Radical Theory of Economic Imperialism", Economic History Review, 31 (1978), p. 568.

goes on to say:

> I take leave to reinforce this statement from the personal experience of one who, born and bred in the middle class of a middle-sized Midland town, was particularly well placed for observing and experiencing the sentiment and practices we are considering[42].

If Hobson was sentimental, it was concerning things other than himself.

The clearest examination of J.A. Hobson's thought and evolution is certainly to be found in Peter Clarke's Liberals and Social Democrats (1978). Here is a magisterial study of the group of men who attempted before the First World War to rebuild the crumbling spirit of Liberalism. According to one review, "The varied company about whom he writes possessed gentler souls than the Fabians who acquired greater fame through their mutual adulation"[43]. And indeed, from the vantage of hindsight, the influence of the new Liberals seems to cease in 1918, for lack of self-advertisement. J.A. Hobson was condemned after his death to a long period of relative obscurity, and considered to be

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42. J.A. Hobson, "Towards Social Equality", (1931), L.T. Hobhouse Memorial Lecture (London, 1948), p. 13.

43. Peter T. Marsh, "Liberals and Social Democrats", The Journal of Modern History, 53 (June, 1981), p. 332.

essentially an economist, which was clearly not the case. Peter Clarke's study has the great merit of presenting Hobson's achievements side by side with those of his fellow Liberals. But he still remains to be studied for his own sake.

There is an intriguing element in the will to disappear behind an intense devotion to work manifested by Hobson and Webb. Perhaps a key to the answer might be found in these words of the Liberal Richard Haldane: "Our duty is to work without turning our eyes to the right or to the left from the ideal which alone can light up our paths"[44]. Yet it is essential to realize that the new Liberals, like the Fabians, were definitely not contemplating nebulous ideals: they were trying to find sensible and workable answers to the demands imposed on society by, notably, the extension of the franchise in 1867 and 1884, and the general sentiment that the entire organization of the state was in need of radical transformation. In a posthumous article published in 1879, J.S. Mill had said:

> The working classes are entitled to claim that the whole field of social

44. Richard B. Haldane, An Autobiography (London, 1929), p. 334.

> institutions should be re-examined, and every question considered as if it now arose for the first time; with the idea constantly in view that the persons who are to be convinced are not those who owe their ease and importance to the present system, but persons who have no other interest in the matter than abstract justice and the general good of the community[45].

He was thus already proclaiming what was to become the urgent task of the Edwardians.

In 1909, Ramsay MacDonald, in Socialism and Government, defined the state in these words: "It is the organised political personality of a sovereign people-the organisation of a community for making its common will effectual by political methods"[46]. This statement brings us far from the poet and critic Matthew Arnold who could still write in Culture and Anarchy:

> we are in danger of drifting towards anarchy... We want an authority, and we find nothing but jealous classes, checks, and a deadlock; culture suggests the idea of the State. We find no basis for a firm State-Power in our ordinary selves[47].

45. J.S. Mill, "Chapters on Socialism", Part 1, The Fortnightly Review, XXV (Feb., 1879), p. 223.
46. J. Ramsay MacDonald, Socialism and Government, Vol. 1, (London, 1909), pp. 3-4.
47. Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (1869), (Cambridge, Engl., 1950), pp. 75 and 96.

Indeed, the Edwardian years saw the birth of a collective sentiment concerning the state, based on a common will to make it more efficient. At the end of the nineteenth century, such philosophers as the idealist T.H. Green were still content to propose a state based on the common good. Now time had come to find new ways to improve the organization of society: the intellectuals had no choice but to return to earth and the hard realities of a world in mutation. As stated by George Kitson Clark:

> they had to use increasingly the coercive power of the State and the resources that could only be made available by taxation; only so could conditions infactories be regulated and the more helpless types of labour protected, only so could the towns of England be sewered, scavenged, partially rebuilt and prevented from becoming...the breeding-places of misery[48].

Sidney Webb and J.A. Hobson, however divergent their visions of life, were both caught in the same vast movement against the deliquescent Liberal laissez-faire. As the shocked Victorian Leslie Stephen exclaimed in 1902, "The

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48. George Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England (London, 1965), p. 281.

Liberal is tempted to carry on a flirtation with the Socialist; and having admitted that State supervision may sometimes be needed even in the interest of 'liberty', is led to believe that no supervision can be in excess"[49]. This new consensus explains why, as suggested by Michael Freeden, "On some issues it was actually difficult to pinpoint distinctions between Hobson and the Fabians as to what the state was to undertake"[50].

Webb and Hobson were more than abstract "Fabian" and "new Liberal" figures: they were highly gifted individuals in their time. As Edwardian intellectuals, they belonged to a generation obdurately dedicated to work. In sharp contrast with the obsolete picture of the era, consisting generally of a veneer of unconsciousness and detachment concealing an explosive social situation, they were energetically advocating a fairer distribution of wealth, and a more efficient public system. Both Webb and Hobson were planning a kind of promising New Jerusalem. Like H.G. Wells, they were convinced that: "There is a secular amelioration of life, and it is brought about by Good Will

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49. Leslie Stephen. "The Good Old Cause", The Nineteenth Century and After, LI (Jan., 1902), p. 17.

50. Michael Freeden, The New Liberalism-An Ideology of Social Reform (Oxford, 1978), p. 71.

working through the efforts of men"[51]. This collective "Good Will" was in their opinion the true basis of a progressive national state. Neither wrote a treatise on the subject, yet that concern was omnipresent in everything they did. Our task will be here to analyse their distinctive crusades.

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51. H.G. Wells, New Worlds for Old (New York, 1908), p. 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

## SIDNEY WEBB AND THE STATE: THE FORMATIVE YEARS

> Sidney Webb and the "irresistible glide into collectivist Socialism"[1].
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> - Sidney Webb, Fabian Essays, 1889.

Before studying Sidney Webb's formative experiences during the later Victorian years, it is essential to reconsider the "enigma" of the man. C.P. Scott's contemptuous judgement of the Webbs in 1899, stating that "They have been raking among statistics too long"[2], was long-lasting. Indeed, Kenneth O. Morgan feels nowadays that there exists a need to question "the conventional wisdom that regards the Fabians as austere, humourless philistines"[3]. Webb obviously still awaits the historian who could demonstrate that he was more than an insensitive and elitist

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1. Sidney Webb, "Historic", Sidney Webb et al., Fabian Essays (1889), (London, 1950), p. 56.

2. C.P. Scott quoted in Peter Clarke, Lancashire and the New Liberalism (Cambridge, Engl., 1971), p. 171.

3. K.O., Morgan, "Purpose before pleasure", The Times Literary Supplement, (July 23, 1982), p. 783.

archdeacon of British Socialism, that he enjoyed reading George Eliot and Heine, as well as occasional walks in the countryside. And this despite the fact that, in the words of Stefan Collini, "These days, the Fabians are second only to the Bloomsbury group as the most overstudied set of English intellectuals"[4].

In order to comprehend Webb's views on the state and his craving to transform the England he knew, one must firstly realize that he was a man who could feel and share the concerns of his contemporaries. H.G. Wells, who certainly cannot be accused of professing an unconditional admiration for him, wrote in 1907:

> To regard Webb, for example, as a Machiavellian statesman is ridiculous. He has a mind, it is true, of immense activity, and he is a glutton for work; he has a real enthusiasm for social organisation, and in particular for education [however]...he has adopted latterly a pose of self-satisfaction in his own dexterity that arouses unworthy resentment and makes colleagues and opponents unduly suspicious of him. But that little weakness really only humanises his very real intellectual greatness[5].

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4. Stefan Collini, "The Fabian Fringe Thinker", The Times Literary Supplement, (July 25, 1980), p. 837.

5. H.G. Wells, "On the Alleged Diabolical Influences in the Fabian Society", The Nation, April 6, 1907.

What Wells describes as "that little weakness" was in fact the myth with which Webb carefully surrounded himself over the years. According to Leon Edel, "the self-myth is the truest part of an individual: by that myth we always seek to live; it is what gives us force, direction, and sustenance"[6]. Transposed to the personality of Sidney Webb this idea is quite revealing, because he himself really always wanted to be remembered as the ultimate civil servant and the ideal collector of facts. His work for the eventual realisation of collective Socialism in England was unquestionably the driving force in his life.

Even his physical appearance participated in the image of a selfless individual. Malcolm Muggeridge, for example, describes him in these unflattering yet somewhat apt words, and can testify to the general impression he made at first on others:

> Webb came toddling in. He really was a ridiculous looking man, with tiny legs and feet, a proturing stomach, and a large head /and he spoke/ in his soft, sibilant, toneless voice...

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6. Leon Edel, Stuff of Sleep and Dreams-Experiments in Literary Psychology (New York, 1982), p. 27.

> his goatee beard wagging, his pince-nez with their black ribbon steady on his large nose[7].

All too often, Webb's unbecoming traits and his "remotedness" had the effect of diverting popular attention towards his more outspoken and attractive wife. Samuel Hynes, among many others, exemplifies that kind of superficial perception when he says that "Sidney Webb was a good deal less terrifying than his wife; but he was also considerably less charming"[8]. The truth is that it was Beatrice who wrote "Alas! for human nature. I am of the old opinion still: I do not like human beings"[9], not her husband. Sidney Webb always was a keen observer of reality; the existing world was his lifelong enthusiasm. Describing a small Australian mining town visited in 1898, he reported:

> The town proved to be unexpectedly attractive and charming - small but beautiful gardens with tree ferns and palms, splendid public buildings erected by the Colonial Government in boom-time and generally the air of a German 'Residenzstadt'[10].

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7. Malcolm Muggeridge, Chronicles of Wasted Time, Vol. 1, The Green Stick (London, 1972), pp. 147, 195-196.

8. Samuel Hynes, The Edwardian Turn of Mind, p. 98.

9. Beatrice Webb, Beatrice Webb's Diaries, Vol. II, 1924-1932 (London, 1956), p. 248.

10. Sidney Webb quoted in A.G. Austin, ed., The Webbs' Australian Diary (Melbourne, 1965), p. 90.

Whether he found the buildings more appealing than the trees is perhaps open to question: the important element to notice here, as in all his writings, is the strong curiosity manifested.

In the middle of a long and austere presentation to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1892, one is surprised to discover the following light-hearted exchange between the interrogator and Sidney Webb:

> Q.: The single men are better off a good deal are they not?
> S.W.: I should be sorry to state that.
> Q.: Why not?
> S.W.: Because I have just got married[11].

Webb, the caricature, must never hide from us Webb the resourceful and creative mind. There always was in him a witty man hiding behind the dignified façade. G.B. Shaw, in one of his typical inflated statements, has said that: "Webb never posed, never acted, never courted popular favour or any other favour, and was never in danger of becoming a humbug and a living fiction, not to say a living lie"[12]. But this was probably unfair to his friend: instead of presenting a flawless

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11. Sidney Webb quoted in British Parliamentary Papers-Fourth Report from the Royal Commission on Labour 1893-4, Vol. 43. Industrial Relations (Shannon, Ireland, 1970), p. 261.
12. G.B. Shaw, "The History of a Happy Marriage", The Times Literary Supplement, (October 20, 1945), p. 493.

being, he should have shown Webb as he really was. And the best way to render full justice to his true personality is surely to study the road that led him from 44 Cranbourne Street, his anonymous birthplace, to national eminence at 41 Grosvenor Road.

Sidney James Webb was born in London on July 13, 1859, the year of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species, John Stuart Mill's On Liberty, Samuel Smiles's Self-Help, and Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities. Palmerston, that monument of British politics, had formed in June yet another Ministry and Queen Victoria was forty years old. It appeared then as if the nation was to withstand for ever any abrupt transformations: indeed, the Queen could still open Parliament using these benevolent terms: "I am happy to think that, in the internal state of the country, there is nothing to excite disquietude, and much to call for satisfaction and thankfulness"[13]. Obviously, Webb belonged by birth to a world still essentially "Victorian" in outlook: he was to be "nurtured on the purest milk of Victorian radicalism"[14].

Yet the first years of the sixties were to witness

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13. Annual Register, 1859 (London, 1860), p. 3.

14. R.H. Tawney, The Attack and Other Papers (London, 1953), p. 133.

many troubling and premonitory phenomena, foremost among those being the wars in Italy and the United States and the increasing tensions amidst the British labour force. The truth was that the nineteenth century in Europe, as Theodore Zeldin has rightly observed, "was very far from being either stable or simple to live in...it was a century of doubts"[15]. Clearly, the Edwardians were not the pioneers of the movement of skepticism about the Victorian consensus. For example, when the essayist and harbinger of years to come, Walter Pater, said in 1873, "What we have to do is to be for ever testing new opinions"[16], he was contributing to an evolution of thought which gave birth during the 1880's to a new generation's self-consciousness. Indeed, an unprecedented social awareness and growing anxieties were gradually creating during the later Victorian years what H.M. Hyndman described in 1881 as "the Dawn of a Revolutionary Epoch"[17]. And the young Webb was caught in the middle of this national

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15. Theodore Zeldin, France 1848-1945. Anxiety and Hypocrisy (Oxford, 1981), p. 276.

16. Walter Pater. The Renaissance (1873), (London, 1893), p. 151.

17. H.M. Hyndman, "The Dawn of a Revolutionary Epoch", The Nineteenth Century, XLVII (January, 1881), p. 1.

intellectual turmoil.

The historian R.H. Tawney has warned those concerned with Sidney Webb's intellectual formation that:

> If the work of the Webbs is too massive for biographical gossip, an attempt to provide them with intellectual ancestors is equally superfluous... The clue to their outlook on the world of their day is to be found less in what they absorbed of its prevalent assumptions and fashionable philosophies than in what they ignored[18].

And indeed, Webb was never one to formulate ideas like a conquering hero. His life's output was one of creative synthesis: if there is a pattern to be found in his existence, it lies surely in his constant efforts in self-education. Born in Leicester Square where his father was a local public accountant and radical vestryman who actively supported J.S. Mill's electoral campaign in 1865 and his Evangelical mother managed an hairdressing business, Webb's milieu was the one defined by Harold Perkin as 'the forgotten middle class' for whom "the ideal society was a functional one based on expertise and selection by

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18. R.H. Tawney, The Attack and Other Papers, p. 132.

merit"[19]. Instead of attending a University he started at sixteen to live on his own as a clerk in a broker's office, while perfecting his education at night by accumulating scholarships and slowly elevating himself in the civil service hierarchy. Richard Shannon has spoken of Webb's education as belonging to that of a "frustrated minority among the working classes conscious of deprivation who, even as they scrambled to embourgeoisify themselves, would very often do so as part of an education in socialism"[20]. This 'education in socialism', indeed, was to become the decisive element in his career. Yet his background had made him a thorough petit bourgeois. He had triumphed over the system's inequalities on a personal level, and therefore felt that dramatic transformations were unrealistic and unnecessary. As we shall see, he remained in theoretical matters a believer without a religion.

The Sidney Webb of the 1880's fits easily into the early British Socialist Movement, which has been described by E.P. Thompson, paraphrasing William Morris, as a "collection

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19. Harold Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880 (London, 1969), p. 258.

20. Richard Shannon, The Crisis of Imperialism 1865-1915 (Frogmore, Engl., 1976), p. 222.

of oddities"[21]. Ill-assorted men like G.B. Shaw, Tom Mann, John Burns, H.H. Champion, H.M. Hyndman, and an ever growing number of Socialist partisans were then all united in a common belief that the English state had to become some day democratic and collectivist. For them, as well as for Webb, changes were imperative and had to be radical in nature, if not revolutionary. As explained by Helen M. Lynd, the "Socialists of this period were more concerned with a series of specific reforms than with any integrated program of social change"[22]. Mill's On Liberty had made all of them aware that

> the worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individual composing it...a State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes- will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished[23].

Mill desired the establishment of a new man and a new state: Webb and his fellow Socialists undertook the task of making his project real.

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21. E.P. Thompson, William Morris-Romantic to Revolutionary (New York, 1977), p. 298.

22. Helen M. Lynd, England in the Eighteen-Eighties (London, 1945), p. 187.

23. John Stuart Mill, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government (Oxford, 1948), p. 104.

For similar reasons to those which made him consider J.S. Mill as the greatest economist, Webb always admired William Morris. Together they constituted for him a kind of dual intellectual ancestry, with the somewhat reluctant Socialist on the one hand, and the enthusiastic dreamer on the other. And together they taught him faith in the power of ideas. The Socialist poet explained in 1894 his adhesion to Socialism as being associated with a stimulating conversion, or near resurrection: "So there I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life, if it had not somehow dawned on me that amidst all this filth of civilisation the seeds of a great change, what we others call Social-Revolution, were beginning to germinate"[24]. For Morris, as for Webb, to accept the world as it stood was to participate in its eventual death; in contrast, Socialism represented a powerful tool to assail the Victorian orthodoxies. In short, it was a means to build a regenerating new life, as well as a rational argument that justified optimism and social involvement.

Like many members of his generation, Webb was free from the Victorians' use of charity as "a way of spreading self-help philosophy and of combating revolutionary

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24. William Morris, "How I became a Socialist", William Morris-Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse (London, 1948), p. 658.

ideas"[25]. In 1899, he was still passionate when he wrote:

> I am furious when I read of bequests to the Poor Box, or the Lifeboat Society, or the Hospitals-it is worth more to discover one tiny improvement that will permanently change conditions ever so little for the better than to assuage momentarily the woes of thousands[26].

Life was for him based on an inner mission to perform social work. Convinced that the individual could be a powerful political instrument, he said in 1890: "We have no right to live our own lives. What shall it profit a man to save his own soul, if thereby even one jot less good is done to the world"[27]. The previous year, he had declared in a tone which recalled J.S. Mill:

> The political conflicts of the near future will necessarily take place between the party representing poverty and economic privilege on the one hand, and the party of the wage-earners on the other. The

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25. Derek Fraser, The Evolution of the British Welfare State (London, 1975), p. 119.

26. Sidney Webb quoted in Sydney Caine, The History of the Foundation of the London School of Economics and Political Science (London, 1963), p. 95.

27. Sidney Webb quoted in Robert Skidelsky, "The Fabian Ethic" in Michael Holroyd, ed., The Genius of Shaw (New York, 1979), p. 116.

> fundamental principle of the one will be Individualism; that of the other will be Collectivism[28].

This struggle was to become his own, and there would be no doubt concerning his side in the battle: he would try to reconcile the two factions.

During the 1880's, Webb believed already that his "mission" had to be exercised outside traditional party politics to be successful. As Edward Pease explained:

> The political parties...offered very little attraction to the young men of the early eighties, who, viewing our social system with the fresh eyes of youth, saw its cruelties and its absurdities and judged them, not as older men, by comparison with the worse cruelties and greater absurdities of earlier days, but with the standard of common fairness and common sense[29].

Indeed, Webb's true concern was the task of reconsidering the functioning of society via the perspective of common sense. In 1878, he met G.B. Shaw, and soon engaged himself in heated debates with Graham Wallas and Sydney

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28. Sidney Webb, Socialism in England (1890), 2nd ed., (London, 1893), p. xxi.

29. Edward Pease, The History of the Fabian Society (1915), (London, 1963), p. 17.

Olivier on the "right" way to transform England. He attended with these friends in 1884 the first meeting of the "Karl Marx Club", later to become the Hampstead Historic Society. There he discussed Marx's theories, simultaneously repelled and attracted by the new credo. Socialism appeared already to him as the best means to make himself useful to "Humanity": he was convinced that the days of the collectivist remedies had come. But he was looking for solutions, nor revolutions. As he explained in 1889 to Alfred Marshall, "the course of social evolution is making us all Socialists against our will"[30].

When in 1885 the still obscure civil servant Sidney Webb joined the newly founded Fabian Society, he had the impression of finding at last the perfect platform. The immediate successor of the ethical and anarchist Fellowship of the New Life, whose ultimate aim was an ambiguous self-perfection of the individual, the Fabian Society, created in 1884, differed from its predecessor in many ways. It was pragmatic, "scientific", and worked for the betterment

30. Sidney Webb quoted in Jeanne MacKenzie. A Victorian Courtship-The Story of Beatrice Potter and Sidney Webb (New York, 1979), p. 61.

of collectivity as a whole, not from an individualistic basis. As observed by G.B. Shaw, "The Fabian Society got rid of its Anarchists...and presented Socialism in the form of a series of parliamentary measures"[31]. The Fabians found their inspiration in the works of Auguste Comte, Henry George, J.S. Mill, Robert Owen and Karl Marx, while insisting on the potential practicability of these thinkers' ideas. In fact, the Society's blueprint ideal created a gulf between its members and their intellectual forebears. In sharp contrast with their predecessors, the Fabians' political attitude was always based on pragmatism and oriented towards the living world; in Sidney Webb's words "even Comte, superior as he was to many of the weaknesses of his time, must needs add a detailed 'Polity' to his 'Philosophy' of Positivism"[32].

For the Fabians, the means to achieve concretely their collectivist ideal were as important as their ideal itself. As rightly emphasized by Max Beer, "Bentham's formula is, 'The greatest happiness of the greatest

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31. G.B. Shaw, The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism (New York, 1928), p. 220.

32. Sidney Webb, Socialism in England, p. 4.

number'. The Fabian formula is, 'The greatest efficiency of the greatest number'"[33]. Happiness was a vague notion, linked with outmoded utilitarian concepts, while the transformation of society represented a highly workable enterprise. As proclaimed by Webb, "The Socialists are the Benthamites of this generation"[34]. His aim was thus to make sure that the future state would work for the benefit of all, not merely for a minority. In short, what the Fabians desired was to find an answer to the problem formulated by Mill in 1859 about "how to make the fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control"[35].

The sociologist L.T. Hobhouse summarized the original mission of the Fabians as follows:

> The little group of middle-class intellectuals...who formed the Fabian Society in the early eighties, had a great opportunity...to build the bridge over the chasm that severed the old laissez-faire

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33. Max Beer, A History of British Socialism, Vol. II, (London, 1920), p. 276.

34. Sidney Webb, "Socialism: True and False". (1894), The Basis & Policy of Socialism (London, 1909), p. 55.

35. J.S. Mill, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government, p. 4.

> Liberalism from the new demands of political and economic democracy[36].

The project was immense and, as might have been foreseen, only partially fulfilled its ambitious programme. The Fabians most successful performances consisted in their effective systematization of the Progressives' dispersed credo and their demonstration that a "reasonable" Socialism could be accepted in England. As observed by Philip Poirier, the Fabians' plans "embodied most of the short-term objectives of the Marxists"[37], while being openly doubtful about class theories and the potential ability of the working classes to govern their own destinies.

The Fabians wanted, in the words of Barbara Tuchman, a "Socialism without Marx or revolution, something like Macbeth without murder - an intellectual, respectable, gradual, factual, practical, 'gas and water' English Socialism"[38]. This reflection illustrates perfectly the

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36. L.T. Hobhouse, "The Career of Fabianism", The Nation, March 30, 1907.

37. Philip Poirier, The Advent of the British Labour Party (New York, 1958), p. 29.

38. Barbara W. Tuchman, The Proud Tower - A Portrait of the World before the War, 1890-1914 (New York, 1966), p. 358.

two-dimensional nature of Fabianism, which was aiming at the realisation of a social ideal while being simultaneously convinced of the uselessness of utopias, and professing a creed whose unique dogma was that knowledge constituted the ultimate cure to all problems.

This manifest dichotomy greatly resembles Sidney Webb's own apparent contradictions, which Willard Wolfe describes as the "disparity between Webb's sweeping theoretical arguments...and the rather modest reform proposals that they were intended to sustain"[39]. G.D.H. Cole has stated, alluding to him, that "Fabianism was essentially his creation"[40]. And undeniably, Webb and Fabianism did grow together: no other creed could have better matched his peculiar blend of moral ethics and constitutional Socialism. On March 20, 1885, he delivered his first lecture to the Fabian Society, "The Way Out", in which he already demonstrated his typical reasonableness. It was one of the earliest expositions of what has been called "the quasi-religious function

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39. Willard Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism - Men and Ideas in the Formation of Fabian Socialist Doctrines 1881-1889 (New Haven, 1975), p. 382.

40. G.D.H. Cole quoted in Anne Fremantle, The Little Band of Prophets: The British Fabians (New York, 1960), p. 39.

of Webb's collectivism as a substitute faith"[41].

Indeed, he gradually transformed himself during the eighties from being an orthodox and individualist Liberal-Radical into a Socialist, by publicly proclaiming to the Fabians in 1886: "I call myself a Socialist because I am desirous to remove from the capitalist the temptation to use his capital for his own exclusive ends. Still, the capitalist may do good by accumulation"[42]. Here it is essential to consider the reasons that led Webb to Socialism and the extent to which he accepted "the religion of Socialism"[43], if such a creed then ever existed in England. As Paul Thompson rightly observes, Webb, Wallas and Olivier were "milder socialists who had reached their new convictions through Liberalism and social conscience"[44]. They had all been much impressed by Chamberlain's conception of municipal government, with its plans of limited, practical,

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41. Willard Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, p. 282.

42. Sidney Webb quoted in Willard Wolfe, Ibid., p. 211.

43. Stephen Yeo, "A New Life: The religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896", History Workshop, 4 (Autumn 1977), pp. 5-56.

44. Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour-The Struggle for London 1885-1914 (London, 1967), p. 137.

public ownership. In the words of Donald Read, the Birmingham mayor was indeed "enough of a 'socialist' to believe that services which by their nature best functioned as monopolies should be under public control"[45]. In fact, Webb was convinced with his Marxist friend Shaw that Socialism was merely the "next step in the Radical programme"[46]. And as if to confirm this belief, the year 1886 witnessed the Radicals' downfall: Joseph Chamberlain broke with Gladstone, the Liberals were defeated in the General Election, and Sir Charles Dilke's career abruptly ended following a sensational divorce trial. In short, the Liberal party was in jeopardy, and Webb had to search for another political platform.

It now appears obvious that Sidney Webb remained "an innocent bye-stander"[47] of the Socialist movement. He "converted" himself to Socialism for very pragmatic motives, even opportunist ones, and because he felt by the eighties

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45. Donald Read, England 1868-1914, p. 57.

46. G.B. Shaw quoted in Willard Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, p. 257.

47. Royden Harrison, "The Religion of Socialism", History Workshop, 5 (Spring 1978), p. 215.

that Radicalism offered only patchwork solutions to social problems in need of global transformation. In contrast with G.B. Shaw, who is reported to have said in 1906 that when Socialism will have rearranged society "as it might be in 100 years or so, mankind should go on with its main work, the realization of God"[48], Webb always expressed down to earth and workable views of the future of humanity. He never believed himself to be the incarnation of a Socialist prophet.

Caught in the middle of a national quest for a new equilibrium between social organisation and the individual, Webb progressively realized that Herbert Spencer's contention stating that "All socialism involves slavery"[49] was quite simply indefensible and archaic. When he came to the Fabian Society, he already was under the influence of T.H. Green, for whom the state had a legitimate and vital role to play as keeper of individual liberties. Inspired by the Hegelian will to comprehend the Universe's totality, Green's understanding of Ethics was, in the words of the philosopher D.G.

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48. G.B. Shaw quoted in Charles A.Berst, ed., Shaw and Religion (London, 1981), p. 84.

49. Herbert Spencer, The Man Versus the State (New York, 1884), p. 34.

Ritchie,

> completed by his view of Politics; because he conceives that the function of the State is to make it possible for men to realise themselves, which they can only do by attaining a good that is a common good[50].

Sidney Webb's thoughts on the subject of state intervention were altogether similar, since he felt that it ought to constitute a means to serve humanity through social reconstruction. In short, his conception of a "step by step" Socialism was always devoid of any "mysticism", and rested on a firm belief that "the Socialist philosophy of to-day is but the conscious and explicit assertion of principles of social organization which have been already in great part unconsciously adopted"[51].

A fervent admirer of German literature, Webb characteristically preferred Goethe's Faust to his romantic novel The Sufferings of Young Werther. After reading Carlyle, he was convinced that the creator of Faust had initiated a Gospel of Individual

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50. David G. Ritchie, The Principles of State Interference. (London, 1891), p. 140.

51. Sidney Webb, "Historic", Sidney Webb et al., Fabian Essays, p. 28.

Renunciation[52]. This confirmed him in his conviction that

> We must abandon the self-conceit of imagining that we are independent units and bend our proud minds, absorbed in their own cultivation, to this subjection to the higher end, the Common Weal[53].

For Webb, only Socialism could reconcile authority and individual liberty; only Collectivism could prevent the resurgence of egoistical behaviour which had led England in the past towards the contemporary social sclerosis.

Always to remain in many aspects a traditionalist, Webb was, as observed by Raymond Williams, the heir of "a utilitarianism refined by experience of a new situation in history"[54]. For the members of the Fabian Society, the "Revolution" had necessarily to be a quiet one: in their opinion, nothing could be more tactless than the idea of a brutal and frontal attack of the existing

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52. Willard Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, p. 277.

53. Sidney Webb quoted in Willard Wolfe, Ibid., p. 277.

54. Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950 (New York, 1966), p. 181.

economic order. In 1889, the Fabians published their soon to become classical Fabian Essays. G.B. Shaw, one of its contributors, thus explained the book's originality:

> it presented [Socialism] for the first time as a completely constitutional political movement, which the most respectable and least revolutionary citizen can join as irreproachably as he might join the nearest Conservative club[55].

In his own section, entitled "Historic", Sidney Webb fully subscribed to the ambitious Radical programme of the London Liberals of 1888, to which he referred as being the manifestation of an "unconscious Socialism"[56]. This project exposed the elements of social reform that were to constitute his lifelong interests: the global revision of taxation, the shortening of the hours of labour, the increase of municipal powers, the abolition of Poor Laws and the democratisation of politics. As emphasized by Asa Briggs, Webb was convinced that "'unconscious' or later 'conscious' socialism was the necessary corollary of political democracy. The result

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55. G.B. Shaw, The Intelligent Woman's Guide..., p. 468.

56. Sidney Webb, "Historic", Sidney Webb et al., Fabian Essays, p. 50.

would necessarily be the emergence of a more active state"[57].

Inspired by Social Darwinism, he believed that social organisms, not individuals, were involved in a dynamic struggle for life, and propelled forward by what he called the natural "rate of progress"[58]. He thought that social institutions were "as much the subjects of constant change and evolution as any biological organism"[59]. In agreement with thinkers such as D.G. Ritchie who talked of an "attempt at Hegelianising natural selection"[60], Webb often referred to the predestined fulfillment of Socialism as an inescapably moving Zeitgeist. For him, as for Ritchie, morality came to mean "the conscious and deliberate adoption of those feelings and acts and habits which are advantageous to the welfare of the community"[61]. Both Hegel and Darwin perceived

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57. Asa Briggs. "The Welfare State in Historical Perspective", Archives Européennes de Sociologie, II (1961), pp. 232-233.

58. Sidney Webb, Socialism in England, p. 9.

59. Sidney Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism", The Economic Journal, I (June 1891), p. 361.

60. D.G. Ritchie, Darwin and Hegel with Other Philosophical Studies (London, 1893), p. 56.

61. D.G. Ritchie, Ibid., p. 63.

ethics as an integrated part of sociology, and from this belief sprang Webb's output. However lost he might seem amidst fastidious details, he always had the certitude of working for a better England. Indeed, it would be a distortion of reality to reduce Sidney Webb to be merely an overly zealous civil servant. For it was a unique conjugation of attachment to details and a far-seeing vision that made his thought so coherent. There was a dream of social equality in the mind of the "remote" civil servant, and it was to become the source of his life-work.

Webb's views on the evolution of British society during the nineteenth century were anchored in his conviction that England had then experienced a "beneficient revolution"[62] which had to be completed by responsible and efficient individuals. He felt that "Man /was becoming/ the midwife of the great womb of Time"[63], that each generation was responsible for its future. This insistence on the role to be played by the individual was in perfect harmony with the Fabian

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62. Sidney Webb, Labour in the Longest Reign 1837-1897 (London, 1897), p. 15.

63. Sidney Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism", p. 363.

Society's "missionary" work. As Webb explained in 1894:

> we repudiated the common assumption that Socialism was necessarily bound up with Insurrectionism on the one hand or Utopianism on the other, and we set to work to discover for ourselves and to teach to others how practically to transform England into a Social Democratic Commonwealth[64].

Yet if the Zeitgeist was moving, it was progressing very slowly indeed. In 1887, Webb published his "Facts for Socialists" and in 1889, his "Facts for Londoners". Both studies were detailed statistical presentations of the "evils" afflicting England with corresponding Socialist remedies. But it turned out to be more difficult than expected to change the British minds of the later Victorian period, and the Fabian professors were often facing apathetic audiences. As cynically observed by G.B. Shaw in 1900, "our 'Facts for Socialists' [remained] facts from edition to edition, in spite of our sixteen years' struggle to awaken compunction concerning them"[65].

It was difficult for many contemporaries to

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64. Sidney Webb, "Socialism: True and False", p. 51.

65. G.B. Shaw ed., Fabianism and the Empire-A Manifesto (London, 1900), p. ix.

understand that, paradoxically, state intervention and increased municipal powers were to become guardians of liberty in the near future. Socialism, which Bruce Glasier defined as "the transformation of mankind from a state of loosely linked and competing families and groups into a perfect cooperative commonwealth"[66], was still considered un-British and totalitarian. For example, in March 1891, the Liberal-Unionist Leonard Courtney strongly condemned Socialism and reiterated his faith in his political creed, speaking of it as the manifestation of a civilisation where were to be found "free men, with personal independence...working out an elevation of the common life through individual advancement"[67]. In June of the same year, Webb retaliated by demonstrating the obsolete nature of this idea in "The Difficulties of Individualism", proclaiming that

> The whole range of the present competitive Individualism manifestly tends...to the glorification, not of honest personal service, but of the pursuit of personal gain... The inevitable outcome is the apotheosis not

66. Bruce Glasier, "What is Socialism"; The Labour Leader, May 18, 1906.

67. Leonard Courtney, "The Difficulties of Socialism". The Economic Journal, I (March, 1891), p. 188.

> of social service, but of successful financier speculation[68].

For the Progressives, the important task was to convince the politicians to adhere to the new beliefs, a mission that Webb exercised during the nineties from the platform of the London County Council.

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The 1890's were crucial years in Sidney Webb's life: it was then that he really became an intellectual in politics, in closer communication with the realities of his time. In 1892, he resigned from the Civil Service, married Beatrice Potter, and was elected as a Progressive to the London County Council in Deptford, where he remained until 1910. This series of events influenced the future course of his whole career, and the foremost among these was certainly the beginning of a permanent collaboration with Beatrice.

Beatrice Potter was apparently the perfect foil to the more "prosaic" Sidney Webb. In the words of Shaw, she was

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68. Sidney Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism", p. 377.

> an intelligent girl-capitalist, with a sensitive conscience and a will of her own, critically impervious to mere persuasion, and impressible by first hand evidence and personal experience only, [who] was led to Socialism by stubbornly investigating the facts of Capitalist civilization for herself[69].

Indeed, she always gave the impression of being an efficient worker and an overwhelming woman. Yet behind the façade of a forceful individuality could be discovered evidences of deep inner insecurity. She possessed a troubled "Victorian" mind, as is clearly revealed in the following entry from her Diaries:

> Physical appetites are to me the devil: they are the signs of the disease that ends in death... I am haunted with the fear that all my struggles may be in vain; that disease and death are the Ends towards which the individual, the race and the whole conceivable Universe are moving[70].

But despite these anxieties, or perhaps precisely just because of them, she immersed herself in "the Work". H.G.

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69. G.B. Shaw, The Intelligent Woman's Guide..., p. 468.

70. Beatrice Webb, Beatrice Webb's Diaries, Vol. 1, 1912-1924, p. 50.

Wells caricatured the unique couple she formed with Webb by saying that "She was aggressive, imaginative, and had a great capacity for ideas, while he was almost destitute of initiative, and could do nothing with ideas except remember and discuss them"[71]. He was thus accusing her of having "made" Webb. In fact the basis of their partnership was never domination on either side but rather fruitful exchange.

When they met, Webb already was an influential figure, proud of his rise to eminence through his own efforts. Beatrice was then reacting against her prosperous familial background and experiencing an intense desire to make her life useful in the fight against social injustice. In today's language, one might also add that she wanted to realize herself as a woman. But what they shared was more important than their individual enthusiasms and origins. They both intended to re-shape the society they were rejecting, and together believed that knowledge was the perfect instrument to enlighten the world. She was inclined to speculative meditations, whereas he was an exceptional collector of facts and more willing to involve

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71. H.G. Wells, The New Machiavelli (New York, 1910), p. 194.

himself in politics, then a men's arena. In short, "Mr. and Mrs. Webb", as they came to be known, complemented each other perfectly.

Beatrice Webb's most visible influence on her husband's work during the nineties consisted of her contribution to their production in dual authorship of The History of Trade Unionism (1894), Industrial Democracy (1897), and Problems of Modern Industry (1898). It was then that they developed a literary style that was neither "his" nor "hers" but belonged to "the Webbs". These publications of immense erudition were associating history with sociology to propose concrete solutions to the "Social Problem". Their impressive output's originality rested in what The Edinburg Review then described as the Webbs' wish to

> allure the minds of their readers as gently as possible, and without having to cross any gulf of principle, towards the idea that all conditions of labour sanitation, safety, hours, wages, should gradually be brought under public control[72].

Referring constantly to the history of the nineteenth

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72. "The State and Conditions of Labour", The Edinburgh Review, (April, 1898), p. 285.

century in England, Sidney and Beatrice Webb demonstrated in these volumes that state intervention on a national scale had merely to be increased and better organized, not artificially imposed on the country, since it already existed.

In Industrial Democracy, they argued for the first time in favour of the idea of a "National Minimum", this quintessential Webbian device they defined as being the "enactment of a definite sum of earnings per week below which no employer should be allowed to hire any worker [in order] to secure the community against the evil of industrial parasitism"[73]. They thus established the basis of their common work, which was to be primarily a struggle for the maintenance of a national minimum of civilized life at every level of an efficient and democratic state. As Beatrice later summarized it, "Our whole working energy has been applied to this particular problem of how to combine, in the Control of Industry, National Efficiency with the full 'consciousness of consent' which is Democracy"[74].

73. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Industrial Democracy (1897), (London, 1920), p. 774.

74. Beatrice Webb, "The Autumn Campaign", The Crusade, Vol. III, No. 9, (September, 1912), p. 163.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb were intellectuals, prominent ones, and might have spent the rest of their lives continuing to write exhaustive text-books on "how things should be done", and framing an ideal British nation. But they were intellectuals with a difference: they wanted, as explained by Beatrice, to become "active citizens...to have a practical policy of public life"[75]. In short, they desired to make sure that their plans were to be implemented, not abandoned on the shelves. This is why their lives present so much the aspect of an enduring and intense fight for "the purpose of 'intellectualizing' politics-bringing the whole of politics into conformity with a large intellectual or rational scheme of things"[76]. This is why they became "permeators".

Sidney Webb was a much more thorough "political animal" than his wife. Although always distrustful of party politics, he considered it as a necessary game to play. The 1890's were years when the middle-class Fabians felt, as Paul Thompson observes, "at ease in the Liberal

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75. Beatrice Webb, Our Partnership (London, 1948), p. 16.

76. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The intellectuals in politics: the case of the Webbs", Journal of Contemporary History, VI (1971), p. 3.

Associations, where their views were tolerated"[77]. Despite their profession of Socialism, they considered any possibility of a Labour political party as utopian. In fact, their general attitude on the subject is revealed in Beatrice Webb's dismissal of the I.L.P. partisans in 1895 as mere "babies in politics"[78]. The demarcation line between the Fabians and the Liberal Radicals was then indeed quite thin. In the words of Michael Freeden, "Both liberals and non-liberals were aware of the feasibility of a practical alliance on the basis of the common measures they advocated"[79]. In this context, it is not surprising to discover that the Webbs' political efforts during the early nineties aimed at /driving/ the official Liberals on into a sea of Socialism before they know where they are"[80]. Sidney Webb always remained a consistent Socialist. However close to various Radicals he might have been then (attending lectures of Ethical Societies or Liberal meetings), ideological concerns never became the main motivations behind

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77. Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour-The Struggle for London, p. 104.

78. Beatrice Webb quoted in The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. II, Partnership 1892-1912 (Cambridge, Engl., 1978), p. 35.

79. Michael Freeden, The New Liberalism, p. 147.

80. Sidney Webb quoted in Jeanne MacKenzie, A Victorian Courtship, p. 160.

his shifting political alliances. Even at this early stage, his mind was totally absorbed in a quest for powerful political instruments. It would be a distortion of reality to believe that because he frequented Radical circles at the time, he <u>became</u> one of them. Since his "faith" in Collectivism was devoid of any religious overtones, one may compare his attitude to that of an earnest salesman trying to convince potential buyers of the effectiveness and quality of his product. Pragmatism and Idealism, together, were the roots of his political action.

It was then that Sidney Webb realized that the London County Council might be the perfect outlet for the Fabian credo: that it constituted the ideal platform from which to demonstrate the practical nature of his ideas, the fact that they could <u>really</u> work. Always a "Committee man", he was to reveal himself much more effective in the Council than during his later and rather disappointing career with the Labour Party after 1920, whose major achievement seems in retrospect to have been his creation as Lord Passfield in 1929.

In order to understand Webb's involvement with the London County Council, one must firstly emphasize his passion

for London. It certainly was one of the dominant enthusiasms in his life, and represented for him "not a city, but a province, even a whole nation in itself"[81]. In 1928, using a rare personal tone, he recalled the London of his youth:

> It is impossible, with any brevity, to convey an intelligible notion of the deplorably low state of urban civilisation of the London of my childhood...Needless to say, the administration was as primitive and barbarous as the jurisdictions were complicated and obscure. The slums: the all-pervading stenches; the alterning seas of mud clouds of poisonous dust of the macadamised streets; the floating 'blacks' that darkened the air[82].

London was a microcosm of the world, and the scene of what he considered to be "the greatest municipal experiment that the world has ever seen"[83], the London County Council. The election in 1889 of the Progressive Party in municipal London opened the way for Fabian permeation, and Webb started to involve himself actively in what G.B.Shaw described as the "Fabian conquest of the London County Council"[84]. His

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81. Sidney Webb, "London University: A Policy and a Forescast", The Nineteenth Century and After, 51 (June, 1902), p. 915.

82. Sidney Webb quoted in M.A. Hamilton, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, pp. 111-112.

83. Sidney Webb, "The Work of the London County Council", The Contemporary Review, LXVII (Jan., 1895), p. 130.

84. G.B. Shaw, "Sixty Years of Fabianism", Fabian Essays, p. 209.

election in 1892 was in a sense the logical conclusion of his lifelong interest in the general welfare of the city.

In 1891, Webb had assembled a collection of Fabian Tracts under the general title The London Programme, which was, in the words of Bentley Gilbert, "the application of 'gas and water socialism' to the metropolis"[85]. It consisted of the presentation of practicable solutions to most of the problems which then afflicted London, ranging from the issues of Housing and Tramways to the Financial Budget and taxation, and ending with a chapter describing "London as it might be". Webb was enthusiastic and confident: the "muddle" would eventually be overcome:

> If the fight is severe, the prize is great. And we dare not hesitate. Whatever the cost, the vast province covered with houses can no longer be safely neglected. These five millions of Englishmen cannot be left unorganized, a prey to every social disease. This is why there is, and why there must be, a London Political Programme[86].

He was convinced that "it is mainly for 'Municipal Socialism'

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85. Bentley Gilbert, The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain, p. 48.

86. Sidney Webb, The London Programme (London, 1891), p. 8.

that the near future is bright"[87]. Speaking of the Corporation of Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain said in 1894 that it

> enters into direct competition with private industry and undertakes work which individuals are equally able to perform; it has become its own builder, its own engineer, its own manufacturer ...its own shopkeeper[88].

What Webb desired was the establishment of a similar administrative government not only in London, but in the whole of England.

In 1891, he wrote in collaboration with Harold Cox an essay, The Eight Hours Day, where he advocated an idea which had been previously introduced by Karl Marx in his Capital (1867). The main emphasis of the Eight Hours Movement to which it contributed was on the necessity to ameliorate the quality of the workers' life. According to Webb,

> Men and women who toil for wages are everywhere growing tired of being

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87. Sidney Webb, Socialism in England, p. 131.

88. Joseph Chamberlain quoted in Sidney Webb. "The Work of the London County Council", p. 149.

> only working animals, [they] are growing daily more conscious of the cruelty of a system which condemns them to a barely broken round of monotonous toil[89].

He was thus demonstrating what he considered to be the urgent need to "convert...political democracy into what one may roughly term an industrial democracy"[90], where the individual might possess some control over his working conditions. In 1893, he pursued his campaign for democracy in the form of a bitter and sensational article written with G.B. Shaw, "To your Tents, Oh Israel!", where he accused the Liberals and the politicians in general of having betrayed fundamental democratic principles. In short, he denounced their aloofness in face of the nation's political and administrative inadequacies, their blatant uselessness in the fight for social progress, and concluded: "it remained with the workers themselves to make our words good"[91].

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89. Sidney Webb and Harold Cox, The Eight Hours Day (London, 1891), pp. 2-3.

90. Sidney Webb quoted in British Parliamentary Papers, Fourth Report from the Royal Commission on Labour 1893-4, Vol. 43, Industrial Relations, p. 266.

91. Sidney Webb and G.B. Shaw, "To your Tents, Oh Israel!", The Fortnightly Review, 54 (November, 1893), p. 589.

Sidney Webb never believed that the advent of a collectivist heaven was imminent, yet his conviction that reason and education would eventually rule society was strong. His ultimate ambition was to shape his milieu in conformity with G.E. Moore's ethical principles which understood duty as "that action which will cause more good to exist in the Universe than any possible alternative"[92]. According to Carl Schorske, "the European mind lost its capacity to project satisfying utopias"[93] during the twentieth century. If that is true, then the Edwardians were clearly the last thinkers in England to dedicate most of their energies to the elaboration of an ideal collectivity based on reason and morality. Indeed, as rightly observed by David Caute, the Fabians formed one "perch on the family tree of the Enlightenment"[94], and what else were documents such as The London Programme if not careful expositions of a kind of vision reminiscent of the eighteenth century optimism and self-assurance? Webb's conclusion of his Programme is here particularly eloquent:

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92. George Edward Moore, Principia Ethica (1903), (Cambridge Engl., 1956), p. 148.

93. Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna, p. 279.

94. David Caute, The Fellow-Travellers- A Postcript to the Enlightenment (London, 1973), p. 7.

> It is not money that is lacking to turn 'London as it is' into 'London as it might be', but only ideas, some growth in public imagination, and a development of the ordinary civic virtues of municipal life[95].

For him, British society was moving in the right direction; all it needed to go forward were guiding principles.

In a sense, Webb's thoughts always belonged to the future: in his opinion, democracy and civilisation were in their infancy and had to be slowly and carefully planned. This is why one of his most enduring achievements during the 1890's was his important contribution to the Fabians' initiation in 1895 of the London School of Economics and Political Science, which he conceived as a powerful instrument to achieve a long-term transformation of England. He was convinced, in the words of Edward Pease, "that a thorough knowledge of these sciences was a necessity for people concerned in social reconstruction"[96]. In 1903, Sidney Webb described the fundamental motives which prompted him to found the School in the following terms:

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95. Sidney Webb, The London Programme, p. 214.

96. Edward Pease, The History of the Fabian Society, p. 124.

> I think I must say that the School originated with my wife and myself. We had long been concerned at the lack of provision for (I) economic teaching and research, (2) training in administration, whether commercial or governmental...I thought that we were suffering much from lack of research in social matters, and that I wanted to promote it[97].

Rather paradoxically, he did not believe in utopias, but was nevertheless looking for builders to construct one. As he explained in 1901 to H.G. Wells,

> all experience shows that men need organising as much as machines, or rather, much more; that the making of such arrangements, and constant readjustments, as will ensure order, general health and comfort, and maximum productivity, among human beings, is a professional art in itself[98].

During the Edwardian years, his social project was to consist of a struggle aiming "not so much to disintegrate or supersede the existing social organizations, as to expand

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97. Sidney Webb quoted in Sydney Caine, The History of the Foundation of the London School of Economics and Political Science, p. 11.

98. Sidney Webb, The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. II, (Cambridge, Engl, 1978), p. 144.

them"[99]. As intellectual in politics, he considered himself as a guide during the imminent and collective process of creating a new British state.

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99. Sidney Webb, Socialism in England, p. 7.

## CHAPTER THREE

## SIDNEY WEBB AND THE STATE: THE EDWARDIAN YEARS

"[We] must interfere, interfere, interfere"[1].

- Sidney Webb, June 1910.

By the time Edward VII, that "very human man"[2], reached the throne in 1901, Sidney Webb was already a mature thinker. He might have been overwhelmed by the Edwardian unrest; instead, this time was to constitute for him a period of prodigious activity. He had discovered his true domain. As in the case of most of his intellectual peers, from Graham Wallas to Hilaire Belloc, he brought rejuvenated ardour and seriousness to political discussions. During years which have often been wrongly characterized as glamorous and careless, these men constantly referred to the social duty of each citizen. Equipped with a compelling moral call to perform social work and an ardent desire to

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1. Sidney Webb, "Eugenics and the Minority Report", The Crusade, vol. I, (June, 1910), p. 52.

2. A.G. Gardiner, Prophets, Priests and Kings (London, 1908), p. 2.

change nothing less than the whole of England, they thoroughly belonged to a generation for which "progress ought to be based on principle"[3].

In 1900, Webb broke with Ramsay MacDonald and other anti-war Fabians, since he agreed with the Liberal-Imperialists' views on the Boer War. In 1911, he left England with Beatrice for a world tour. Between these two dates, his activities were dispersed in many directions. It was as if he had wanted to contribute personally to the development of all the spheres of society where he considered the Zeitgeist to be progressing. He was still involved in the London County Council and the Fabian Society. He wrote with Beatrice a stupendous series of works on the history of Municipal Government. On the political scene, he permeated with Fabian ideals both Liberal and Conservative parties, drafted the Education Act, and actively pleaded in favour of his "National Minimum". In 1909, the Webbs launched a national crusade to abolish the Poor Laws,but without a voice in the Liberal Government their campaign was ultimately condemned to failure. Whether on Education, State intervention, Municipal Government, Poverty or Individualism, Webb had

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3. G.K. Chesterton, What's Wrong with the World (New York, 1910), p. 302.

something to say, and was listened to. The funny looking man with the shaky voice was then professing thoughts that made him the champion of an efficient state, of "a nation of first-rate individuals"[4].

At the beginning of the new century, the Webbs' ambition was to transform the austere dining-room of their house on Grosvenor Road into a political headquarters. They wanted to become nothing less than the éminences grises of the forthcoming politics. Associated at first with the Liberal Imperialists, or "Limps", through their friendships with H.H. Asquith, Edward Grey and R.B. Haldane, they focused their attention after 1902 on Arthur Balfour. In return, the Conservatives appointed Webb in 1903 to the Royal Commission on Trade Union Law, and Beatrice became a member of the Royal Commission on Poor Law in 1905. The fundamental reason for these alliances can be discovered in the following letter of Beatrice Webb to Haldane on March 21, 1901, where she said: "we regard you as an aider and abettor, if not as a fellow conspirator, in our small attempts to outflank some of the stupidity and unenlightened self-interest of this troublesome world"[5]. Like her husband,

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4. "Mr. Strachey, Society and the Individual", The New Age, Vol. I, no. 15, (August 8, 1907), p. 229.

5. Beatrice Webb, The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. II, Partnership, 1892-1912, p. 137.

she believed that to gain the active support of any prominent politician constituted a stage in the ineluctable journey towards the realization of an efficient, mature, British state, and a fight against darkness.

In 1902, the Webbs were the instigators of a dining club, "The Co-Efficients", whose primary concern was the discussion of imperialism. It continued to meet regularly until 1908, long after the subject had grown out of fashion and the Co-efficients' ideal had been submerged by the controversial question of Tariff reform. Its members were vastly divergent, ranging from Tory imperialists like Lord Milner to personalities such as Bertrand Russell, G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells. Yet all were convinced that the first lesson to be acquired from the Boer War experience was not, as it was to be for J.A. Hobson, that imperialism should be condemned, but rather that the whole national administrative system had to be perfected. As G.B. Shaw explained in 1900:

> Whatever else the war may do or undo, it at least turns its fierce searchlights on official, administrative, and military perfunctoriness... It may be that nothing will rouse us but some staggering calamity or some unbearable humiliation[6].

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6. G.B. Shaw, ed., Fabianism and the Empire-A Manifesto, pp. 98-99.

For the "National Efficiency" movement, the Empire was a manifestation of civilisation. Its adherents argued that a well-organized England should logically possess a corresponding rational and equitable imperial policy: the growth of Empires, they felt, was an inescapable historical trend. Indeed, the Co-efficients' solidarity with the Empire did not essentially proceed from "Jingo" or militarist sympathies, or from their admiration of the German and Japanese authoritarian regimes. As expressed by Haldane, their main concern always was "the development of the State"[7].

Considering this general context, Webb's real position on the subject of imperialism appears complex and somewhat hard to define. According to Leonard Woolf, "[Webb] was a progressive, even a revolutionary, in some economic and social spheres; where the British Empire was concerned, he was a common or garden imperialist conservative"[8]. Until the Boer War, the Fabians were clearly not seriously concerned by international topics,

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7. R.B. Haldane, "The Dedicated Life", (1907), Universities and National Life (London, 1910), pp. 67-68.

8. Leonard Woolf, An Autobiography, Vol. II, 1911-1969 (Oxford, 1980), p. 363.

and he was no exception. His reaction to the South African conflict seems to have been somewhat ambiguous and opportunist. For example, Beatrice described in 1900 their common attitude as follows: "we two sitting comfortably [between the pro-Boers and Tory imperialists]"[9]. In fact, one gets the impression that Webb did not feel much concerned by the issue, and was content to enunciate rather mild statements on the matter, such as "Our obvious duty with the British Empire is deliberately so to organise it as to promote the maximum development of each individual state within its bound"[10]. The most adequate illustration of his understanding of imperialism is perhaps to be found in Frank Holmes's summary of what the "right" socialist approach towards the Empire should be:

> And the Socialist attitude towards Imperialism can be defined in a sentence: Provide a worthy nation, and then defend it to the last drop of blood... Military glory may be good, but there is another ideal better worth the energies of a nation like ours. For this reason the Socialist, in his modest way, demands that

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9. Beatrice Webb, Our Partnership, p. 194.

10. Sidney Webb, "Lord Rosebery's Escape from Houndsditch", The Nineteenth Century and After, L (September, 1901), pp. 371-372.

> Imperialism, like charity and every other virtue, shall begin at home[11].

Webb certainly shared with Holmes an "England first" vision of Imperialism during the Edwardian era. Nevertheless, it must be noted here that his opinion on internationalism did change over the years, largely as a result of his journey around the world in 1911-1912. In 1913, his perspective had broadened, and he wrote with his wife:

> /the Socialists/ repudiate the conception of foreign politics which makes it a patriotic duty to strive always to 'get the better' of other countries, and to profit at their expense... A State has, in its corporate capacity, in relation to other States, the same sort of moral obligations and duties as an individual to other individuals - even the same sort of moral duty to humanity as the citizen has to the community in which he lives [12].

Yet as an examination of his views on imperialism makes clear, Webb's major concern at the turn of the century remained the condition of England. He was then searching for an effective political instrument to transform his

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11. Frank Holmes, "Socialist Imperialism", The New Age, Vol. I, no. 9, (June 27, 1907), pp. 137-138.

12. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, "What is Socialism?", The New Statesman, 1 (July 26, 1913).

country, and believed for a while to have found it in the form of the Liberal Party. Unfortunately, his association coincided with a period of increasing malaise within the Liberal ranks. As explained in 1900 by H.W. Massingham, "There occurs to every political party a time when it finds itself deprived of the means to give effect to its principles... The Liberal Party, or what is left of it, has too long been living on unrealities"[13]. According to him, the era when the Liberal Gladstonian mission could have still prevailed had definitely passed away. The Whig Liberal was becoming an endangered species. And its archetype, the party aristocratic leader Lord Rosebery, clearly had to leave the scene in order to ensure any possibility of a Liberal renaissance. In retrospect, it may appear surprising to discover that Sidney Webb chose to influence Lord Rosebery with Fabian ideals, in conformity with his familiar method of permeation. For after all, posterity has retained the following evaluation of the Liberal politician's personality: "...his lordship's talents have been displayed mainly in the direction of refraining from doing things"[14]. Why did Webb select him

13. Henry W. Massingham, "The Decline of Liberalism", The National Review, 35 (June, 1900), pp. 560-566.

14. "Lord Rosebery in 'Houndsditch'", The New Age, Vol. I, no. 26, (October 24, 1907), p. 401.

as a political ally?

Although Beatrice Webb wrote in 1901 that Rosebery "will never be a leader of men... He is far too capricious and aristocratic to re-form a great Popular party"[15], the efficiency group thought that he possessed enough qualities to become an appropriate exponent of their aspirations. He was genuinely concerned by the problem of education and accepted the Presidency of the London School of Economics in 1901. Moreover, he had been Chairman of the London County Council in 1889-90, and had expressed Liberal Imperialist sympathies. Here Webb cannot be blamed for being at fault in forecasting the future course of national life, or for failing to see the realities that Massingham was already discerning. In fact, from the General Election of 1895 when he fell from office until the Conservative Education Act of 1902, Rosebery served as the rallying point for many demoralised Liberals. He was still the Liberal force, if only an ambiguous one. He even displayed what seemed to be a readiness to understand the Fabians' arguments. As E.J.T. Brennan explains, the Webbs "were convinced that, however vague Rosebery's reference

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15. Beatrice Webb, The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. II, p. 135.

to social problems might be, they were entirely consistent with their own belief in the need to promote 'the national minimum' in every way possible"[16]. Webb felt strongly that some urgent reforming action was needed, and selected Rosebery as the best available means to publicize his opinions. At the time, and from his own standpoint, it was probably quite a logical alternative.

In September 1901 there appeared under the name of Sidney Webb a sensational article called, with the characteristic use of metaphor, "Lord Rosebery's Escape from Houndsditch". It could have been more simply entitled "Why Lord Rosebery ought to escape from old-fashioned Individualist Liberalism". According to Peter Clarke, it was the product of a collaboration with Bernard Shaw "/offering/ Rosebery a policy of National Efficiency buttressed by the legal enforcement of a National Minimum"[17]. But it was more than a favourable occasion to try to implant the Fabian credo among a section of the Liberal party. It was more than, to paraphrase Shaw, a mere handling of Rosebery. It was essentially the exposition of Sidney Webb's vision

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16. E.J.T. Brennan, Education for National Efficiency. The Contribution of Sidney and Beatrice Webb (London, 1975), p. 59.

17. Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats (Cambridge, Engl., 1978), p. 86.

of what the new century was to be. In a lecture to the Fabian Society during November of the same year, he emphasized the unique regenerating capacity of his generation:

> It is not altogether an idle fancy that associates the change of century with a change of thought. The governing ideas to which we look forward, at the beginning of the twentieth century, will, we may be sure, not be those on which we looked back at the close of the nineteenth[18].

Webb, as we have seen, possessed an overwhelming faith in the power of ideas. When all around is materialism and selfishness, idealism can shock and awake people. And this becomes especially true when, as in the case of Webb, the proposed utopia takes the form of a "scientific" and reasonable plan. For him, the crucial transformation experienced in England at the time was that "We have become aware, almost in a flash, that we are not merely individuals, but members of a community, nay, citizens of the world"[19]. Consequently, the ultimate aim of his selfless struggle would

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18. Sidney Webb, "Twentieth Century Politics", (Nov. 1901), Fabian Tracts (Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1969), p. 2.

19. Sidney Webb, "Lord Rosebery's Escape...", pp. 368-369.

be to make the politicians aware of the necessity to build a state based on truly responsible persons.

Elevating himself above the futile stratagems of party politics and the administrative torpor and grayness characterising the British Parliament, Webb scrutinized reality and was ashamed by what he saw. In "Lord Rosebery's Escape...", his critical analysis of the condition of Liberalism was used in reality as a pretext to arrive at a new global assessment of English society. His article was a fervent appeal for progressive reforms. For example, there is to be found a deep feeling of urgency in the following outcry:

> Can we, even as a mere matter of business, any longer afford to allow the eight millions of whom I have already spoken- the 'submerged fifth' of our nation- to be housed, washed, and watered worse than our horses?[20]

Clearly, the task of transforming England into an effective whole was to be formidable. And it soon became evident that Rosebery obstructed the road to the achievement of this mission. The Liberal politician felt uneasy over a

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20. Sidney Webb, "Lord Rosebery's Escape...", p. 377.

credo he neither really believed in nor understood. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party was undergoing profound internal dissensions, with the "Pro-Boer" and "Limps" factions apparently worlds apart. The following statement of Campbell-Bannerman on Rosebery's views gives an idea of the climate reigning in 1901 inside the party:

> All that he said about the clean slate and efficiency was an affront to liberalism & was pure claptrap- Efficiency as a watchword! Who is against it? This is a mere réchauffé of Mr. Sidney Webb[21].

And as if to make matters worse, the Limps were to be torn by the Tariff Reform question "between allegiance to the party's traditional adherence to free trade and their desire for a strenghtened empire"[22]. As a result of all these ideological discords, the Webbs became increasingly dubious about the political potential of the Limps clique. At the time, even the new Liberals' plans failed to attract

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21. H. Campbell-Bannerman quoted in John Wilson, C.B.-A Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (London, 1973), p. 371.

22. Bernard Semmel, Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperialist Thought 1895-1914 (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 82.

them: as Sidney explained to Herbert Samuel in a letter reviewing the later's Liberalism (1902),

> /Your book/ is weak and vague in the connection between your fundamental principle of Liberalism, and some of your particular projects... The sort of middle axioms you need, I think, are such as To Raise Compulsorily the Standard of Life, To Enforce a National Minimum in each important point, Collective Regulation of all matters of Common Concern, and so on[23].

Confronted by the inadequacies of the Liberals of all kinds, the Fabians had to find other influential personalities to cultivate, this time Conservative ones.

In retrospect, the Webbs' involvement with the Conservatives came to be considered as one of their several unfashionable political alliances between 1900 and 1910, as another manifestation of their almost chronic inability to choose the "right" partners. Indeed, the Liberal M.P. John M. Robertson thought that the Conservative Party's legislative measures aiming at social reform "/had/ been obviously motivated by the immediate desire to 'dish the

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23. Sidney Webb, The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. II, p. 146.

Liberals', whether or not for ulterior reasons of a more presentable kind"[24], an opinion shared by many observers of the political scene. Notwithstanding the fact that this remark was expressed by a Liberal, it certainly contains some elements of truthfulness. The quintessential Tory Lord Hugh Cecil, for example, seemed ready to recognize the necessity of social reform, but only "from a standpoint prudently distrustful of the untried, and preferring to develop what exists rather than to demolish and reconstruct"[25]. In an age which was to be dominated by the momentary triumph of Liberal politics, the Conservatives appeared indeed to many as tepid and dubious allies in the "March to Progress". Considering that their leader was the somewhat aloof Arthur Balfour, it is not surprising that the measures they advocated were criticized for lack of impetus. After all, Balfour was a man who could still write in 1895: "we forget amid the buzzing of debate the multitude of incomparably more important processes, by whose undersigned co-operation alone the life and growth of the State is rendered possible"[26].

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24. John M. Robertson, The Meaning of Liberalism (London, 1912), p. 11.

25. Hugh Cecil, Conservatism (London, 1912), p. 195.

26. A.J. Balfour, The Foundations of Belief (New York, 1895), p. 213.

Yet it was his government which initiated a long overdue reform of Education. Despite the highly complex political intrigues behind the Education Act of 1902, it nevertheless must be acknowledged that it constitutes one of the few successful illustrations of the Fabian tactics of permeation. In Margaret Cole's opinion, it is nearly "the dream of Fabian 'permeators' come to life-proposals drafted by intelligent and hard-working Fabians, conveyed to puzzled or sympathetic administrators, and carried into effect by a Conservative Government"[27]. In 1901, Webb, the true father of the Act along with the prominent civil servant Robert Morant, had said of what he labelled contemptuously "the Education Muddle":

> The various educational institutions in the United Kingdom-taxing only those supported out of the rates and taxes-are officially under the charge of no fewer than ten separate Cabinet Ministers; and their several departments usually scorn to consult together... In English education to-day, waste and want go hand in hand[28].

After a long and detailed description of the appalling

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27. Margaret Cole, The Story of Fabian Socialism (Stanford, Calif., 1961), p. 107.

28. Sidney Webb, "The Education Muddle and the Way Out", (Jan., 1901), Fabian Tracts (Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1969), p. 3.

condition of education in the country, his "way out" was simple and bold: "What we have to work towards is the concentration in a single elected body for each locality of all the public business entrusted to that locality"[29]. Here is another example of the familiar method employed by Webb to define his proposals of social remedies. For many pages he almost seems lost amidst a thorough, and quite often apparently meaningless, analysis of the particular question he is examining. And then, when all aspects of reality are known at last, comes the logical device. In the case of national education, it consisted of the addition of an effective centralised Board of Education to a well-organised system of local authorities.

While not entirely satisfied by the Education Bill of 1902, Webb was nevertheless optimistic: "[it] begins a new era. For the first time we have education made a public function, simply as education, without restriction of age, or sex, or class, or subject, or grade"[30]. What was more, the fundamental aspect of his plan of reform, centralisation, had been accepted by the government. Consequently, there is an unusual tone of contentedness associated with the sentiment of a fulfilled mission to be found in Webb's

29. Sidney Webb, "The Education Muddle and the Way Out", p. 11.
30. Sidney Webb, "The Education Bill", The Nineteenth Century and After. LII (October, 1902), p.605.

apparently unassuming sentence: "The council of every county or county borough is now the local education authority"[31]. This "now" illustrated his conviction of belonging to a new world.

As Richard Shannon observes, Morant inaugurated in 1903 "the era of educational policy as a commitment to an ideal of popular enlightenment, no longer as a matter of administration and finance, bricks and mortar"[32]. His ideas and those of Webb were thus in perfect harmony. In 1896, the latter had participated in an international Socialist Congress which discussed education, as Chairman of the Technical Education Board of the London County Council. He there defined his convictions in the form of the following series of resolutions:

> the Congress, whilst fully recognising the value in education of independent experiment, declares that it is an essential duty of the public administration in each country to provide a complete system of education, under Democratic public control, extending from Kindergarten to the University (including physical;

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31. Sidney Webb, "The Education Act, 1902-How to Make the Best of It", Fabian Tracts (March 1903) (Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1969), p. 11.

32. Richard Shannon, The Crisis of Imperialism 1865-1915, p. 304.

> scientific, artistic, and technical [manual work] training), the whole made genuinely accessible to every citizen by freedom from fees and by scholarships covering maintenance[33].

The enunciation of these views was the occasion for heated debates between himself and Keir Hardie on the subject of scholarships, which Hardie attacked for closing the doors of education to many children. And he was not the only one to criticize this "ladder ideal": Leo Chiozza-Money has referred to it as a belief which

> [affirms] that it is necessary to divide the nation into two parts: the toiling mass...and a considerable, but relatively smaller, number of people who are to be completely absolved from manual labour, and who are to act as the officials and overseers of the toiling many[34].

Unquestionably, there is an elitist aspect in most of Webb's writings, and his cult of the expert merged on occasions with authoritarianism: he believed in a "'managed'

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33. Sidney Webb quoted in Justice, August 1, 1896.

34. Leo Chiozza-Money, The Future of Work and Other Essays (London, 1914), pp. 129-30.

democracy"[35], as the only functional alternative to tackle England's "sicknesses". Himself a beneficiary of the scholarship system, he wanted to establish, as he declared in 1897, "the greatest capacity-catching machine that the world has ever yet seen"[36]. Like Morant, he was searching for future leaders. Webb could never have been a utopian democrat: the civilisation in which he was living was based on inequalities which he had personally experienced in his youth and were still to be considered in any realistic approach to the education problem. Yet even by the standards of the time the Education Act's achievements were quite impressive. It had, in the words of A.V. Judges, "spread the opportunity so that further education in the widest sense should be available to all /but/...not without an eye to the civic dividend"[37]. As Webb explained in 1902 to Graham Wallas, all he wanted was

35. Brian Simon, Education and the Labour Movement 1870-1920 (London, 1974), p. 175.

36. Sidney Webb quoted in E.J.T. Brennan, Education for National Efficiency...p. 29.

37. A.V. Judges, "The Educational Influence of the Webbs", The British Journal of Educational Studies, X (November, 1961), p. 47 .

a) The best possible primary schools available to all
b) The largest possible scholarship system
c) The best possible evening instruction
d) The most efficient secondary schools and University colleges
e) The most thorough provision for post-graduate study and research[38].

Indeed, Webb perceived the reform of the British University system as a positive step towards the overall modernisation of the country. As he had demonstrated by his involvement in the foundation of the London School of Economics, he always considered universities as potential braintrusts. Speaking of London University, which he had helped to re-organize with Haldane, Webb made a true profession of faith:

> They are futile dreamers who seek to fit new circumstances to the old ideals; rather must we strive, by developing to the utmost the opportunities that the present affords us, to create out of twentieth century conditions, new kinds of perfection[39].

He believed the University to have crucial roles to play in this "perfect" state: the mission of enlightenment, and

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38. Sidney Webb, The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. II, p. 174.

39. Sidney Webb, "London University: A Policy and a Forecast", The Nineteenth Century and After, 51 (June, 1902), p. 931.

of propagation of the ideal notion of what society should be. Moreover, he was convinced that "It is in the classrooms...that the future battles of the Empire for commercial prosperity are being already lost"[40]. Needless to say he was quite cheerful in 1903 when he observed that "we are actually engaged, on no small scale, in the business of making universities. We are evidently going during the next few years, to endow each part of England with its own local university"[41]. With the recent re-organization of the University of London (1898-1900), and the establishment of Universities at Birmingham (1900), Reading (1902) and Southampton (1902), even contemporary developments in education illustrated his faith in localisation. As Webb wrote in 1907: "What is most delaying progress to-day is our lack of knowledge. If we knew more, things would move faster"[42]. And indeed, education was always for him the key sector in the fight to transform permanently British society.

But education represented merely a fraction of all

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40. Sidney Webb, "Lord Rosebery's Escape...", p. 383.

41. Sidney Webb, "The Making of a University", The Cornhill Magazine, XIV (April, 1903), p. 530.

42. Sidney Webb, The New Age, Vol. I, No. 1, (May 2, 1907), p. 3.

the work that remained to be done. Gladstonian Liberalism had aimed at the fulfillment of individual liberties: Webb's socialistic ideal, by contrast, was that of corporate freedom, to be found primarily inside the trade-unions, the co-operative movement and municipal governments. Recalling the fact that local administrations were compelled since 1856 to provide a well-organized police system, he declared: "England has, almost without being aware of it, invented exactly that relationship between central and local government which enables the greatest possible progress to be made"[43].

Sidney Webb was acutely conscious of the fact that all the reforms advocated by the central government were vain and absurd unless concrete means to guarantee their successes were secured. For him, theoretical speculations and governmental schemes ought to be complemented by an efficient system of Grants-in-Aid, "[a reformed] financial arrangement between the Local Authorities and the National Exchequer"[44]. The Grants-in-Aid, a distinctive English administrative device which

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43. Sidney Webb, "Lord Rosebery's Escape...", p. 379.

44. Sidney Webb, Grants in Aid: A Criticism and a Proposal (London, 1911), p. 80.

had emerged in the course of the nineteenth century, consisted in the right of the National Government to supervise local projects in exchange of subventions. The initiative was still local, but made effective by the allowance of national funds. During the Edwardian era, the Grants system was resting inadequately on an ad hoc basis, and as always when facing an administrative muddle, Webb raised his visionary voice:

> Whether any branch of the Local Government service hardens into a stagnant bureaucracy...or blossoms and develops into an ever-improving, ubiquitously-serving agency...depends very largely on the particular conditions upon which its Grant in Aid is made[45].

So much for Webb the fanatical bureaucrat.

Indeed, the state as envisaged by Webb was never an imposing, inanimate, structure. In the collectivity that he was planning as early as 1889, laissez-faire was beaten on all fronts:

> The individualist town councillor will walk along the municipal pavement,

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45. Sidney Webb, Grants in Aid, p. 23.

> lit by municipal gas and cleansed by municipal brooms with municipal water, and seeing by the municipal clock in the municipal market that he is too early to meet his children coming from the municipal school, hard by the county lunatic asylum municipal hospital, will use the national telegraph system to tell them not to walk through the municipal park, but to come by the municipal tramway to meet him in the municipal reading-room[46].

Webb was definitely never a great fiction writer. Yet these oft-quoted lines illustrate more than a mere "municipal" fantasy. In fact, municipal government was where he focused most of his painstaking analysis of British government. In the words of Rodney Barker,

> [the Webbs] saw the socialist state as being active at both national and local levels, though Sidney complained of the absence of any discussion of the distribution of increasing public responsability between local and national government... their heaviest emphasis was always placed on local government[47].

This insistence on the vital role of local administration was far from unknown in English political thought. Webb

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46. Sidney Webb quoted in Walter L. Arnstein, Britain Yesterday and Today-1830 to the Present (Boston, 1966), p. 186.

47. Rodney Barker, Political Ideas in Modern Britain (London, 1978), p. 33.

often quoted reverently J.S. Mill's Considerations on Representative Government (1861) on the subject:

> John Stuart Mill was emphatic in his declaration, as a principle of fundamental importance, that 'in each local circumscription there should be but one elected body for all local business, not different bodies for different parts of it'[48].

He was in a sense merely contributing to the revival of this slogan.

Since Webb's vision of the state was anchored in the concrete England he knew, it implied the obligation to find "scientific" solutions to problems as diverse as the abysmal ignorance of the British people, the sweating system, or the parishes' water supplies. It represented nothing less than the planning of a whole new civilisation, accompanied by the implantation of the best individuals, the "experts", at every level of government. Webb was convinced that there ought to exist what Comte had described many years before as "a class absorbed by speculative labours, constantly and exclusively occupied

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48. Sidney Webb, "The Education Bill", p. 607.

in furnishing all the rest with the general rules of conduct, which they can no more dispense with than create"[49]. In a somewhat paternalist fashion, Webb thought that the "best possible rearing of the 'children of the State'"[50] could be secured only by the sensible employment of a collective method of national administration. In 1909, he defined it as:

> The fourfold path of collective administration of public services, collective regulation of private industry, collective taxation of unearned income, and collective provision for the dependent sections of the community-and not any excursion in Utopia or 'cloud-cuckoo-land'[51].

While trying to comprehend the whole forest, Webb tended to always begin with individual trees. Sir William Beveridge accurately described in an obituary the partnership's output: "It was designed as an example of sociology and

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49. Auguste Comte, System of Positive Polity, (1822), quoted in Philip Rieff, ed., On Intellectuals-Theoretical Studies, Case Studies (New York, 1969), p. 275.

50. Sidney Webb, "Lord Rosebery's Escape...", p. 381.

51. Sidney Webb, Towards Social Democracy? (1909), 4th ed., (London, 1921), p. 39.

political science based not on theory but on description and analysis of institutions "[52]. Using this method, the Webbs' aim was to abolish a world where, as expressed by Sidney, "The denizens of the slums...might conceivably pull down the industrial communities among which they existed, not by revolution, but by that insiduous demoralization which sprang from the slums and ate away the vigour and manhood of the race"[53].

In "Lord Rosebery's Escape..." Sidney Webb was still advocating the idea of a National Minimum he had first proposed in the 1890's, particularly, as we have seen, in Industrial Democracy, and it was to remain an essential element of his global view of the state. Referring to this, A.M. McBriar has said that "one feels that the question about the State might have elicited from him a vast amount of factual information about the relation between County Councils and central government departments"[54]. This certainly constitutes an unfair

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52. William Beveridge, "Obituary-Sidney Webb 1859-1947", The Economic Journal, 58 (September, 1948), p. 431.

53. Sidney Webb quoted in The Times, April 5, 1910.

54. A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics 1884-1918, p. 73.

judgment. There is, to be sure, an exaggerated, almost obsessive, preoccupation with facts to be found in most of Webb's writings. For example, in a Fabian Tract called "Five Years' Fruits of the Parish Councils Act", we are told that "The Parish Councils of Threapwood (Cheshire, pop. 306) and Hildenborough (Kent, pop. 1, 440) complained to their District Councils time after time about the unhealthy state of their parishes, owing to the bad arrangements for drainage"[55]. And a few pages further, one can discover almost cryptic sentences, such as: "The Parish Council may ask the Rural District Council to appoint a 'Parochial Committee', and to make the Parish Council that committee, with perhaps the addition of the District Councillor for that district"[56]. Yet the true essence of his work lies elsewhere, and the bare facts were serving larger purposes. What he really wanted was to demonstrate the need for the creation of "an indissoluble partnership between the individual and the community, in which neither must fail in duty"[57].

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55. Sidney Webb, "Five Years' Fruits of the Parish Councils Act", (Jan. 1901), Fabian Tracts (Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1969), p. 11.

56. Sidney Webb, Ibid., p. 22.

57. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The Prevention of Destitution (1911), (London, 1916), p. 297.

The definitive version of the perfect state according to Sidney Webb does not exit. He always worked on various proposals concerning precise means to attain a better social organisation. This explains perhaps why the Webbs' sole production as abstract social theorists, A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain (1920), has been characterized by Margaret Cole in these words: "no one ever framed, lovingly, so horrible a Utopia"[58]. Sidney and Beatrice Webb were no Robert Owen. Nevertheless, their seemingly undogmatic magisterial series of works on English Local Government is eminently relevant to a study of Sidney's vision of the state. The Times Literary Supplement, speaking about the volume I, The Parish and the County (1906), referred to its main theme as being "a melancholy narrative of incompetence, jealousy, and corruption on the part of the governing bodies, and of neglect, fraud and oppression on the part of their officers"[59]. The result of eight years of research, the book presented a detailed picture of the evolution of British Parishes and Counties from 1689 to 1835, the year

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58. Margaret Cole, "The Webbs and Social Theory", The British Journal of Sociology, 12 (1961), p. 103.

59. "The Parish and the County", The Times Literary Supplement, (Nov. 2, 1906), p. 366.

of the Municipal Reform Act. Eden Paul, a member of the I.L.P., wrote in a review of the Webbs' The State and the Doctor (1910):

> The Webbs are no merely imaginative reformers. They base always their admonishment of what ought to be, and their aspirations regarding what may be, upon an exhaustive and accurate demonstration of what has been and what is[60].

And indeed, as we have seen, the study of the past was not for them simply an antiquary's leisure. It was an essential and stimulating element of reality. This is why each of the "laborious and luminous studies of English local institutions"[61] written by them during the Edwardian years have all to be considered in order to appreciate fully their option.

Whether examining the English hierarchies of town government before 1835, as in The Manor and the Borough (1908), or observing the historical development of the road system in The Story of the King's Highway (1913), they were always

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60. Eden Paul, "The State and the Doctor", The Labour Leader, (August 26, 1910), p. 531.

61. "The Manor and the Borough", The Times Literary Supplement, (April, 16, 1908), p. 122.

implicitly advertising the same pattern of national efficiency. As Sidney Webb admitted in Grants in Aid: "when a thing had been said once, it is not altogether impertinent, if there be need, for it to be said again, and said again in volume form!"[62]. On occasions like this one, he sounded almost like an evangelical missionary manqué.

So far, we have studied Webb as a planner of the state. It remains to explore his conception of its smallest yet essential component, the individual. The Guild Socialist Samuel G. Hobson wrote in 1920:

> Certainly, the State has a sinister reputation to live down. The overwhelming mass of the workers know it only as an organ of oppression, arrogantly assuming autocratic power under the guise of political democracy to subserve plutocratic ends[63].

And indeed, the rapid increase of the powers of the state during the Edwardian period was enough to provoke a generalized debate over the survival of individualism. The

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62. Sidney Webb, Grants in Aid, p. vii.

63. Samuel G. Hobson, National Guilds and the State (London, 1920), p. 20.

problem was often simplified to take the form of the slogan "Socialism versus Individualism". Many were upset by what they perceived to be the growing tendency of the central government to imitate the flawless and unsympathetic utopias created by H.G. Wells's imagination. Several Edwardians had the impression of elevating an impressive monument, the "Great State", on rather shaky foundations without any reference to ethical concerns. They often felt helpless about the sudden transition from laissez-faire to the emergence of the welfare state. Was Webb really succumbing then to the temptation of designing a totalitarian type of society, a colossal organism devoid of any form of humanistic pre-occupations? Was he on the democratic side or rather a partisan of the amelioration of the "race", whatever the human cost might be? Inside the new perfect social organisation planned by the Webbs, what kind of freedom of initiative was left to the individual? For after all, as Margaret Cole rightly pointed out, "'A discreetly regulated freedom' was a frequent phrase of [Sidney Webb]".[64]

In fact, as aptly summarized by Willard Wolfe,

> Webb never suggested that the state itself should become more

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64. Margaret Cole, The Story of a Fabian Socialism, p. 148.

> coercive; rather, a greater sense of cohesion and commitment should develop from within it in response to the appeal of social duty[65].

Webb has often been portrayed as a kind of foxy schemer, more interested with the collectivist character of life in society than willing to emphasize the uniqueness of each of its participants. In reality, he was convinced that the new age was to witness the transition from a world of individuals to one of citizens:

> If our aim is the transformation of England into a Social Democracy, we must frankly accept the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the factory system, the massing of population in great cities, the elaborate differentiation and complication of modern civilization, the subordination of the worker to the citizen, and of the individual to the community[66].

Yet the fact that he was not a lachrymose observer of the inequities of British society did not made him less of a

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65. Willard Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, pp. 280-281.

66. Sidney Webb, "Socialism: True and False", pp. 59-60.

democrat. One of his primary concerns was always to ensure that the worker should not be maintained in the condition of a "landless stranger in his own country"[67].

It is true that some concepts used by him, such as "physical degeneracy" or "race" now appear to be tainted with an unsavoury fascist terminology. But the science of Eugenics, as it was then called, was perceived essentially as a potential tool to make sure that society was not wasting its energies. As we shall see, even J.A. Hobson would consider favourably some of its elements. When Sidney Webb says about the rearing of children:

> At present it is ignored as an occupation, unremunerated, and in no way honoured by the State. Once the production of healthy, moral, and intelligent citizens is revered as a social service and made the subject of deliberate praise and encouragement on the part of the Government, it will, we may be sure, attract the best and most patriotic of the citizens[68].

it is actually difficult not to fall into the trap of picturing him as an early incarnation of the fascist type.

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67. Sidney Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism", p. 373.

68. Sidney Webb, "Physical Degeneracy or Race Suicide?" Part. 2. The Times, October 16, 1906.

His case sounds even worse when he refers to the nation's minorities in the following terms:

> This particular 25 percent of our population, as Professor Karl Pearson keeps warning us, is producing 50 per cent of our children. This can hardly result in anything but national deterioration; or, as an alternative, in this country gradually falling to the Irish and the Jews... The ultimate future of these islands may be to the Chinese[69].

Karl Pearson was a Socialist and Darwinist thinker who professed views often similar to those of Webb. As Bernard Semmel explains, "[Pearson] posited as the 'moral basis" of his new socialist society, not religion, but a 'rational motive for conduct' - 'service to Society'"[70]. But before hastily cataloguing Webb as an authoritarian planner, it is essential to remind ourselves of the condition of England then: fundamentally, a mixture of stupendous riches and terrible poverty. And also, that Eugenics was still considered as a respectable means to break down the vicious circle of misery in the country.

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69. Sidney Webb, "Physical Degeneracy or Race Suicide?".

70. Bernard Semmel, "Karl Pearson: Socialist and Darwinist", The British Journal of Sociology, 9 (June, 1958), p. 113.

When Havelock Ellis wrote in 1912: "The key to the situation, it is now beginning to be more and more widely felt, is to be found in the counterbalancing tendency of individualism and the eugenic guardianship of the race"[71], he was merely illustrating his contemporaries' perplexities over the choice of an effective method to transform society. After all, as the Webbs themselves noted in The Prevention of Destitution, "many of the keenest supporters of Eugenics are, at the same time, the most zealous workers for social reforms"[72]. According to J.M. Winter, "By contemporary standards the Webbs' racialism was un-exceptional"[73]. This statement does not excuse their many shortcomings on the subject, but has the merit of situating them in the right historical perspective.

Sidney Webb provides us with the key to his true conception of individualism in his article "The Necessary Basis of Society", where he insists on the fact that "the

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71. Havelock Ellis, "Individualism and Socialism", The Contemporary Review, CI (April, 1912), p. 527.

72. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The Prevention of Destitution, p. 45.

73. J.M. Winter, Socialism and the Challenge of War, p. 42.

average citizen or the normal human being...is a mere abstraction, and simply does not exist. You and I have never seen him in the flesh"[74]. His socialism did not foster the vision of a collectivity resting on nebulous notions of equality and democracy. Instead, it was based on a desire to make every citizen an integrated part of a well-organized whole, as can be seen in his idea of a Legal Minimum Wage as an instrument to "stimulate the selection, for the nation's business, of the most efficient workmen, the best equipped employers, and the most advantageous forms of industry"[75]. The journalist Alfred G. Gardiner wrote in 1914:

> To Mr. and Mrs. Webb we are statistics. We are marshalled in columns, and drilled in tables, and explained in appendices. We do not move to some far-off divine event, but to a miraculous perfection of machinery and a place in decimals[76].

Indeed, the Webbs were looking at the world from a "scientific"

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74. Sidney Webb, "The Necessary Basis of Society", The Contemporary Review, 93 (June, 1908), p. 660.

75. Sidney Webb, "The Economic Theory of a Legal Minimum Wage", The Journal of Political Economy, 20 (December, 1912), pp. 984-985.

76. Alfred G. Gardiner, Pillars of Society (London, 1914), p. 209.

viewpoint and always manifested an almost childish enthusiasm whenever they discovered an effective administrative policy. But Gardiner's presentation of heartless experts constitutes a gross exaggeration. For it was the same Webb who said: "the most important business of twentieth-century governments must be to provide not only for minorities, but even for quite small minorities, and actually for individuals"[77].

Sidney Webb's intellectual hero J.S. Mill had firmly believed that "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model...but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing"[78]. And Webb cherished throughout his life that kind of high standard of individual life: his work was focused on human beings, not on standardized robots. In 1891, years before the suffragettes, he had already referred to the "past subjection /of women/"[79]. His perspective was always that of justice. Over the denominational issue raised by the Education Act of 1902, for example, he

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77. Sidney Webb. "The Necessary Basis of Society", p. 660.

78. J.S. Mill, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government, p. 52.

79. Sidney Webb, "The Alleged Difference in the Wages Paid to Men and to Women for Similar Work", The Economic Journal, I (Dec., 1891), p. 661.

advocated the liberty of choice for parents of all creeds. As M. A. Hamilton pointed out, "He was against intolerance, under whatever name it might masquerade: against the cut-and-dried imposition of certain views, whatever they might be"[80]. Webb's attitude towards the concept of the state during the pre-war years was rooted in a strong common sense. With a typical Edwardian earnestness, he desired the establishment of a

> closer communion for the future, of these two great social forces - the public-spirited citizen exercising his influence and manifesting his will in public opinion, and the specialised investigator and trained official, supplying the organised knowledge and carrying out the social purpose[81].

Since Webb was not the creator of a utopia, the task of defining his collectivist ideal is not an easy one. His general attitude towards the social problem sprang from his abiding faith in rationality: if only, he thought, England could undergo a thorough "Webbian" treatment, then the life of each individual citizen would

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80. M.A. Hamilton, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, p. 334.

81. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The Prevention of Destitution, p. 334.

be immensely enriched. His remedies were not mere patch-work solutions: in a true Edwardian spirit they aimed at the transformation of humanity. Like his contemporary H.N. Brailsford, he desired the establishment of "an ordered democracy"[82]. It can be argued with some justice that such plans involved detachment from the real world. Today, anyone who would attempt the realisation of similar projects would rightly be accused of an inclination to totalitarianism. Yet nothing could be more injurious to Webb's intellect than to discard him because he now sounds like an authoritarian dreamer. Although his ideal collectivity was elitist, with its "good" measures reaching "the people" from above, one should never under-estimate his formidable faith in human nature. Like Hobson, Webb believed that the men and women of England would at last be able to fulfill themselves if they were provided with a better social environment. The question of knowing whether his plans were practicable really does not matter here, since our first duty is to respect the integrity of his thought. After all, there was no means for him to know what was going to happen in years to come.

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82. Henry Noel Brailsford, The War of Steel and Gold: a study of the armed peace (London, 1914), p. 312.

In 1932, the Webbs admitted that they were concerned "not with the individual man, regarded as a living organism having body and mind, but with the relations among men"[83]. This was in their case unavoidable: they were sociologists, not philanthropists. Yet when Beatrice refers to her husband in 1924 as being "essentially a detached observer without any keenness for one way over another"[84], we must remain cautious: in reality she might have been thus describing her own personal distance from "the people", not Sidney's.

As T.S. Simey rightly observes:

> the greatness of the Webbs' achievements thus lies in their recognition that the time had come when attention had to be paid to the new institutions that were most typical of a rapidly changing industrial society[85].

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83. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Methods of Social Study (London, 1932), p. 3.

84. Beatrice Webb, Beatrice Webb's Diaries, Vol. 2, 1924-1932, p. 42.

85. T.S. Simey, "The Contribution of Sidney and Beatrice Webb to Sociology", The British Journal of Sociology, 12 (1961), p. 120.

The Webbs scrutinized the past to find clues that might enable them to contribute to shape England's future, and these were to be basically the local governments, the co-operative societies, the central control of social services and the trade unions. In Webb's opinion, Socialism was inevitable, but it was a Socialism which worked hand in hand with capitalism. There is some truth in the remark that "Mr. and Mrs. Webb /suffered/ from the same capitalistic myopia"[86]. He wanted the communal ownership of wealth, yet he always felt reluctant to promote the control of industry by the state. This apparent contradiction and the resulting uncertainties of some of his writings reflect to a large extent those of the Edwardian period itself. There would be no point in accusing Webb of inconsistency: we must accept his own impression of building a scientific project.

So far, we have examined Webb's emphasis on the crucial role to be played by the individual in society. It should be clear by now that his ideal community was not merely a technocratic one, where the citizens would

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86. "Personality in Guild and State", The New Age, Vol. 13, No. 9, (January 1, 1914).

be totally subservient to the collective good. Why, then, has he been accused so often of scheming for a state that would oppress the individual and abolish its uniqueness to the benefit of a Webbian Eden? Was he really "concerned essentially with performance"[87]? The Socialists denounced Webb's "naïve" belief in "the idea that a mechanical re-arrangement of Society can dodge the law of rent or circumvent wagery"[88]. At the other end of the political spectrum, his old collaborator turned anti-Socialist Harold Cox proclaimed in 1920 that Webb was less concerned with liberty than equality, and concluded:

> The real question for Socialists as well as the rest of mankind to consider is whether on balance such injustice as results from inequality is greater in amount and more injurious in effect than the injustice that would result from compulsory equality[89].

Both sides thus agreed to charge Webb with propounding a delusion of justice.

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87. Reba Soffer, Ethics and Society in England-The Revolution in the Social Sciences 1870-1914 (Los Angeles, 1978), p. 21.

88. "The Death of an Idea", The New Age, Vol. 13, no. 11, (July 10, 1913).p.238

89. Harold Cox, Economic Liberty (London, 1920), p. 194.

But these judgments do not enlighten us about the real origin of Sidney Webb's output. They are out of context, and as such, miss their point. It is essential to remember that his awakening to Socialism came at a time when "the philosophy of collectivism shared the assumptions of the old atomism, it was simply an alternate position on the same axis"[90]. Webb's thoughts sprang in a particular historical context, during a period when British Socialism was still tainted with strong doses of Liberalism. Like many Edwardian Socialists, he neither rejected the capitalists' growing powers, nor accepted the social conditions that the latter were imposing on England. His reflections were so original that they did not allow for an "easy" classification. There existed, as we have seen, strong elitist tendencies amidst the Fabian Society. Indeed, there are elements of truth in Engels's contemptuous portrayal of the Fabians as middle-class intellectuals "not trusting this gigantic task [revolution] to the crude proletariat alone [but] gracious enough to stand at the head of it"[91]. But this does not imply that Webb

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90. Helen M. Lynd, England in the Eighteen-Eighties, p. 427.

91. F. Engels quoted in Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour, p. 139.

desired to transform the individual into the anonymous servant of an efficient, overpowering, collectivity.

In fact, his views on the equilibrium to be attained between individualism and collectivism were quite similar to those of the philosopher T.H. Huxley, who wrote in 1898:

> I am strongly convinced as the most pronounced individualist can be, that it is desirable that every man should be free to act in every way which does not limit the corresponding freedom of his fellow man. But I fail to connect that great induction of political science with the political corollary which is frequently drawn from it: that the State - that is, the people in their corporate capacity-has no business to meddle with anything but the administration of justice and external defence[92].

If Webb ever held one belief, it certainly was his conviction that the state had the right "to meddle" with every social problem. As we shall see, J.A. Hobson was to profess ideas which appeared at times more humanitarian than those of Webb. There was always in the

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92. T.H. Huxley, Evolution and Ethics (New York, 1898), p. 227.

latter a civil servant dimension which made his thoughts seem devoid of compassion. But it was precisely through his seriousness and so-called "heartlessness" that he manifested his intense devotion to the cause of creating a functional and just British nation.

According to E.J.T. Brennan, "the period from 1905 to the outbreak of the Great War was a time of comparative eclipse for the Webb partnership"[93]. This opinion is shared by R.C.K. Ensor, who said that after the Liberal and Labour victory of 1906:

> the Fabian Society 'missed the bus'. It had earned the distrust of Radicals and Labour men alike by supporting the Boer War and the Balfour Education Act, and still more perhaps by belated attempts to revive the now impossible Lord Rosebery[94].

Indeed, Webb lost in 1905 his usual assets to permeate politics. Incapable of inspiring directly the Liberal programme, he published anonymously in 1906 his proposals

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93. E.J.T. Brennan, Education for National Efficiency, p. 10.

94. R.C.K. Ensor, "Fifty Years of Fabians", The Spectator, January 12, 1934.

of reform in the shape of an intercepted letter where he makes Campbell-Bannerman, the new Prime Minister, proclaim that

> It is a poor business for Liberalism to be defending the status quo. We must, in fact, have a play with some action in it, or we shall very quickly be hissed off the stage. We must, in fact, whether we like or not, play Social Reform[95].

Webb, on bad terms with prominent Liberals such as Lloyd George, had then no better way of persuading the Government of the usefulness of his ideas.

From 1909, date of the publication of their Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission, until 1911, the Webbs invested most of their energies in the organization of a "National Committee to Promote the Break-up of the Poor Law", which was transformed in June 1910 into "The National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution". The latter possessed its propaganda instrument in the form of The Crusade, a publication

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95. Sidney Webb, "The Liberal Cabinet-An Intercepted Letter", The National Review, (January, 1906), p. 790.

bearing the significant motto of "For it is not the way of the wise surgeon to waste tears and enchantments on a disease that needs the knife"[96] borrowed from Sophocles. Its primary aim was, in Webb's words,

> to convince our real governing class of the urgent necessity and vital importance of no longer failing to grapple with [the problem of poverty]... We should no more think of 'deterring' a man in distress from taking advantage of the provision made by the State for his case than we now think of 'deterring' a smallpox patient from coming into hospital[97].

The public response to the campaign was for a while impressive, the committee's membership reaching 26,000 in 1910[98], and the prevention of destitution became a highly fashionable topic. Like most middle-class crusaders, Rupert Brooke, then president of the Cambridge Fabian Society, exclaimed: "It's only because the destitute and needlessly suffering millions are here all

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96. The Crusade, III, no. 9, September, 1912.

97. Sidney Webb, "Why there must be a National Authority for the Able-Bodied Unemployed", The Crusade, I (February, 1910), pp. 3-5.

98. The Times, June 1, 1910.

the time that people won't notice them!"[99] Yet, in this case as always, Webb was not moved merely by charitable impulses: as he said in 1909,

> We realise that whilst a high state of civilisation involves a steady development of those forms of poor-relief, such as care for the aged, which are ultimately dependent upon purely humanitarian motives, the economic efficiency of the nation demands an ever-increasing attention to the more difficult questions of preventing the social evils of destitution and the waste of potential citizens[100].

When attempting to find means of abolishing poverty, he was basically concerned with an aspect involved in the creation of a new, efficient state. He was convinced that "unemployment insurance...does not prevent the occurence of unemployment. Hence the best possible schemes of insurance in no way obviate the need for the measures of prevention that the Minority Report

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99. Rupert Brooke quoted in Christopher Hassal, Rupert Brooke- A Biography (London, 1964), p. 228.

100. Sidney Webb, "The Economic Aspects of Poor Law Reform", The English Review, III (October, 1909), p. 502.

demands"[101]. The Webbs' elaborate programme, with its provisions ranging from Domiciliary Treatment of Expectant Mothers and the Helpless Aged to plans giving authority to a Central Control, wanted essentially to organize the Labour Market in an effective way.

Yet, despite all its enthusiasm, the Webbs' crusade was doomed to failure. Commenting on the adoption of the Liberal National Insurance Act of 1911, the disenchanted Beatrice predicted : "We shall have a sort of bastard organisation, neither a properly constituted organ of the state, nor a voluntary agency"[102]. And indeed, the Act did not attempt to prevent ill-health or unemployment. In the words of Lloyd George himself, it was a "temporary expedient"[103]. As Sidney and Beatrice Webb realized, they had repeatly blundered over many crucial issues during the Edwardian years. They seemed to have backed constantly the "wrong horses", from their early opposition to the I.L.P. during the 1890's to their energy-consuming Crusade. In 1913, The

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101. Sidney Webb, "Insurance Against Unemployment", The Crusade, II (January, 1911), p. 13.

102. Beatrice Webb, Our Partnership, p. 475.

103. David Lloyd George, quoted in J.R. Hay, The Origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms 1906-1914 (London, 1977), p. 57.

New Age described Webb as being "palpably a political failure"[104]. Notwithstanding all their achievements, they felt bewildered by the world emerging around them, and left England in 1911 for travels around the world. That year, it was gloomily observed that

> To-day there is almost 'nothing going' [in the spheres of municipalisation and nationalisation]. The London County Council has no longer a Progressive Programme; the nationalisation of railways and land is further off than ever... we are experiencing a set-back in the practical realisation of public ownership[105].

When they came back, the Webbs founded in 1913 an independent weekly journal, The New Statesman, which partially served as an outlet for their work. England had witnessed in recent years labour unrest and suffragettes' agitation, the Parliament Act, the Home Rule Bill and the first aerial post. Picasso and Chekhov were "discovered", while London was the scene of the "coming of the motor omnibus". What years before Sidney had called the Zeitgeist was moving at last.

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104. "The Death of an Idea", The New Age, p. 237.

105. "Letter to the Editor-The Prevention of Destitution", The New Age, Vol. 9, no. 21, (September 21, 1911), p. 500.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## J.A. HOBSON AND THE STATE: THE FORMATIVE YEARS

> What are the chief lines of economic change required to bring about a readjustment between modern methods of production and social welfare?[1]
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> - J.A. Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism, 1894.

To measure the gulf separating the living experiences of Sidney Webb and J.A. Hobson, one has simply to listen to Florence Hobson's short stories: "My husband was doing literary work, which took him a good deal from home..."[2]. The obvious autobiographical tone of this excerpt reveals a fundamental dichotomy in Hobson's life. On the one hand, he seemed perfectly at ease in a world of well-kept houses and faithful servants; in many ways he personified the archetypal educated British gentleman of his day, living on a private income and enjoying the serenity of a "home" and the company of his children. It is therefore not surprising to hear him proclaim that "the narrowing

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1. J.A. Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism (1894), (London, 1895), p. 352.
2. Florence Edgar Hobson, Shifting Scenes (London, 1906), p. 141.

of the home into a place of hurried meals and sleep is on the whole the worst injury modern industry has inflicted on our lives"[3]. Yet as his wife made clear he was often away, making himself a part of the real world, plunging into "the darker side of life"[4]. Instead of being a spectator, he became an engaged witness. Why?

The truth was that like many Edwardian intellectuals, he felt chosen to act as a crusader for the establishment of an "art-science" of social progress which would be dedicated to the fulfillment of all the potential of mankind. In the words of Michael Freeden, he "strove towards the crystallization of a social science, a unitary study of the processes of social evolution"[5]. He believed that this intellectual tool would endow the statesman and the citizen with the power to "/absorb and assimilate/ the history of the past which science presents in its facts and laws, but /also to use/ his free constructive

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3. J.A. Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism, p. 320.

4. J.A. Hobson, John Ruskin-Social Reformer (1898), (London, 1899), p. 12.

5. Michael Freeden, Introduction to J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic (Brighton, Engl, 1976), p. vi.

faculty to make the history of the future"[6]. In sharp contrast with men like C.F.G. Masterman, who gloomily observed in 1909 that "zest and sparkle had gone from a society which suddenly feels itself growing old"[7], Hobson remained a resolute optimist during the Edwardian years. Indeed, Graham Wallas would refer distrustfully to his friend's axiomatic, "easy-going optimism"[8]. Even in 1914, he was still convinced of "the evidence of the ascent of human society towards a larger and closer complexity of human relations and a clearer intellectual and moral consciousness" [9]. He had then an absolute faith in the future and in the effectiveness of the collective will of the people.

Hobson's ultimate aim was to contribute personally to the readjustment of what he considered to be the disrupted equilibrium between the industrial system and the individual. In the pre-war period, he remained certain

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6. J.A. Hobson, Work and Wealth: A Human Valuation (New York, 1914), p. ix.

7. Charles F.G. Masterman, The Condition of England (London, 1909), p. 230.

8. Reba N. Soffer, Ethics and Society in England, p. 173.

9. J.A. Hobson, Work and Wealth, p. 350.

that the deep contemporary social malaise could be cured in foreseeable time. Using knowledge of the past as a guiding light, and convinced that each generation ought to be the master of its own destiny, he was arguing in favour of a well-balanced national structure. Consequently, his general attitude towards economics was quite unique: he characterized it himself as a "Humanist approach to Economic Life".[10] While his first targets were the defects of the economic structure, his major concern always was to "substitute a subjective standard of human feelings"[11] for the prevailing political and economic norms. In short, his entire life-work was a constant effort to "refer every 'is' to an 'ought'"[12].

But before examining the roots of his self-imposed mission it is crucial to challenge here the fiction which transformed Hobson into a martyr economist and a priest of under-consumption. Could he have been really "one of those rare persons who was completely unspoilt by the neglect of his contemporaries, never sour and superlatively

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10. J.A. Hobson, Economics and Ethics. A Study in Social Values (New York, 1929), p. 3.

11. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem-Life and Work (1901), (New York, 1902), p. 51.

12. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 51.

honest"[13]? To what extent was he "the lonely economist"[14], or the "emotional radical"[15]? As we shall see, it is undeniable that his career as an economist experienced severe set-backs in the 1890's and he remained always an outcast from academic circles. Yet in 1929 Hobson was described by an American scholar as "one of the foremost economists in the English-speaking world"[16]. Despite his failure to obtain full recognition as an economist, or perhaps precisely for that reason, he had nevertheless succeeded in establishing himself as an influential moral conscience. As Peter Clarke sees so clearly,

> It would...be a mistake to think of Hobson as an otherwise predestined Professor of Economics, cruelly martyred in the cause of under-consumption. He would in any case have been lucky to establish himself as an academic economist in view of the sheer lack of rigour or respect for academic standards in much of his work[17].

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13. Kingsley Martin, Editor-"New Statesman" Years, 1913-1945 (Chicago, 1968), p. 159.

14. Barbara Tuchman, The Proud Tower, p. 358.

15. Joseph A. Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis (New York, 1954), p. 832.

16. Jerome Davis, preface to J.A.Hobson, Economics and Ethics, p. i.

17. Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 48.

Indeed, all the discussions of his resilience to adversity must not hide from us the fact that for a "Heretic", he possessed a surprising ability to choose the right political allies and causes. Whereas Sidney Webb's career during the Edwardian years was impaired by the ascent of the Liberals and his own "aberrances"[18], Hobson consistently backed the winner's side through his association with the new Liberals. From his opposition to Rosebery at the turn of the century, his vibrant denunciation of imperialism, his numerous pleas for a democratic state, to his involvement in the crusade against poverty, he made himself one of the symbols of progressivism in England. In his study of John Ruskin, Hobson wrote with admiration:

> Mr. Ruskin will rank as the greatest social teacher of his age...because he has made the most powerful and most felicitous attempt to grasp and to express, as a comprehensive whole, the needs of a human society and the processes of social reform[19].

Like many biographers, he was thus describing his own

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18. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Process, Purpose and Ego", The Times Literary Supplement, (June 25, 1976), p. 789.

19. J.A. Hobson, John Ruskin-Social Reformer, pp. v-vi.

aspirations through an assessment of his subject's achievements. Instead of being remembered as a victim, Hobson should be present in our minds as someone who attacked the consecrated truths of his days. Moreover, he should not be considered as a fanatic who conjured out of his own thoughts a new version of Liberalism and desired to convert England to it. He was part of a social movement in which he worked as a propagandist: to comprehend his craving for reform, it is necessary to go back to the later Victorian years.

John Atkinson Hobson was born on July 6, 1858, in Derby, the second son of William Hobson, a printer and bookseller. His father was a prominent and prosperous citizen: he had been twice elected mayor and was a joint owner of the Liberal paper Derbyshire and North Staffordshire Advertiser. Reflecting in later years on his family background, Hobson characteristically "confessed" that he had been "favourably situated for a complacent acceptance of the existing social order"[20]. As in the case of his model John Ruskin, his youth was spent in a comfortable and secure environment, hardly

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20. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic (London, 1938), p. 15.

the kind of milieu one would expect to breed a critical mind. Yet by the time he reached Lincoln College, Oxford, on an open scholarship in 1876, Hobson had already rebelled against the atmosphere of Evangelicalism saturating his class. He never became an agnostic, but like many members of his generation he transferred his attention from individual to collective "evils". His adulthood coincided with a long period of economic depression, and he was strongly affected by visions of "the ragged, shoeless condition of the children of these 'poor'. They stirred in me not so much a sense of pity or of distress as of an incipient feeling that 'all was not right' in this best of all possible worlds"[21].

Hobson's evangelical upbringing often came to the surface in his writings, as, for example, in the general tone of this ardent denunciation of the aristocratic way of life: "the luxury and foppish refinement of a small section of 'fashionable' society, unnaturally relieved of the wholesome necessity of work"[22]. But it

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21. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, pp. 16-17.

22. J.A.Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism, p. 370.

was an Evangelicalism focused entirely on a fight to restore a social equilibrium, not merely the peace of individual souls. Like another troubled contemporary, Beatrice Potter, he was driven gradually by his growing discontent to believe with her that "Social questions...are the vital questions of to-day: they take the place of religion"[23]. Both were convinced that harmony was disappearing from the world, that the social organism was in a state of moral crisis.

Hobson was thus not isolated in his early criticism of British society. The story of the last twenty years of the nineteenth century represented for the generation of the 1880's a dark age of "ignominy and shame"[24]. Yet despite repeated attacks on the so-called Victorian consensus, laissez-faire was still triumphing in all spheres of society, infiltrating politics as well as education and industrial relations. Dean Farrar, a contemporary, even characterised the

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23. Beatrice Webb, My Apprenticeship, (1926), (London, 1950), p. 129.

24. C.H. Driver, "Social and Political Ideas", in F.J.C. Hearnshaw ed., Edwardian England 1901-1910, (London, 1933), p. 235.

dominant mental climate as a "worship of inutility"[25]. The Victorians' attitude towards the rising and disturbing forces of industrialism remained fundamentally ambiguous, and most of them seem to have felt unconcerned by the social repercussions of the new industrial system they had created.

Considering the predominant conservative atmosphere of the time, it was logical that when Hobson went to Oxford, no serious opportunity for economic studies was to be found in academic circles. The "science" of economics was still perceived as too crudely useful to have been recognized as a major part of the curriculum. Yet he knew already that it would be the means of his personal contribution to the re-orientation of society: beyond all the "fallacies", Hobson discerned instinctively the formidable potential of economics as an instrument of reform.

The Cambridge University Extension Movement of the seventies had been the initiator of his first encounter with economic discussion, and it fascinated him. Ignoring the works of more progressive economists

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25. Dean Farrar quoted in Martin Wiener, English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980 (Cambridge, Engl., 1981), p. 19.

such as W.S. Jevons, its lectures were still blindly faithful in spirit to J.S. Mill's statement of 1848: "Happily there is nothing in the laws of Value, which remains for the present or any future writer to clear up"[26]. As late as 1896, Hobson could describe his fellow economists as a "body who still lean/s/ with childlike confidence upon a theory of Capital formulated by J.S. Mill, and afterwards abandoned in its most essential feature by its author"[27]. In view of the blatant shortcomings of the professional economists of the time, one should not be surprised by Peter Clarke's assessment of Hobson's performance at Oxford: "/he/ was remembered by his contemporaries as a distinguished high-jumper. He read Greats, regarded it as a humane experience, but examined badly"[28].

Despite its political and philosophical idealism, Oxford nevertheless provided him with a lifelong conviction: he would try never to be like the "others", those

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26. J.S. Mill quoted in J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 23.

27. J.A. Hobson, The Problem of the Unemployed-An Enquiry and an Economic Policy (1896), (London, 1911), p. x.

28. Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 46.

intellectuals who were content to move quietly in the stream of life, discussing abstract notions of liberty. In fact, like another remarkable Liberal thinker, G. Lowes Dickinson, "he realised that he could not serve humanity by the old methods, so he turned to new methods, and sometimes they were revolutionary"[29]. The teachings of T.H. Green alone impressed him, but it is easy to suspect that he was ill at ease in the rarified, unwordly atmosphere of neo-Hegelian preachings. They had, however, a long-lasting influence on him. Green was then a pioneer in his belief that individual freedom and greater state interference were reconcilable. In the words of Harold Laski, Green "emphasized not the individual over against the process of government, but the individual in the significant totality of his relations with it"[30]. In reality, Hobson felt attracted by Green's ideas for the same reasons as did Webb: because they "made greater state action possible"[31]. But he was disenchanted with Green's

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29. E.M. Forster, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (London, 1934), p. 28.

30. Harold J. Laski, "The Decline of Liberalism", L.T. Hobhouse Memorial Lectures, 1930-1940 (Lecture no. 10), (London, 1948), p. 11.

31. Rodney Barker, Political Ideas in Modern Britain, p. 14.

fundamental conservatism. As he said in 1901, "even philosophers like the late Professor Green, who are stoutest in repudiating Utilitarianism, invariably return to that terminology to express their final judgment on a concrete moral issue"[32]. In sharp contrast with Green, Hobson desired to face real problems, not to pass round them. This is why he never was an economist in the restrictive sense: as rightly observed by G.D.H. Cole, "He became an economist because he was already a social reformer, seeking a solution to the problem of poverty"[33].

Derby was also the home of the philosopher Herbert Spencer, and it might have been the sight of him walking which induced Hobson to read his Principles of Sociology. Through his knowledge of Spencer, he came to realize not only that institutions were worthy objects of study, but also that they were integrated parts of a fascinating social organism. Spencer provided Hobson with a global understanding of society, and he could not have failed to be strongly impressed by sentences such

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32. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 5.

33. G.D.H. Cole, "Obituary: J.A. Hobson (1858-1940)", The Economic Journal, (1940), p. 352.

as the following:

> The society exists for the benefit of its members, not its members for the benefit of the society. It has ever to be remembered that great as may be the efforts made for the prosperity of the body politic, yet the claims of the body politic are nothing in themselves, and become something only in so far as they embody the claims of its component individuals[34].

Indeed, it was Spencer's stimulating impact on his own thought which launched Hobson in a lifelong quest to define the "right" place to be attributed to the individual in society, in the "interconnected whole"[35]. Herbert Spencer's organic conception of society had made Hobson acutely aware of the social impact of each individual's actions, and that the well-being of society was inseparable from the self-development of each of its citizens. In the tradition of Bentham, Owen, Comte and Mill, Spencer strove "to express the intellectual and moral unity of social progress"[36]. It was left to John

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34. Herbert Spencer, The Principles of Sociology Vol. I, third ed., (New York, 1893), pp. 449-50.

35. L.T. Hobhouse quoted in Peter Weiler, "The New Liberalism of L.T. Hobhouse, Victorian Studies, XVI (1972), p. 143.

36. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 2.

Ruskin to teach him that the study of man cannot be value-free.

As we have seen, Hobson greatly admired Ruskin, who had been the first to reveal to him "the supreme moral obligation of confronting /the social problem/"[37]. Moreover, his early adoption of Ruskin's motto, "The largest number of happy and healthy human beings"[38], certainly was the source of his own definition of the Social Question in 1901:

> Given a number of human beings, with certain development of physical and mental faculties and of social institutions, in command of given natural resources, how can they best utilize these powers for the attainment of the most complete satisfaction?[39]

His reading of Ruskin made him realize that the life of the individual was much more adequate as a means of measuring the success of social reforms than mere

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37. J.A. Hobson, John Ruskin-Social Reformer, p. vi.

38. John Ruskin quoted in J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 7.

39. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 7.

quantitative utilitarian concepts such as Wealth. It was through his admiration for Ruskin that his distrust for sciences, even the science of economics, grew. As Michael Freeden observes, "Sciences, invariably associated by him with quantification, could not be used to measure the unmeasurable"[40]. What Hobson found particularly attractive in Ruskin's views was the constant reliance on Ethics as a guiding principle it displayed. He was impressed by the "emotional basis of close knowledge of reality, under the control of the spiritual faculty"[41], manifested by the art prophet. Ruskin's ideas had appealed to Hobson's humanism and rationalism because they seemed to provide worthy aims to otherwise blind, meaningless, social mutations. As Peter Clarke notes, "Evolution as a mechanism of progress needed a hypothetical goal, which Ruskin's insistence on 'life', 'souls of good quality', seemed to supply"[42].

Yet Hobson's reverence for Ruskin was never totally

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40. Michael Freeden, Introduction to J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. vi.

41. J.A. Hobson, John Ruskin-Social Reformer, p. 29.

42. Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 49.

unconditional. Indeed, he was always firmly opposed to what he described as "Mr. Ruskin's assumption that, because the will of individuals initiates all conduct, the solution of the social problem must proceed chiefly from individual, not from public action"[43]. In fact, Hobson was to defend precisely the opposite thesis. For him, it was only through the use of collective control of industry that a democratic ideal had any chance of being realized in the future. Sidney Webb had faith in a Zeitgeist that guaranteed the imminent advent of the welfare state: similarly, Hobson became more and more convinced that "the indictment against social control over industry is an indictment against a natural order of events on the ground that nature had taken a wrong road of advancement"[44]. In short, Hobson intended to apply on the political scene the Ruskinian organic conception of society as an economic structure. According to him, Ruskin's understanding of society conceived the existence of a "harmony of human forces, but it did not bear within itself any capacity of progress. It was an

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43. J.A. Hobson, John Ruskin-Social Reformer, p. 202.

44. J.A. Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism, p. 362.

organisation and not an organism"[45]. Hobson, however, believed that Democracy demanded "a self-government in which the whole of the self which constitutes a nation, shall find direct conscious expression"[46]. This conviction remained his primary political credo throughout the later Victorian and Edwardian years.

So far, we have studied the impact of Ruskin and Spencer on J.A. Hobson's awakening to socio-political thinking. Before examining his contribution to new Liberalism, it is interesting here to understand firstly his reasons for never becoming a Fabian. After leaving Oxford in 1880, Hobson began to teach Classics successively in Faversham and Exeter, and became a lecturer in English literature for the Oxford Extension Delegacy. In 1886, he married the American-born Florence Edgar, and moved a year later to London to try journalism. Through his friendship with Graham Wallas he then met Sidney Webb and other prominent members of the Fabian entourage. Considering his intellectual background, Hobson was apparently the perfect Fabian candidate,

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45. J.A. Hobson, "Ruskin and Democracy", The Contemporary Review, LXXXI (January, 1902), p. 112.

46. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 112.

especially since, according to Ian Britain, "the group managed to accommodate such a diverse range of views and personalities that even the label 'socialist' does not convincingly fit them all"[47]. Like most Fabians, he was of middle-class origin, and was ready to devote relentlessly his life to the cause of social reform. He shared with them a growing wrath toward what Henry George had characterized as "the unequal distribution of wealth which is the curse and menace of modern civilization"[48]. And like them, he certainly agreed with the novelist Olive Schreiner's contention that "Life, personal life, is a great battlefield"[49]. What, then, repelled him in Fabianism?

Apparently, Hobson's criticism of Fabianism originated in reasons similar to those that made him accuse the Ruskinian Democracy of resting essentially on a "self-chosen benevolent oligarchy of able men"[50].

47. Ian Britain, Fabianism and Culture-A Study in British socialism and the arts 1884-1919 (Cambridge, Engl., 1982), p. 272.

48. Henry George, Progress and Poverty (1879), (New York, 1940), p. 328.

49. Olive Schreiner quoted in Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, Socialism and the New Life (London, 1977), p. 43.

50. J.A. Hobson, "John Ruskin and Democracy", The Contemporary Review, p.111.

As he wrote in 1902, he considered that the Fabian Society was preaching a disguised form of elitist government, and that its typical member "easily finds reasons for repudiating all measures for enabling the voice of the people to prevail, and relies more and more upon the wire-pulling and intriguing capacity of an enlightened few"[51]. Yet as we shall see, Hobson's thought during the Edwardian era was not always immune from notions of meritocracy, and along with many Fabians he approved of Eugenics. In fact, although his "feelings were beginning to move in the direction of Socialism"[52] during the 1880's, he refused to become a servant of either Marxism or Christianity. He definitely shared with the Fabians a faith in T.H. Green's theology where "citizenship becomes a religious vocation"[53], but he already intended during this early stage to contribute primarily to the development of society as a whole, not of a particular creed.

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51. J.A. Hobson, "John Ruskin and Democracy", p. 105.

52. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 29.

53. Melvin Richter, "T.H. Green and his Audience: Liberalism as a Surrogate Faith", The Review of Politics, 18 (October, 1956), p. 454.

Moreover, Hobson felt that, as he later explained in his Confessions,

> the Fabians did not, in my judgment, assail capitalism in its weakest point, and though the Fabian Essays were a notable contribution to the economic education of the open-minded few, they had not the spirit of a popular appeal[54].

Notwithstanding what he considered as their essential shortcomings, he had numerous reasons for being favourably impressed by many sections of the Essays. As Paul Thompson emphasizes, the new doctrine was unique for its "gradualist vision and its economics based on Jevons instead of Marx"[55], both orientations to which Hobson fully subscribed. He observed in 1898 that "Heroic remedies are little to the taste of Englishmen: a more discriminative logic rules their policy"[56], and this "reasonable" attitude suited him. With the Fabians,

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54. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 29.

55. Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour-The Struggle for London 1885-1914, p. 138.

56. J.A. Hobson, "The Influence of Henry George in England", The Fortnightly Review, LXII (December, 1897), p. 843.

he always preferred step by step, carefully planned administrative measures of reform to sweeping political upheavals. Moreover, he was distrustful of the Marxist Weltanschauung, which many Fabians, such as Webb, also found somewhat dreary and misleading. According to H.N. Brailsford, Hobson, "a rationalist and a humanist to the core, was repelled not merely by the lack of scientific objectivity in the proletarian economics of the Marxists, but even more by their reliance on force"[57].

Although he could not have fully escaped the pervasive influence of Karl Marx's thought, Hobson's global understanding of economics sprang from the insular tradition established by Jevons. The British economist William Stanley Jevons, author of The Theory of Political Economy (1871) and The State in Relation to Labour (1882), was among the first to question the supremacy of J.S. Mill in economics. As he explained in 1874 in a letter,

> I fear it is impossible to

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57. Henry Noel Brailsford, "The Life-Work of J.A. Hobson", L.T. Hobhouse Memorial Lectures 1941-1950 (Lecture no. 17) (London, 1952), p. 6.

> criticise Mr. Mill's writings without incuring the danger of rousing animosity... [but] however valuable they are in exciting thought and leading to the study of subjects, they must not be imposed upon us as a new creed[58].

He was, in short, the economist of the renouveau, and it is therefore not surprising to realize that his ideas could be attractive to both Fabian and Liberal thinkers. Despite the fact that he always considered political economy to be mainly a science of wealth, and his lukewarm feelings towards the contemporary growth of the central government's powers, Jevons's influence on the rising generation was important. As Reba Soffer explains, his legacy was a major contribution to the development of British economic thinking "for its use of probability theory, its definitions of marginal utility and value; and its rejection of the labor and cost of production theories"[59]. Moreover, he was the direct ancestor of Hobson's theory of under-consumption, since according to the latter,

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58. W.S. Jevons quoted in John Maynard Keynes, The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes-Essays in Biography Vol. X, (London, 1972), pp.136-137.

59. Reba Soffer, Ethics and Society in England, p. 266.

"Professor Jevons went so far as to say that 'the whole theory of economics must begin with a correct theory of consumption'"[60].

As we have seen, Hobson felt that the Fabians had been unsuccessful in their attempt to expose all the defects of the economic status quo of the 1880's. His early perception of the roots of the diseases then paralyzing the economic system led him to produce with a collaborator, the business man A.F. Mummery, his first statement as an economic heretic, The Physiology of Industry. Like the Fabian Essays, it was published in 1889, and as in the case of Sidney Webb was the occasion of his first publication. Both volumes reflected the new generation's rejection of Victorian creeds: it was thus highly predictable that Hobson's study should generally be perceived by the established caste of economists as a threatening desecration of faith in laissez-faire and in J.S. Mill's enduring motto: "saving enriches and spending impoverishes the community along with the individual"[61].

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60. J.A. Hobson and A.F. Mummery, The Physiology of Industry: Being an Exposure of Certain Fallacies in Existing Theories of Economics (1889), (New York, 1965), p. 6.

61. J.S. Mill quoted in J.A. Hobson and A.F. Mummery, Ibid., p. iii.

In fact, the prominent economist Francis Y. Edgeworth's review of the book even seemed to accuse its authors of lack of seriousness. According to him, they were

> champions of paradox [who had] chosen a very difficult battleground on which to encounter a very formidable adversary... The attempt to unsettle consecrated tenets is not very hopeful, unless the public, whose attention is solicited, have some security against waste of their time and trouble[62].

For J.A. Hobson, such depreciatory remarks were the origins of his lasting exclusion from academic circles. As he explained in a lecture in 1935, "I hardly realised that in appearing to question the virtue of unlimited thrift I had committed the unpardonable sin"[63]. Yet John Maynard Keynes possessed a better, more neutral, understanding of the matter. According to him, Hobson belonged to the category of thinkers "who have preferred to see the truth obscurely and imperfectly rather than

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62. Francis Y. Edgeworth quoted in T.W.Hutchison, A Review of Economic Doctrines (1953), (Oxford, 1966), p. 118.

63. J.A. Hobson quoted in J.M. Keynes, The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money (1936), (London, 1957), p. 366.

to maintain error, reached indeed with clearness and consistency and by easy logic, but on hypotheses inappropriate to the facts"[64]. And he was probably right. The Physiology of Industry, like most of his later books on economic problems, was fundamentally the result of an intuition: in this case, that "undue saving of individuals impoverishes the Community, simultaneously lowering Rent, Profit, or Interest and Wages"[65]. While Hobson and Mummery achieved a convincing presentation of their main thesis, based on the belief that under-consumption was the cause of the unemployment of Capital and Labour, the general tone of argument they used appeared at times somewhat unscientific. And some of the book's rather vague contentions, such as "Most definitions of economists have proved futile because they haved aimed at fulfilling too exactly the logical function of definition"[66], were often enough to shock more traditional economists.

In reality, Hobson was occasionally quite careless in his denunciations of economic "fallacies", and the

64. J.M. Keynes, The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money, p. 371.

65. J.A. Hobson and A.F. Mummery, The Physiology of Industry, p. viii.

66. J.A. Hobson and A.F. Mummery, Ibid., p. 31.

truly innovative character of his ideas was clearly ill-suited to fit the narrow limits of economics. At a time when most economists were still lauding the rights of the individual, Hobson felt "the need of closing the hiatus between reform and economic theory and attempted the task"[67]. His inner conviction that the social organism as a whole needed transformation in all spheres, whether economic, political and social, prompted him in 1890 to join the London Ethical Society. Like his father, who had launched a local branch of the Liberal-Unionist Association, Hobson had evolved to become a mild Liberal-Unionist, and he believed that the Ethical Society might constitute a suitable outlet for his desire for personal involvement in society. Linked with the Oxford Idealist Movement, its leaders' aims apparently matched his own, since they "preached for an applied social and personal ethics based on a rational, not theological, conception of moral welfare"[68]. In

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67. Paul T. Homan, Contemporary Economic Thought (New York, 1928), p. 288.

68. Michael Freeden, "J.A. Hobson as a New Liberal Theorist: Some Aspects of his Social Thought Until 1914", Journal of the History of Ideas, XXXIV (1973), pp. 425-426.

theory, at least, the movement had everything to attract someone like Hobson, anxious to redeem himself in social work.

Yet he grew increasingly dissatisfied with the Ethical Society's global vision of the community and left it after five years. As he soon found out, it shared strong affinities with the Charity Organisation Society and perceived an insurmountable antithesis between the moral and economic dimensions of reform. Moreover, Hobson considered that the movement, through the influence of men like R.B. Haldane and the philosopher Bernard Bosanquet, was permanently blinded by the standard of moral regeneration it applied solely to the poor's characters and earnings. It was mainly the dual morality advocated by the C.O.S. that led him in 1896 to attack vigorously its social philosophy:

> Why do the Charity Organisation Society and their philosophers constantly denounce small gifts to the poor, and hold their peace about large gifts to the rich?... Their fault is not that they are too hard-hearted, but that they are not sufficiently hard-headed: it is not a lack of feeling, but a lack of logic. They are simply not

> the scientific people that they claim to be, for they have not learned to think straight against the pressure of class interests and class prejudices[69].

In Hobson's opinion, J.S. Mill, Jevons, and Marshall, in his Principles of Political Economy (1890), had already prepared the way towards the creation of a society where the general will, or moral force of the community, would be embodied in the equal possibility for all individuals and classes to find "an opportunity of rational self-realisation in forms of property which are 'the definite material representation' of their own energy"[70]. In short, he aimed at establishing democracy as the corner stone of the industrial system.

Hobson had previously examined potential remedies to the acute social malaise of his day in Problems of Poverty- An Enquiry Into the Industrial Condition of the Poor (1891). After a "Webbian" analysis of the historical "growth of State socialism"[71], Hobson admitted his new faith in

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69. J.A. Hobson, "The Social Philosophy of Charity Organization", The Contemporary Review, LXX (November, 1896), pp. 713 and 727.

70. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 727.

71. J.A. Hobson, Problems of Poverty (1891), (New York), p. 186.

Collectivism. Although saturated by the utilitarian tradition during his formative years, Hobson was growing strongly distrustful of the capacity of the individual's self-interest to serve as a warrant of the common good. For him, only collective rights and duties might prevent the perpetuation of the past's excesses. This collectivist tendency made him assess the rightful social role of the state as follows:

> But the State does not confine itself to these restrictive or prohibitive measures, interfering with the free individual application of capital and labour, in the interests of other individuals, or of society at large. The State and the municipality is constantly engaged in undertaking new branches of productive work, thus limiting the industrial area left open to the application of private capitalist enterprise[72].

Like Sidney Webb, he was looking for a collectivist state that would be able to secure more than mere ad hoc palliatives for the numerous problems resulting from the savage urbanisation and chaotic industrialisation of England.

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72. J.A. Hobson, Problems of Poverty, p. 189.

During the 1890's, Hobson was a collectivist Liberal trying to break free from the philanthropical rhetoric of the C.O.S. But in 1894, at 36 years of age and still relatively unknown, he succeeded in giving a new impetus to his life: he wrote The Evolution of Modern Capitalism and he contributed to the foundation of the Rainbow Circle. Moreover, he joined in 1895 the South Place Ethical Society, where he preached democratic ideals with constant zeal for the next forty years. Its discussions were less arid than those of the London branch, and Hobson thoroughly agreed with the group's motto: "the promotion of human welfare, in harmony with advancing knowledge"[73]. Its weekly paper, The Ethical World, attracted notorious contributors as diverse as S.G. Hobson, William Clarke, G.B. Shaw, and provided Hobson with the intellectual company and support of progressive thinkers of various tendencies. Before being Fabians or Liberals, all these men were earnestly dedicated to the idea of reform. One gets the impression that to a large extent, their individual banner

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73. Report of the Committee of the South Place Ethical Society,(1896) quoted in Bernard Porter, Critics of Empire - British Radical attitudes to colonialism 1895-1914 (New York, 1968), p. 161.

did not really matter. It was in this stimulating milieu that Hobson's vocation as critic of society found confirmation: as an economist, he would promote the welfare state, and on the political scene, he would become a "new Liberal".

As Peter Clarke rightly emphasizes, "The recurrent imagery of shipwreck was deeply appropriate to the state of the Liberal party in the 1890's"[74]. As we have seen above, these years witnessed the persistent inability of the party to re-adjust its politics in the post-Gladstonian world. Yet many enlightened dissenters, such as Hobson, attempted at the time to reform the party from within. These thinkers already took for granted a new version of the Liberal creed which contended, as expressed later by L.T. Hobhouse, that "the difference between a true consistent, public-spirited Liberalism and a rational Collectivism ought, with a genuine effort at mutual understanding, to disappear"[75]. Hobson's conviction that individual freedom was from now on

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74. Peter Clarke, Lancashire and the New Liberalism, p. 4.

75. L.T. Hobhouse, Democracy and Reaction (1904), (New York, 1905), p. 237.

inseparable from social control thus did not develop in a kind of intellectual no man's land: in fact, it was to a large extent the result of intensive debates amidst the Rainbow Circle's members.

The Rainbow Circle, like The Ethical World, was fundamentally a laboratory of ideas, where progressive plans for reform were tested and passionately discussed. Although it lasted thirty years, it was essentially a microcosm of the ideological tensions dividing the 1890's. Its attention was focused on collectivism (whether Socialist or Radical), and it was often considered as a rival of the Fabian Society. The early membership was highly diversified, and numbered, besides Hobson, Ramsay MacDonald, William Clarke, Herbert Samuel, J.M. Robertson and Sydney Olivier. Despite their vastly divergent intellectual backgrounds, they could nevertheless all agree in 1895 on the following credo, stating that

> the conception of the individual as independent of society is false; that economics of the quantitative kind must be supplemented by economics of the qualitative kind; that formal political democracy is not sufficient in itself to secure good government; that Trade Unionism cannot be made the basis of a great political movement; that cooperation is equally

> narrow; & fundamentally that the politics of the past correspond to the economic problem of production & in the future that they must correspond to the problem of use[76].

Like his peers, Hobson was by this time clearly convinced of the necessity of transforming economics into a qualitative science, and of the need to establish a balance between the industrial structure and its environment. His organic vision of society was then inducing him to stand the Gladstonian Liberalism on its head, and to affirm in The Evolution of Modern Capitalism that "in a large measure... social control is to be regarded, not as a necessary protection against the monopolic power of individual, but as necessary for the security of individual property within the limits prescribed by social welfare"[77]. Along with other members of the Rainbow Circle, Hobson was trying to define a new global perspective for Liberalism and the social sciences.

If the group's rallying cry rested on pragmatic

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76. Rainbow Circle Minutes (19 June 1895) quoted in Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 57.

77. J.A. Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism, p. 359.

collectivism, its participants' individual intellectual roots were often contradictory, ranging from the evolutionary thesis to Liberalism and Fabianism. Indeed, they often followed a path parallel to the one exposed by the Fabians in 1896 in Tract #70, where the role of the state was defined in careful and realistic terms:

> The Fabian Society does not suggest that the State should monopolize industry as against private enterprise or individual initiative further than may be necessary to make the livelihood of the people and their access to the sources of production completely independent of both[78].

And like the Fabians, they were concerned essentially with "the defective organization of industry and by a radically bad distribution of wealth"[79]. But, as we will now see, tensions were such in the midst of the Rainbow Circle that it became quite impossible for them to build up a unified political alternative.

In 1896, the Rainbow Circle launched its official

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78. George Bernard Shaw, "Report on Fabian Policy and Resolutions" (July 1896), Fabian Tracts (Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1969), p. 288.

79. G.B. Shaw, Ibid., p. 290.

organ, The Progressive Review, and Hobson acted as one of its editors. The paper's ambitious aim was to "give due emphasis to the new ideas and sentiments of social justice and of a clear rational application of those principles in a progressive policy and progressive party"[80]. As might have been predicted, the Review survived only for two years; the task of defining one progressive policy proved impossible given the often conflicting orientations of its contributors. For example, Herbert Samuel had already started in 1895 to defend Liberal Imperialism, thus entering into direct opposition to Hobson's Cobdenite internationalism. In fact, the paper's difficulties were the reflection of the progressives' momentary inability to provide an effective basis to their rapport de force against the defenders of the status quo. The Rainbow Circle's self-imposed mission had been to oppose the legacy of a thirty years period during which "a wave of reaction has spread over the civilised world and invaded one department after another of thought and action"[81]. Not surprisingly, its immediate achievements were quite modest.

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80. The Progressive Review (August 1896) quoted in Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 57.

81. L.T. Hobhouse, Democracy and Reaction, p. 2.

The joint impact of the South Place Ethical Society and the Rainbow Circle on Hobson helped to confirm his vocation as progressive missionary. Both The Problem of the Unemployed (1896) and John Ruskin-Social Reformer (1898) illustrate his stand against the "individualist fallacy": through these studies, he was warning his contemporaries of the "danger of resting upon palliatives"[82] to cure social evils in need of thorough administrative and moral re-evaluations. He felt a strong sympathy with what he described as Ruskin's conviction that

> Modern industrial life demands reform, because it suffers from two mortal diseases which war against the right ideal of human society; first, it deprives men of this sound physical basis of life; secondly, it poisons the springs of spiritual life and of intellectual honesty by permitting the dominion of selfish lust directed to the attainment of low material ends[83].

Yet Hobson was not merely announcing the advent of a new man and society from an abstract ethical pulpit. He knew that the art of human welfare he was then advocating had

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82. J.A. Hobson, The Problem of the Unemployed, p. 160.

83. J.A. Hobson, John Ruskin-Social Reformer, p. 311.

to be sustained with constant contacts with living history in order to reflect and magnify the contemporary voice of progress. Since he desired to make his literary output the instrument of the coming wave of social reform in England, he officially became in 1897 a journalist. Sidney Webb had plunged into the real world via his involvement in the work of the L.C.C.: Hobson, to achieve similar ends, associated himself first with the family paper in Derby, and then with The Speaker (later The Nation). In his biographical study of L.T. Hobhouse, Hobson defined his friend's achievements as follows: "He sought to obtain a body of truth on the conduct of life in order that those who assented to it might apply it to human betterment"[84]. There exists no more apt way to characterize Hobson's personal motivations. Throughout the 1890's, he attempted to revive faith in progress. Unfortunately,while the new century was fast approaching, harmony seemed to have deserted England...

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84. J.A. Hobson and Morris Ginsberg, L.T. Hobhouse - His Life and Work, p. 27.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## J.A. HOBSON AND THE STATE: THE EDWARDIAN YEARS

> The real revolution is in the mind of men...the real difficulties must be met; the right limits of State and municipal collectivism must be laid down[1].
>
> - J.A. Hobson, 1907.

Lucy Masterman, while assessing her husband's output, concluded: "His writing was part of action...he used his pen admittedly as a weapon to achieve something, or to fight for or against something"[2]. Similarly, J.A. Hobson's life-work consisted of a personal search for an ideal and at the turn of the century his new political cause became Free Trade. As he explained in 1898 in a sensational article entitled "Free Trade and Foreign Policy", Hobson felt that the contemporary economic ideology of the so-called "open-door" was in fact employed as a shameful disguise to hide "the policy

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1. J.A. Hobson, "Socialism in Liberalism", The Nation, October, 12, 1907.

2. Lucy Masterman, C.F.G. Masterman-A Biography (London, 1939), p. 48.

of forcing doors open and forcibly keeping them open"[3]. At this point he firmly defended the Cobdenite tradition which had contended that the economic interests of the nation would be better served through peaceful policies rather than coercion. Indeed, he felt that the enduring notions behind the government's actions, namely that

> (1) England requires continual expansion of foreign trade; (2) this expansion can only be adequately secured by increased armaments and an extension of the area of empire; (3) it is sound "economy" to undergo these risks and these expenses in order to promote foreign trade[4],

all had to be refuted. With his theory of under-consumption always in mind, he argued that home trade was

> a more solid and substantial basis of industrial prosperity than foreign trade for two reasons. First, it is less amenable to fluctuations arising from commercial and political policies over which we can exercise no control, and which sometimes are designed expressly for our injury. Secondly, the gain arising from home trade is double instead of single, the

3. J.A. Hobson, "Free Trade and Foreign Policy", The Contemporary Review, LXXIV (August, 1898), p. 167.

4. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 169.

> full advantage which both parties obtain from exchange being kept within the nation[5].

In short, Hobson thought at this stage that the empire merely was a tremendous waste of energies and the source of hatred and misunderstanding between nations. Moreover, his article attempted to demonstrate that investments in imperial markets were, at least in the short term, unprofitable. The case of China had in his opinion clearly confirmed the validity of his theory, since it had revealed that

> even if the whole of China were thus parcelled out to other industrial nations, and these nations imposed such conditions as prohibited all direct import and export trade between England and Chinese ports-the most extreme assumption of a hostile attitude-it by no means follows that England would not reap enormous benefits in the expansion of her foreign trade[6].

Drawing upon international events, Hobson launched a personal crusade which lasted throughout the Edwardian

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5. J.A. Hobson, "Free Trade and Foreign Policy", p. 177.

6. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 169.

years against England's social status quo. It was then that he became a member of the small élite of thinkers described by H.G. Wells in 1901 as "now rather aimless-men who have disconsolately watched the collapse of the old liberalism- [and who] will be clearly telling themselves and one another of their adhesion to [a] new ideal of reconstruction"[7]. Hobson always admired Richard Cobden's ideal of international co-operation. Yet his desire to re-build British society soon led him carefully to emphasize the gulf separating his own social thought and that of his model. As he explained much later in his Richard Cobden (1919), "To modern men and women it may seem strange that this policy [Cobden's internationalism] should be conceived so exclusively or primarily in terms of governmental non-intervention"[8]. At the turn of the century Hobson felt that such laissez-faire, although acceptable in Cobden's day, had now become totally obsolete. In his opinion, both dimensions of national life, external and internal, were inseparable, and he was convinced that the internal difficulties of England ought to be resolved

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7. H.G. Wells, Anticipations-of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon human Life and Thought (1901), (New York, 1902), p. 299.

8. J.A. Hobson, Richard Cobden-The International Man (1919), (London, 1968), p. 21.

as first priorities before initiating any imperial venture.

As his article on Free Trade clearly shows, the events in China, where the British Empire used garrisons and gunboats to fight against Russia and Germany for the control of the Yang-tse valley, had persuaded Hobson that "to organise the forces of political nationalism in order to secure by an appeal to military power the maximum quantity of commerce for the members of a nation is, in terms of the case, to revert from a higher to a lower stage of social life"[9]. This early denunciation of the Imperialists' lust for wealth basically proceeded from his personal understanding of what British society ought to become in the near future. He then conceived Britain's problems in simple, black and white, terms: "The issue, in a word, is between external expansion of markets and of territory on the one hand, and internal social and industrial reforms upon the other"[10]. In short, Hobson was warning his contemporaries: instead of seeking the gain of exotic markets, it was urgent that they start devoting all their energies to raise the English working classes' standard of living and power to buy national products. With an improved social equilibrium, Hobson

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9. J.A. Hobson, "Free Trade and Foreign Policy", p. 168.

10. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 179.

contended, the need for imperial assets would become less imperative. Yet his article's conclusion still retained an hopeful tone: "Even now it is surely not too late to abandon the notion that we must fight for markets"[11]. He could not foresee that Britain would shortly tumble down in South Africa to an ever lower stage of social life.

In 1898, L.T. Hobhouse, who had never met Hobson, nevertheless convinced The Manchester Guardian to hire him as Special Commissioner in South Africa, on the basis of his previous denunciations of imperialism. The offer turned out to be one of the greatest opportunities of his career. Hobson's timely stay in South Africa during the summer and autumn of 1899 provided him with a kind of revelation: with the outbreak of the conflict he realized that "The British people were being led into a crime by capitalism for the sake of capitalist interests"[12]. The Boer War (1899-1902) left him even more convinced of the unbearable nature of the status quo, and established his reputation as a leading

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11. J.A. Hobson, "Free-Trade and Foreign Policy", p. 180.

12. Richard Koebner and Helmut D. Schmidt, Imperialism-The Story and Significance of a Political Word 1840-1960 (Cambridge, Engl., 1964), p. 227.

opponent both of the war and the national sclerosis. He returned to England when the military conflict broke out, and contributed to a sensational lecturing tour of the country against imperialism: quite often, the meetings were broken up.

In "Capitalism and Imperialism in South Africa" (1900) and The War in South Africa-Its Causes and Effects (1900), Hobson led a frontal and passionate attack against what he characterised as the "pseudo-patriotic cloak"[13], or respectable veneer of patriotism, hiding the true nature of the conflict. These writings were highly challenging and disturbing: as observed in 1900 by The Manchester Guardian, a leader of anti-war feelings in the country,

> Many will find it hard to accept Mr. Hobson's suggestions; it is so mortifying to our self-esteem that everybody will try not to accept it as long as he can. But it is dismally well backed with evidence: it cannot be pooh-poohed[14].

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13. J.A. Hobson, "Capitalism and Imperialism in South Africa", The Contemporary Review, LXXVII (January, 1900), p. 15.

14. The Manchester Guardian, January, 4, 1900.

Hobson already was an intellectual heretic when he became in 1902 the author of a kind of British socio-economical J'accuse on the Boer War experience defiantly entitled Imperialism.

Imperialism: A Study was more than an enthusiastic charge against Jingoism or the shameful British behaviour in South Africa. It was essentially an effective and equally passionate denunciation of various capitalist "sins". As emphasized in 1903 by a Fabian News review of the book, "Mr. Hobson is bringing an indictment against, not governments or parties, or even nations, but practically humanity itself"[15]. Indeed, it aimed not merely at imperialism, but instead at the core of the existing world order, namely capitalism itself. D.K. Fieldhouse is right when he describes Imperialism as "a pamphlet for the times... [which] can only be properly understood on the basis that his interest, then and throughout his life, was with the social and economic problems of Britain"[16].

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15. Fabian News, XII (February, 1903), p. 7.

16. D.K. Fieldhouse, "'Imperialism': An Historiographical Revision", The Economic Review, XIV (1961), p. 188.

Yet despite its undeniable qualities, Imperialism fails to provide one with a clear exposition of Hobson's social ideas at the turn of the century. It's dual thesis, "Imperialism is the fruit of this false economy: 'social reform' is its remedy"[17], was far too ambitious to allow for a coherent development. Nevertheless, it is still considered as one of Hobson's finest achievements, and posterity has retained Henry Noel Brailsford's conviction that it was "one of the most notable contributions of our time to the scientific study of contemporary politics"[18]. This somewhat excessive view endured for two main reasons. Firstly, Imperialism is said to have fascinated the mind of its most famous reader of all, Lenin. And also, the fervent radical tone it used made Hobson sound, for a while, revolutionary. That Lenin, who aimed at destroying the existing system, could agree with Hobson, who always wished to cure it, could only be the result of a serious misunderstanding. To comprehend this, one has to look for one factor: the book's own defects. Moreover, not only did Hobson soon modify his views on imperial economic

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17. J.A. Hobson, Imperialism: A Study (London, 1902), p. 93.

18. Henry Noel Brailsford, The War of Steel and Gold, p. 74.

problems in International Trade (1904), but The Social Problem, The Crisis of Liberalism or even Work and Wealth are far clearer presentations of his social thought.

Imperialism basically was a pamphlet against the "bad" and "irrational" capitalism operating in South Africa and in the rest of the Empire. According to Hobson, the adoption of imperialism served

> the double purpose of securing private material benefits for favoured classes of investors and traders at the public cost, while sustaining the general cause of conservatism by diverting public energy and interest from domestic agitation to external employment[19].

Since imperialism was the logical ally of conservatism, Hobson was convinced that "political and social reforms would purge capitalism and imperialism"[20]. In other words, he felt that capitalism could be redeemed, rescued from its present dismal condition through the use of liberal social reforms. The Empire, Hobson argued, did not benefit

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19. J.A. Hobson, Imperialism: A Study, p. 383.

20. Alan Hodgart, The Economics of European Imperialism (New York, 1977), p. 25.

the nation: in reality it was supporting a financiers' conspiracy to spoil Britain's energies in overseas investments. H.N. Brailsford, in The War of Steel and Gold (1914) agreed with Hobson's thesis:

> Regarded as a national undertaking Imperialism does not pay. Regarded as a means of assuring unearned incomes to the governing class, it emphatically does pay. It is not true that trade follows the flag. It is true that the flag follows investments[21].

Like most of his contemporaries, Hobson firmly believed that the Empire was a profitable venture for a minority of magnates: if they could only be led to invest in the home market, then Britain's problems would be solved. As Peter Clarke explains, "Hobson needed a conspiracy because he believed in liberal democracy"[22].

Since he was convinced that domestic trade could make up entirely for the loss of the Empire, Hobson postulated a new economic system based on an innovative

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21. H.N. Brailsford, The War of Steel and Gold, p. 78.

22. Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 92.

mechanism of exchange and an emphasis on national self-reliance. The economist J.B. Say had persuaded the financial élite that over-supply was impossible: Hobson tried to demonstrate that it was not only possible, but all too real. It follows that Imperialism was also an attempt to initiate a serious discussion of the British workers' concrete capacity to consume the goods they produced, and an application of the author's under-consumption theory.

Carried away by his pamphleteer's zeal, Hobson unfortunately had misunderstood crucial elements of reality. Because of his faith in man, "he sought a rational explanation for the behaviour of others"[23], while forgetting that reality was often far from being always consistent with reason and intellect. This is why he was led to attribute an undue importance to the role played by economic motives in imperialism. But could the diversion of British capital to foreign markets alone explain the creation of the Empire? In reality, Hobson's enthusiasm blinded him to the fact that

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23. A.J.P. Taylor, Essays in English History (London, 1976), p. 173.

imperial trade was far from being always a source of profits. As D.K. Fieldhouse notes,

> to maintain that Britain had found it necessary to acquire these territories [before 1917] because of an urgent need for new fields for investment is simply unrealistic; and, with the rejection of this hypothesis, so ingeniously conjured up by Hobson, the whole basis of his theory that 'imperialism' was the product of economic necessity collapses[24].

In other words, Hobson's perspective had been too narrowly based on economic causes and neglected the crucial political aspect of the question. Imperialism was a powerful appeal for social reform at home, but quite an unsatisfactory interpretation of the roots of the British empire; as its author himself later explained, it was "an excessive and too simple advocacy of the economic determination of history"[25].

Like his model Richard Cobden, Hobson was neither

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24. D.K. Fieldhouse, "'Imperialism': An Historiographical Revision", p. 199.

25. J.A.Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 63.

a little Englander nor a partisan of the establishment of an empire rooted in violence and mercantile interests. Not surprisingly, this rather vague stand was bound to provoke questions concerning the true nature of his faith in Free Trade. Interestingly enough, many thought that Hobson momentarily rejected Free Trade during the Boer War crisis, as he had reacted very strongly against the obvious bankruptcy of the prevailing economic system. To some of his contemporaries, his pleas for the development of the home market inspired by his theory of under-consumption sounded like an exaggerated form of protectionism. Leonard Courtney, for example, felt in 1903 that Hobson, although right in his denunciation of the Imperialist's greed, was however simultaneously advocating an undeserved desecration of a long tradition of open frontiers:

> It is the fondest of delusions to suppose that a nation /England/ which has arrived at the situation thus described can hope to escape from it by imposing obstacles to importations from other countries. Its position has been reached through freedom of commerce, and restrictions on this freedom, so far from helping to preserve its

> superiority, could only accelerate its decline[26].

Was the Hobsonian notion of Free Trade disguised protectionism? In fact, despite the depressing impact of the South African conflict on English society as well as on his own thought, Hobson was to remain from 1901 until the 1930's an active member of the Free Trade Union, a liberal organization fighting against tariff reform. As he explained in International Trade (1904):

> It is no better for a nation than for a man to live alone... Protection, like Imperialism, is a class policy, instinctively devised in order to break and divide, and so to render impotent, the blind, ill-directed forces of social reform which are groping after the establishment of a juster economic order[27].

At the turn of the century, Sidney Webb had been much impressed by the Liberal-Imperialist credo, and considered the empire as a potential means to transform

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26. Leonard Courtney, "What is the Advantage of Foreign Trade?, The Nineteenth Century and After, LIII (May, 1903), p. 812.

27. J.A. Hobson, International Trade-An Application of Economic Theory (1904), (New York, 1906), pp. 179 and 181.

England into an efficient society. Imperialism, he believed, was an ineluctable development of the Zeitgeist, the natural extension of a progressive civilisation. Indeed, the Limps even had plans for the establishment of a World-State, a kind of perfect social organism devoid of waste and injustice which would reflect perfectly their bureaucratic ideal. In sharp contrast, Hobson's views were vehemently against any form of domination, in the case of nations as well as in the relations between the state and the individual. Yet this is not to suggest that he never felt concerned by international problems. In fact, as he demonstrated in Towards International Government (1915), he always was a keen advocate of the creation of a workable international organism to prevent wars. On the issue of imperialism, Hobson and Webb were clearly standing worlds apart.

The Boer War crisis confirmed Hobson in his impression that the existing world order was utterly uncongenial to him: in 1901, he considered it as a "twelvemonth's debauch in these ancient and abandoned stews of savage lust"[28]. One should therefore not be

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28. J.A. Hobson, The Psychology of Jingoism (London, 1901), p. 40.

surprised to discover a utopian dimension in the bitter denunciations of industrialism which he wrote during those years. The war, which blatantly disclosed all the British nation's shortcomings, left him acutely aware of the brutality involved in modern industry. The contrast between past and present even led him to evoke the past in nostalgic terms such as: "We must get back the 'sturdy yeomen' stock of yore"[29]. As he explained much later in 1932,

> Whereas, under simple and more primitive conditions each man worked mainly for himself, producing his own necessaries of life or trading personally with his neighbours, Capitalism has made him work for society without at the same time giving him a corresponding claim upon society for his livelihood[30].

But not only was man alienated at work: his mind, too, was progressively losing its independence. In short, democracy was in danger.

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29. J.A. Hobson, "The Approaching Abandonment of Free Trade", The Fortnightly Review, (1902), p. 443.

30. J.A. Hobson, Preface to the 2nd ed. of H.M. Hyndman, Commercial Crises of the Nineteenth Century (1932), (New York, 1967), p. viii.

Although Hobson now appears as a somewhat over-confident and naïve rationalist, it is essential to remember that he always shared the psychologist William McDougall's belief that "mankind is only a little reasonable and to a great extent very unintelligently moved in quite unreasonable ways"[31]. It was the Boer War, rendered possible by the joint impacts of the alliance of capital and mob on the one hand, and the pervading Jingoism in all classes of society on the other, which prompted Hobson to reflect seriously on the problem of social psychology. With the shameful war experience in mind, he gloomily argued in The Psychology of Jingoism that the prevailing social organisation was destroying the last remnants of the individual citizen's dignity and common sense:

> The rapid and numerous changes in the external structure of modern civilization have been accompanied by grave unsettlement of the inner-life; breaking up of time-honoured dogmas, a collapse of principles in politics, religion, and morality have sensibly reduced the power of resistance to strong

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31. William McDougall, An Introduction to Social Psychology (London, 1908), p. 11.

passionate suggestions in the individuals of all classes[32].

This dismal state of affairs was particularly intolerable for him since he believed, like Sidney Webb, in the power of men to influence the course of their collective destiny and rejected any idea of historical determinism. Hobson felt that "the mistake consists in regarding the 'laws' and 'forces' as powers external to the mind of man. The only direct efficient forces in history are human motives"[33]. Indeed, even the South African War could not completely destroy his abiding faith in man. To guarantee the survival of the rule of democracy in a world threatened by Jingoism and other dreadful "isms" and where the individual's mind was much too easily captured by the Press, Hobson could only propose one solution: the combination of moral and structural changes. Lowes Dickinson wrote during those years that "If an ideal is to result, an ideal must be willed"[34]. Following a similar logic, Hobson's will was then busy providing England

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32. J.A. Hobson, The Psychology of Jingoism, p. 13.

33. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 84.

34. Lowes Dickinson quoted in "Curves and Ideals", The Times Literary Supplement, (December 10, 1908), p. 458.

with a vision and with principles for social action: indeed, with The Social Problem-Life and Work, he became one of his generation's holder of what his friend Graham Wallas somewhat pompously described as "the torch of conscious life"[35].

A book review in Fabian News observed that Hobson found in The Social Problem (1901) "a theme much more to his taste [than theoretical economic discussions]"[36]. It can even be said that if Hobson's stand against imperialism was an illustration of his social views, then The Social Problem was a direct and clear exposition of the same ideal. The book's argument sprang from Hobson's desire to comprehend the question: "Why Political Economy throw[s] no light upon our darkness?"[37]. According to him, the roots of the problem were obvious:

> buoyant confidence and magnificent conceptions of social progress no longer sway men's minds; it is a day of small things, and men

35. Graham Wallas, Human Nature in Politics (1908) 2nd ed., (London, 1910), p. 296.

36. Fabian News, vol. XI, no. 7 (September, 1901), p. 26.

37. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 19.

> actually glory in the smallness of their thoughts and hopes, as indicative of safety and thoroughness, forgetting that great nations and great men had ever 'hitched their Waggon to a star', taking all knowledge for their province, and reaching with a reckless amplitude of grasp after some dearly-loved, but dimly-seen ideal[38].

Hobson's description of England in The Social Problem was highly distressing: everywhere he witnessed the evil consequences of poverty, waste and inefficiency. The majority of English citizens led lives in 1901, he argued, "not worth living, so far as measurements of life are possible; they are living a life definitely worse in almost all respects than of "savages" in any fairly fertile land"[39]. For Hobson, a new collective social project based on a re-statement of the doctrine of democracy was the only practicable alternative to counter the very real degradation of English society. Much impressed at the time by Maeterlinck's notion of "the Spirit of the Hive", and by the belief that society

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38. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 2.

39. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 13.

was an organism, with the citizens playing the role of cells, he felt that

> It is quite evident that the conception of Society as a moral organism negates the old idea of political equality based on the notion that every member of a political society had an inherent right to the same power as every other in determining the action of Society[40].

Indeed, he argued that the state, not the idea of natural individual rights, should serve as the basis of democracy. As he explained in 1902, "so the idea of Society as a political organism insists that the general will and wisdom of the Society, as embodied in the State, shall determine the best social use of all the social property taken by taxation[41].

Accordingly, Hobson did not devise in The Social Problem a utopian science of Political Economy. Instead, he outlined a social project involving what he called "Humanitarian Socialism". Its aim was ambitious, since

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40. J.A. Hobson, "The Re-Statement of Democracy", The Contemporary Review, LXXXI (February, 1902), p. 266.

41. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 266.

it attempted to

> resolve the opposition of individual and society, with particular reference to the economic basis of life, in order to effect, not a balance or a compromise, but a genuine harmony or reconcilement of the opposed claims of Individualism and Socialism[42].

This Hobsonian "Humanitarian Socialism" of 1901 had a lot in common with Fabian Socialism, since it also thought in terms of Poor Laws, Factory Acts, Educational policies, the public supply of gas, water, and tramways in municipal government, and the prevention of industrial abuses. Indeed, it attributed a "Social Utility"[43] to the state: a mission as protector of the interests of all the classes of the community. The emerging joint-stock companies, in particular, seriously worried him:

> Those who imagine that it remains to the public interest to permit private monopolies to plunder the consumer, and then to force the

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42. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 219.

43. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 197.

> plunderers to disgorge by means of taxation, have not mastered either the intricacies of taxation, or the cunning which monopolies, such as the Standard Oil Trust, employ to dodge taxation[44].

Yet at this point Hobson hesitated to advocate the control of the state over industry, and with the exception of the nationalization of railways, his proposals to stop this threatening evolution remained rather vague. Since he desired the establishment of state Socialism, not that of state monopoly, he carefully distinguished his own position as a Liberal from the one of contemporary socialist thinkers. According to him, there existed "right limits /to/ this humanitarian Socialism"[45], and this limit basically consisted of the individual's inalienable liberty.

Hobson always took pride of calling himself a "humanist"; G.D.H. Cole even referred to the latter's "quintessential humanism"[46]. As he explained much later

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44. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 177.

45. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 202.

46. G.D.H. Cole, "J.A. Hobson", New Statesman, July 5, 1958.

in 1919, using an almost Ruskinian tone,

> If the term [Humanism] sounds a little 'precious' or 'pedantic' that can't be helped. It can and ought to be rescued from these contemptuous implications. For it is wanted to express the need and demand that society shall be so transformed as to furnish for all its members a fully human life[47].

Characteristically, however, he nowhere defined precise means to guarantee the achievement of his democratic ideal, and he never drafted "Webbian" devices which might have brought his thought to the level of real politics. It is in fact impossible to picture Hobson working for the London County Council as Webb did. His faith in the powers of ideas was such that it often led him to believe that general principles were powerful enough to transform mentalities. Prompted by his conviction that man had to be reconciled with his collectivity, all he did was to argue in The Social Problem that no state legislation or orders ought to ever destroy a citizen's legitimate interest in his job or his personal inclinations.

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47. J.A. Hobson, Introduction to J. Bruce Glasier, The Meaning of Socialism (London, 1919), p. xii.

And this, Hobson felt,was particularly true in the case of the artist since "the soul of art is essentially and eternally opposed to officialism and routine, however carefully and humanely ordered it may be"[48]. Indeed, he could have agreed with the art critic Roger Fry's contention that "It is impossible that the artist should work for the plutocrat: he must work for himself, because it is only by so doing that he can perform the function for which he exists; it is only by working for himself that he can work for mankind"[49]. In fact, Hobson considered the artist as a kind of glorification of an ideal relationship between man and society. Yet he had come to realise, in a break with the liberal tradition, that the notion contending "That every man's life is of equal value to Society, in the sense that it can yield equal social service, is not only false but absurd"[50]. An ideal community, one perfectly equalitarian, was thus unattainable. Since the workers as well as the artists needed a certain amount of self-initiative to guarantee the harmonious functioning of the social organism, Hobson

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48. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 244.

49. Roger Fry, "The Artist in the Great State", in H.G. Wells et al., The Great State-Essays in Construction, p. 257.

50. J.A.Hobson, "The Re-Statement of Democracy", p. 267.

could propose only the distribution of wealth to each according to his needs as a reforming principle.

Hobson was aware, of course, that his Humanitarian Socialism sounded like a series of palliatives, as "the provision of a social ambulance which shall take care of those wounded in the fray"[51]. Long-term solutions were in his opinion, as well as for Webb, to be provided at least in part by the science of Eugenics. Throughout all the Edwardian years, he stood alone amidst the Liberal thinkers to persist in believing that Eugenics might be able to stop the progression of the main enemy of democracy, mob rule[52]. Yet while reviewing in 1911 Havelock Ellis's The Problem of Race-Regeneration, Hobson carefully insisted on the necessity to maintain a moderate position on the subject:

> Though there may be much exaggeration in the fears of racial degeneration which prevail in certain quarters the better understanding of heredity and the recognition that bad physical and moral stock is implicated in most

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51. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 204.

52. see Michael Freeden, The New Liberalism-An Ideology of Social Reform, p. 193.

> of our grave social maladies compel us to revise our art of social progress in the light of this new knowledge...though 'goodness' or 'badness', 'fitness' or 'unfitness' will remain in many cases matter of controversy, a general body of agreement is reached regarding certain undesirable inheritance[53].

Eugenics, as defined by him, constituted a useful method to prevent the reign of anarchy and laissez-faire in social thought. Moreover, instead of primarily dealing with the quantitative aspect of the social problem, it emphasized its qualitative dimension. As he explained in 1914,

> it may well be urged that the crowning testimony to the validity of the human law of distribution will consist in the higher quality of human life it will evoke by liberating and nourishing the natural art of eugenics in society[54].

The use of Eugenics, it followed, was for him a right step

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53. J.A. Hobson, "Race-Regeneration", The Manchester Guardian, October, 10, 1911.

54. J.A. Hobson, Work and Wealth-A Human Valuation, p. 319.

towards the betterment of the quality of life enjoyed by everyone.

Hobson's Humanitarian Socialism was based entirely on a search for social harmony; its purpose was to serve, not to annihilate, a new ideal of democracy and public justice. His views on the education ladder devised by the Fabians, for example, were for this reason in sharp contrast with Webb's. As he characteristically explained in 1909, the Fabians' ideal of meritocracy in education fostered

> a sociology in which the individual is understood to be dependent upon his own thrift, his own interest for his own success in life-a sociology under which property is sacred... Instead of organic remedies for social disease, you would have charitable palliatives recommended[55].

Whereas for Webb, Hobson felt, education could be used as a means to produce potential leaders, he himself emphasized

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55. J.A. Hobson quoted in Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour-The Struggle for London 1885-1914, p. 209.

its role as instigator of a sound, democratic, public opinion. In short, he considered that "What is needed is not an educational ladder narrowing as it rises, to be climbed with difficulty by a chosen energetic few... It is a broad, easy stair, and not a narrowing ladder, that is wanted, one which will entice every one to rise"[56]. Yet as we will see, Hobson's thought was not entirely devoid of elitist tendencies. His disagreement with Webb on education was essentially the result of a misunderstanding, but remains interesting because it was symptomatic of deeper contrasts between the two. Indeed, where Webb had pleaded in favour of a national minimum of civilised life, Hobson promoted an all-embracing notion of common welfare. As Michael Freeden rightly observes, Hobson's social ideal surpassed Webb's because "in conjunction with his concept of organism, [it] encompasses all human needs, 'lower' and 'higher', physical and spiritual, provided, of course, they comply with the demands of social utility"[57]. To Webb's plans for the

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56. J.A. Hobson, "The Extension of Liberalism", The English Review, III (November, 1909), p. 683.

57. Michael Freeden, "J.A. Hobson as a New Liberal Theorist: Some Aspects of his Social Thought Until 1914", p. 429.

attainment of an ideal community Hobson added the fulfillment of man's potential and liberty as ultimate criteria for the evaluation of a democratic civilisation.

High ideals such as these often had for a logical consequence the public denunciation of Hobson as a mere day-dreamer and disguised elitist. In 1910, for example, The Times Literary Supplement described his output as follows:

> Mr. Hobson writes for a world in which things are otherwise- a world in which pretty nearly everyone is capable, if only he has the chance, and in which there is a general desire to do a good day's work without the spur of necessity. It is Mr. Hobson's own world[58].

To a certain extent, this charge appears justified. When Hobson defined in 1902 a world in which

> The cerebral centres, the expert governing class, determine the organic policy, but the determination of this policy is based upon a

58. "Two Conceptions of Citizenship", The Times Literary Supplement, (May 12, 1910), p. 171.

> mass of information conveyed from members, while the detailed execution of the policy is again directed by the members and their cells, which distribute the work in accordance with adjustments of cellular self-interest that are not referred to the central power[59],

he indeed seemed to have lost track of reality and to dream of a state ruled by the "experts". Yet as a whole, his Humanitarian Socialism is remarkable for its pragmatism. While busy finding immediate cures for the social problems of his day, it was only natural that he should have entertained from time to time buoyant visions of a world where there would exist no need for the kind of solutions he was prescribing. As he made clear in The Social Problem, explaining his position,

> the present cannot be wholly sacrificed to the chances of an ideal future. Some of these palliatives may even prepare the social body for more effective remedies by redressing in particular the evil effects of social injustice[60].

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59. J.A. Hobson, "The Re-Statement of Democracy", p. 270.

60. J.A. Hobson, The Social Problem, p. 204.

In short, before being a utopian thinker, Hobson was an optimist. Democracy, he hoped, would in time evolve

> a specialised 'head', an expert official class, which shall draft laws upon information that comes to them from innumerable sources through class and local representation, and shall administer the government subject to protests similarly conveyed[61].

Hobson's self-portrait immediately after the Boer War crisis is revealing: in his own words, he then was a "lecturer for ethical societies, controversial anti-Imperialist and semi-socialist in the Press"[62]. In sharp contrast with the Webbs' blindness towards the forthcoming political developments in England, he already was keenly advocating the creation of a new national political party based on an alliance between a labour party and the Liberals. In 1901, he considered Trade Unionism as more than ready to step onto the political stage:

> If ever the time was ripe for an

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61. J.A. Hobson, The Crisis of Liberalism-New Issues of Democracy (London, 1909), p. 85.

62. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 64.

> effective Labour Party it is now. The old Liberal Party is rotten to its core, divided in just as many separate issues: the nucleus of a Labour Party already exists in the enthusiastic I.L.P.... If the latter body could be got to waive the assertion of certain ideals, which, even if sound and ultimately desirable, lie far outside the range of political vision, a Labour Party might be formed which would realise in this country the 'Socialisme sans Doctrines' which an able French sociologist has recently discovered in Australasia[63].

Hobson had come to realize that a reasonable version of Socialism, as personified by Labour, could constitute a potential complement of Liberalism and might indeed "save" the Party. During those years, however, the Conservatives' rule left few opportunities of success for such "advanced" views, and Hobson spent most of the next five years touring in the United States and Canada. The time was not ripe for new Liberalism yet.

This prolonged sojourn away from England played an eminently fruitful role in Hobson's intellectual evolution.

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63. J.A. Hobson, "Labour Representation and the I.L.P.", The Labour Leader, (October 19, 1901).

It brought him into closer contact with international problems, and more importantly, it led him to witness the development of the kind of community he dreamed of for his own country. The emerging collective spirit that he perceived in Canada, in particular, let him entertain high hopes for the future:

> Now the really remarkable event in Canada is the recent quickening of this self-same faith, not a blind faith in a Providence outside ourselves that is going to do 'big things' for us while we sit still, but a compelling impetus to take things in hand ourselves, and force them to take shape according to our will[64].

His Canadian tour, in short, appears to have confirmed his belief in men's collective ability to influence their own destiny.

While in the United States, Hobson was a perceptive observer of the racial problem, writing in 1903 "It is no exaggeration to say that the democracy of America is on

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64. J.A. Hobson, Canada To-day (London, 1906, p. 7.

its trial in finding a solution of this negro problem"[65]. And here once again, he emphasized "the inability of a surgical operation to effect a permanent and complete cure of diseases in the body politics"[66]. Moreover, his observations on the Americans' understanding of economic phenomena such as the growth of Trusts and the concentrative forces in modern industry induced him to re-write entirely in 1906 the sections related to these issues in his Evolution of Modern Capitalism. The world economy, he argued in the revised edition, was undergoing extensive transformations: "it has come to pass that in every field of capitalist industry joint-stock enterprise has been rapidly displacing privately-owned businesses"[67]. These developments left him optimistic about the future course of international relations:

> In what important ways this economic internationalism is moulding world-politics

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65. J.A. Hobson, "The Negro Problem in the United States", The Nineteenth Century and After, LIV (October, 1903), p. 593.

66. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 581.

67. J.A. Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism-A Study of Machine Production (London, 1906), p. 237.

> is obvious, the cross-ownership among nations is by far the most substantial guarantee of the development of a general policy of peace. Economic internationalism is the precursor and the moulder of political internationalism[68].

Yet as Hobson explained in his Confessions, "these vivid experiences tended to over-stress my sense of the dangers of a dominant capitalism"[69]. Not until 1907, when he edited the posthumous work of his American friend Henry D. Lloyd, A Sovereign People-A Study of Swiss Democracy, did Hobson appear to have found a truly satisfactory model of government. Lloyd's description of the use of referendum as a means to secure democracy. "(The people must be sovereigns because, in the long run and on the average, their decisions will be the most unselfish and the wisest")[70], reflected to a large extent Hobson's own convictions. As a whole, these travels gave him the impression of witnessing the evolution from theoretical to practical acceptance of social equality in politics; in Hobson's words, they brought him

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68. J.A. Hobson, The Evolution of Modern Capitalism (1906), pp. 237-238.
69. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 70.
70. Henry Demarest Lloyd quoted in J.A. Hobson, preface to A Sovereign People-A Study of Swiss Democracy (New York, 1907), p. x.

> into close contact with practical affairs of various countries, strengthened my distinctive attitude in social thinking, viz. the testing of all political and economic conduct by the criteria of human welfare, however difficult and imperfect that process may be regarded from any standpoint of scientific exactitude[71].

In 1905, while still in the United States, Hobson was recalled by L.T. Hobhouse to work as a journalist for the new Liberal daily The Tribune. The same man who launched him on his South African adventure thus directly contributed to another watershed in his career, this time his involvement in the influential circle of the new Liberals. Hobhouse, who according to Hobson possessed "a clearer, fuller conception of the humanist interpretation [than the one] to which I had been moving"[72], consistently played for him the role of mentor concerning socio-political issues. Not only did they share a similar outlook in politics (both argued in favour of an alliance between the Liberal party and Labour): their views on society often coincided. As Peter Weiler explains, Hobhouse longed for an "ideal of Humanity [which] would allow both cooperation and

71. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 70.

72. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 79.

individualism"[73], and that was also the "dream" shared by all prominent new Liberal thinkers, including Hobson.

Despite the fact that Hobson's experience at The Tribune was short-lived, it had the merit of indirectly leading him in 1906 to join the all-star staff of H.W. Massingham's Nation. With the paper's other regular contributors Hobhouse, H.W. Nevinson, J.L. Hammond and C.F.G. Masterman, Hobson actively participated in the Nation lunches, the braintrust of the Liberal party and "a famous institution [where Hobson] could delight everyone with his illuminating shafts of wit"[74]. With Campbell-Bannerman securely in power since 1906 these Liberals of various creeds were then enthusiastically re-stating Liberalism. In 1903, G.K. Chesterton had proclaimed in dismay that "There are no longer party principles"[75]: from 1906 until 1910, the new Liberals tried to demonstrate that his analysis of the situation was utterly wrong, that

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73. Peter Weiler, "The New Liberalism of L.T. Hobhouse", Victorian Studies, XVI (1972), p. 149.

74. Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 108.

75. G.K. Chesterton quoted in Fabian News, Vol. XIII, no. 2, (February, 1903), p. 5.

principles could indeed be made the corner stone of politics. And for a very short while, they believed in their triumph.

As observed by C.F.G. Masterman in 1906, "The General Election of last January was hailed as the beginning of a new era in English politics"[76]. Although the election undeniably reflected a major shift of the English public opinion, the fortunes of the Liberal party remained, however, far from certain. As the perceptive observer Frank Holmes rightly diagnosed in 1907, it was confronted by major internal dissensions:

> The Liberals of to-day are at the very crisis of their fate; they dare not go forward, they cannot go back; while to stand is impossible. Mental habits are notoriously difficult to change; and its innate distrust of State interference, together with a constitutional inability to see to the roots of things, has resulted in our Liberalism offering cures which are not cures, and remedies which remedy nothing[77].

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76. C.F.G. Masterman, "Liberalism and Labour", The Nineteenth Century and After, (November, 1906), p. 706.

77. Frank Holmes, "Socialism and Liberalism", The New Age, I (August 1, 1907).

As if to make matters worse, the new Prime Minister Herbert Asquith had the reputation of being a man of "little imaginative vision, [professing] a cold distrust of idealism and sentiment, [and] a dislike of anticipating the future"[78]. This was scarcely the kind of man one would expect to comply with H.W. Massingham's vision of a state which

> can set up a minimum standard of health and wage, below which it will not allow its citizens to sink; it can step in and dispense employment and restorative force under strictly specified conditions. This is not a problem of relief, it is a method of humanity[79].

Considering all the ideological clashes at the time within the Liberal rank and file, it is small wonder that one of Hobson's two significant books of 1909 was entitled The Crisis of Liberalism-New Issues of Democracy. Imperialism: A Study and The Social Problem had been expressions

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78. Alfred G. Gardiner, Pillars of Society (London, 1914), p. 115.

79. H.W. Massingham, preface to Winston Churchill, Liberalism and the Social Problem (London, 1909), pp. xix-xx.

of Hobson's basic social philosophy at the turn of the century. Similarly, The Industrial System and The Crisis of Liberalism shared a common purpose, this time to provide the Liberals in power with stimulating guidelines for action. If Hobson was ever close to being a "permeator" in the Webbian sense of the term, it was during the crucial year of 1909 when he outlined many elements of the measures advocated by Lloyd George's controversial budget.

Although The Industrial System was not the occasion for major transformations of his economic beliefs (indeed, G.D.H. Cole rightly characterized the book as "the most systematic exposition of Hobson's doctrine of under-consumption"[80]), it was nevertheless a brilliant economic complement to The Crisis of Liberalism. The book's central argument consisted in the denunciation of the existence of the "surplus", or unearned income, which Hobson accused of preventing the state from gaining the full share of its revenue. According to him, it seriously injured the industrial system by depriving

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80. G.D.H. Cole, "Obituary: J.A. Hobson 1858-1940", The Economic Journal (1940), p. 356.

> some factor of production, usually labour, of a payment necessary as a physical and moral stimulus of increasing efficiency; secondly, by relieving the recipients of 'surplus' of the necessity of productive exertion and thus atrophying the productive powers; thirdly by weakening the life and growth of the state in denying it the public income it requires[81].

Hobson felt at the time that the only way out of the national muddle consisted in a direct taxation of these hidden incomes. As he had explained in 1907, the state had a duty to apply taxation for "the purpose of securing for the State the income which is publicly created and which, therefore, can be publicly taken and publicly expended"[82]. He was convinced that the state had a kind of moral obligation to prevent the chronic unemployment resulting from a savage industrialism. In his opinion, only the control of the state could guarantee the establishment of an industrial system in which "the intrinsically interesting work shall be at a maximum and the burden of routine toil at a minimum"[83]. In short, Webb's plan for the betterment of the Grants in Aid system and Hobson's

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81. J.A. Hobson, The Industrial System-An Inquiry into Earned and Unearned Income (1909),(New York, 1969), p. 313.

82. J.A. Hobson, "'Earned' and 'Unearned', The Nation, (April 27, 1907).

83. J.A. Hobson, The Industrial System, p. 333.

demand for increased taxation proceeded from a common origin: the desire to find means to sponsor social reform.

Lloyd George's Budget of 1909 appeared at first as an illustration of Hobson's proposals, and was indeed in many ways the answer to his prayers. In order to lay the foundations for social reforms such as old age pensions, or expensive projects such as the development of the British Navy, it raised taxation on various luxuries and imposed a relatively small but revolutionary duty on land value. It was therefore only logical that Hobson should welcome the Budget in the following words: "the real force behind the Budget in the country is derived far less from any interest in finance, as such, than from an enthusiastic support of the social reforms which depend upon this finance"[84]. Coming after three rather disappointing years of Liberal rule, it sounded like a guarantee that all the new Liberals' projects would soon materialize.

Unfortunately for these aspirations, however, the

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84. J.A. Hobson, "The Significance of the Budget", The English Review, II (July, 1909), p. 795.

Budget raised such an outcry from the well-to-do classes that it was not accepted until after the General Election of 1910. England, Hobson was forced to admit in February, was left even more divided by the Liberal victory and suffered from a fundamental social dichotomy. There were those who worked with their hands, and those who did not: "never has the cleavage been so evident before. It is organised labour against the possessing and educated classes"[85]. Yet far from depressing Hobson, this tense social climate still permitted him to entertain high hopes about the future of democracy. He even foresaw that the "pressure of the organised workers for economic security and opportunity"[86], the emergence of labour forces on the political scene, was soon to give a coup de grâce to the already deliquescent British society.

In reality, social legislation advocated by the Liberals, covering especially unemployment, minimum wages and health insurance, were somewhat forgotten amidst intricate debates over the Irish Home Rule and the Welsh

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85. J.A. Hobson, "The General Election: A Sociological Interpretation", The Sociological Review, III (1910), p. 114.

86. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 116.

Disestablishment, not to mention the House of Lords crisis. Hobson had joined the Webbs' crusade to promote the break-up of the Poor Law in the hope that the government might be led to face seriously the problem of poverty. The campaign's larger aim was in reality the conversion of the political élite to the necessity of social reform. As the crusaders soon found out, however, noble ideals such as these were apparently hardly compatible with the imperatives of party politics. As Peter Clarke explains, the Liberal party "let down its intellectuals [after 1910] on a range of issues where its competence ought to have been guaranteed by its own historic tradition"[87]. Their minds filled with noble ideals, the reformers failed at first to perceive the obvious: that

> the Liberals' attitude to class, politics and industrial unrest, whenever they descended from abstract principle to a concrete instance, was a product not of their claimed position as a non-class party, but of the class position which the most of them occupied and represented[88].

87. Peter Clarke, Liberals and Social Democrats, p. 195.

88. Alun Howkins, "Edwardian Liberalism and Industrial Unrest", History Workshop, 4 (Autumn, 1977), p. 158.

In the same way that Sidney and Beatrice Webb were induced at the time to reconsider their faith in the experts, Hobson then began to realize that his admiration for the Liberal tradition might have seriously mislead him.

In The Crisis of Liberalism-New Issues for Democracy, Hobson had tried to persuade the Liberals that practical socialism, when appropriate, ought to become the intellectual basis on the party. He failed. Although the opposite thesis has unfortunately often been contended, new Liberalism never came close to constituting a political orthodoxy. Hobson had earnestly believed that the Socialists' influence had forced politicians "to fight with some champion more substantial than the ghosts of Whiggism and Toryism"[89]. While arguing in favour of the extension of the state's powers, he had cautiously fought against what he characterized as "the Frankenstein-monster view of 'Socialism'"[90]. But his fellow Liberals were sometimes hard to convince, and many were shocked, or even repelled, by his statements

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89. J.A. Hobson, "The Task of Realism", The English Review, (October, 1909), p. 550.

90. J.A. Hobson, "Is Socialism Tyranny?", The Nation, October 26, 1907.

of the following kind:

> Liberalism will probably retain its distinction from Socialism, in taking for its chief test of policy the freedom of the individual citizen rather than the strength of the State, though the antagonism of the two standpoints may tend to disappear in the light of progressive experience[91].

Inspired by his formidable enthusiasm, Hobson was convinced that "A larger and larger number of modern men and women are possessed by the duty and the desire to put the very questions which their parents thought shocking"[92]. Reality, as it turned out, was quite otherwise, and the Victorian political mores survived longer than he had foreseen. The Liberals, Hobson argued, "tended to lay an excessive emphasis upon the aspect of liberty which consists in an absence of restraint, as compared with the other aspect which consists in presence of opportunity"[93]. As might have been predicted, they reacted negatively to his "evolutionary idea

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91. J.A. Hobson, The Crisis of Liberalism, p. 93.

92. J.A. Hobson, "The Task of Realism", p. 551.

93. J.A. Hobson, The Crisis of Liberalism, p. 92.

of liberty"[94]. The cause of progressivism was gaining adherents, but much too slowly for his taste.

During the war years, Hobson, then known as the heretic of Limpsfield, Surrey, finally succumbed to his lifelong temptation, Labour-Socialism, while brooding over his past political alliances. However, he characteristically never openly admitted it and maintained until the end his firm belief that "Socialism as preached in this country seems to suffer from three incompatible and undesirable appeals, sentimentalism, over-regimentation and revolutionary force"[95]. In his own estimation, he had been "loosely but sincerely attached to Liberalism"[96]: when the Liberals in government abandoned Free Trade during the War, he could only resign his membership. Free Trade, he felt, "was a War casualty"[97]. After a hopeless campaign in 1918 as an Independent, he gradually transferred his political allegiance to Labour. Hobson had been walking all his life on the road towards Socialism, and had now reached his destination.

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94. J.A. Hobson, The Crisis of Liberalism, p. 93.

95. J.A. Hobson, "A British Socialism-Part I", The New Statesman and Nation, January 25, 1936.

96. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 126.

97. J.A. Hobson, Ibid., p. 123.

A peaceful Socialism, collaborating with industry and not too bureaucratic, then became his political credo. He could never forget his Edwardian ideal of Democratic Control, but doubts raised by a sombre social climate had seriously injured his former buoyant confidence in man.

## CHAPTER SIX

## CONCLUSION

> There are signs of a great intellectual and spiritual revival[1].
>
> - J.A. Hobson, 1909.

> The England of this generation is changing because Englishmen have had revealed to them another new world of relationships, of which they were before unconscious[2].
>
> - Sidney Webb, 1901.

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> I dreamt that all creation
> Re-moulded was completely:
> With youthful animation
> The earth was smiling sweetly[3]:

These words belong to Edward Moore's poem "Utopia" published shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. In retrospect, it seems to epitomize the very best of everything that the word "Edwardian" had come to stand for: creative

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1. J.A. Hobson, "The Task of Realism", p. 550.
2. Sidney Webb, "Lord Rosebery's Escape from Houndsditch", p. 369.
3. Edward Moore, "Utopia", The New Age, XIV (April 16, 1914), p. 742.

"dreams", plans for the transformation of the existing world, and confidence in the destiny of man. In short, it spoke about a civilisation that was soon to die, indeed, that was already dying. At the time when Moore wrote this poem, Hobson and Webb were disenchanted men. During a very brief but eminently fruitful era that coincided with the reign of Edward VII, politicians had listened to their proposals and social remedies and had often applied them to the living world. As intellectuals in politics, they had exercised a real impact on the development of their society by successfully demonstrating that an increase of the state's powers would be beneficial for everyone. In the words of A.J.P. Taylor, they were "heavy-weights of political combat"[4] like most intellectuals of the period. But these blessed days were over. In the troubled years preceeding the war, there suddenly was very little room left for their zeal in reforming society and their singular brand of high-mindedness. In the twenties, everything seemed possible again, and a congenial setting eventually guaranteed the triumph of their social and political ideas. But unfortunately, this recognition came

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4. A.J.P. Taylor, Essays in English History, p. 171.

too late. Neither Webb nor Hobson were ever able fully to regain the prodigious optimism which had characterized all their struggles during the Edwardian years. The Webbs had to go as far as Stalin's Russia to feel that they had discovered at last a political heaven, and Hobson was to remain thereafter a reluctant Socialist. It was really only after they died in the forties that people began to appreciate the full extent of the roles they had played in the making of modern Britain. Of course, they did not at any point of their careers really make history; rather, they had immersed their own lives in it to an exceptional degree.

As Lawrence Stone rightly observes, "Any given society is saddled with dysfunctional institutions and dysfunctional values"[5]. Yet for the generation of thinkers who like Webb and Hobson had reached intellectual awareness during the 1880's, the Victorian consensus was not merely dysfunctional: it had in fact proved bankrupt. After an often acute moral crisis, these young thinkers progressively discovered that the much revered books of

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5. Lawrence Stone, The Past and the Present (London, 1981), p. 10.

Ruskin and Mill did not correspond anymore with the reality of their day. Theoretically the greatest nation on earth, England was then plagued with severe economic difficulties, terrible poverty and a savage industrial system. Born in days of prosperity and confidence, nurtured in Victorian principles, Webb and Hobson were confronted twenty years later by the disappointing results of democracy and an abiding social status quo. The new economic forces had failed to destroy the hierarchical nature of British society, and the Liberals' laissez-faire policies had evolved into an economic chaos. In short, Victorian England appeared in the critical eyes of later Victorian and Edwardian dissenters as a rather sad failure: it had stagnated instead of progressing with history.

Yet it would be much too simplistic to describe the Edwardians as a generation "in revolt". Webb and Hobson, for example, were never at any point of their lives revolutionaries. Although their political struggles were often attempts to revive traditional Victorian ideals, pragmatism was as important as idealism in their projects. Rather paradoxically, they fought Victorianism using a very Victorian sense of moral duty. As Michael

Rose explains, "the problem for late Victorian and Edwardian intellectuals was not to abandon this strong heritage but to adapt it to the circumstances of a rapidly changing society"[6]. In order to secure the realization of their social ideas, these modern crusaders needed a highly efficient political instrument, and they soon discovered it in the form of a new slogan: reform of the state's powers.

Obsessed by the conviction that their generation was to witness the birth of a new civilisation, the Edwardian intellectuals felt compelled to write a stupendous series of works on ethical and political topics. In any list of publications of the period, one could be certain to encounter titles such as The Cry of the Poor, The Making of Citizens and To-Day's Work - Municipal Government the Hope of Democracy. There was nothing new, of course, in preoccupations of this kind. What was specific to the Edwardian era, however, was the sheer explosion of these works and the tone of urgency they manifested. The Edwardians were people in a hurry, trying desperately to rescue at the last minute a "sinking" civilisation. The joint impacts of Darwinism, the Great Depression (1873-1896), and the ascent of

6. Michael Rose, "Later Victorians and Edwardians", Victorian Studies, XVII (March, 1974), p. 326.

Socialism in the 1880's, to name but a few of a series of disruptive forces, had blatantly revealed to progressive thinkers of all creeds that the contemporary so-called sciences did not explain the world around them. Since, in the words of L.T. Hobhouse, their ultimate aim consisted in "the extension of the rational control of life"[7], every social science, every old economic tenet and certitude, all these were in need of extensive repair. The Edwardian reformers' self-imposed role, as true social dissenters, was to demonstrate to others that what was currently considered as liberty and democracy were simply lures. The task was immense: it called for earnest and energetic crusaders prompted by ideals of collective re-construction. Along with other intellectuals of their generation, the Fabian Socialist thinker Sidney Webb and the new Liberal J.A. Hobson had responded to this appeal to end the status quo. And in their particular cases, the enthusiasm seemed indestructible.

The foundations of Sidney Webb's basic philosophy of the state may be summarized in the following simple

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7. L.T. Hobhouse, Social Evolution and Political Theory (1911), (New York, 1913), p. 156.

words: democratic collectivism is the only means to guarantee the growth of individual liberty. In sharp contrast with Gertrude Himmelfarb's insinuation that "[the Webbs'] Machiavellianism was only a new form of utopianism, like any other, that required a rigid control of human beings"[8], Webb's lifelong efforts had in reality only one aim: the maximum development of each individual's life. As Ian Britain rightly emphasizes:

> Webb pitted his view of the world as an organism in which all the constituent parts had duties towards one another that must be fulfilled for the general well-being, even if their own particular development was thereby limited. He referred expressly to the element of beauty, as well of duty, inherent in the idea of the social organism[9].

In the light of these words, the enduring stereotyping of Sidney Webb as a heartless schemer appears totally unfounded. The main responsibility of the government, he felt, was the establishment of a National Minimum of life, not the subjugation of man. As he wrote in 1908,

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8. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Process, Purpose and Ego", The Times Literary Supplement, (June 25, 1976),p. 790.

9. Ian Britain, Fabianism and Culture: A Study in British Socialism and the Arts 1884-1918, p. 63.

> The lesson of economic and political science to the twentieth century is that only by such highly differentiated governmental action for all the several minorities that make up the community-only by the enforcement of some such policy of a National Minimum in Subsistence, Leisure, Sanitation and Education-will modern industrial communities escape degeneration and decay[10].

Moreover, Webb contended that this lesson had to be learned by Individualists and Socialists alike. England, in his opinion, would soon evolve from being a chaotic society to become a well-ordered community of classes. The strengthening of the existing system, not its destruction, was thus the corner stone of his vision of the world.

Like most Edwardian thinkers, Webb had discovered during his formative years that the roots of the crisis of the civilised world could be summed up using a single phrase: "What may be called an 'atomic' view of human society has been replaced by a more 'organic' conception"[11].

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10. Sidney Webb, "The Necessary Basis of Society", p. 667.

11. Sidney Webb, Towards Social Democracy?, p. 39.

Yet the emerging social organism was still in its infancy: to render it truly efficient and to reconcile the citizen's will with the general needs of the community, each of the individual cells that composed it ought to be induced to find the roles where they could be the most useful. As a Socialist, Webb believed, as we have seen, that the notion of "the fourfold path of collective administration"[12] was the precise means to achieve this end. All that was needed for the creation of an efficient community, he argued, was the state's control of industry, taxation and public services. And somewhat paradoxically, J.A. Hobson enthusiastically shared this faith in the welfare state's ability to transform British society.

Indeed, the Fabians' ideas found a highly receptive audience at a time when, as noted by H.N. Brailsford, "the thinking of Socialist idealists has imposed a constructive policy of domestic reform upon the present generation of Liberals"[13]. Whether consciously or not,

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12. Sidney Webb, Towards Social Democracy?, p. 39.

13. H.N. Brailsford, The War of Steel and Gold, p. 172.

most of the new Liberals of the period felt much attracted by the slogans propounded by the reasonable "Webbian" Socialism. As Hobson emphasized in 1907, the four-fold path of Socialism was "genuine Socialism, inasmuch as it involves the adoption of new functions by the State, increased interference with private enterprise and private property, and an expansion of the area of public employment"[14]. Yet convinced as he was that the true welfare of society was rooted in the survival of individual liberties and the abolition of the notion of personal rights, Hobson felt compelled to raise a vibrant warning against the Socialists' plans:

> Let them require that each new enlargement of State functions, each fresh interference with private property or enterprise shall justify itself by showing that it creates more liberty than it takes away, equalises and enlarges the aggregate of opportunities for healthy individual exertions and expressions, and strengthens the foundations of society, upon which individuals build their lives[15].

Sidney Webb was convinced that the extension of the control

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14. J.A. Hobson, "The Four-Fold Path of Socialism", The Nation, November 30, 1907.

15. J.A. Hobson, Ibid.

of the state would eventually allow each citizen to enjoy a more fruitful existence. Hobson, it seems, was less certain on this point.

Indeed, Hobson always remained frightened by the notion of a "God-State arbitrary in its will, as repressive of private liberty of thought and action, as cruel in its persecuting zeal, as any of the spiritual deities that have preceded it"[16]. As in the case of Webb, efficiency never became for him an end in itself, and he firmly believed that "social reform, whether applied through politics or not, consists in a thoughtful endeavour to discover and apply the minimum incentive for maximum personal efficiency"[17]. Hobson needed the help of the state to guarantee the establishment of his plans of "Humanitarian Socialism", but he feared that it might turn out in the end to be even more oppressive than the existing system. In short, he felt that the state was an instrument of reform to manipulate with infinite care.

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16. J.A. Hobson, God and Mammon-The Relations of Religion and Economics (New York, 1931), p. 58.

17. J.A. Hobson, "Are Riches the Wages of Efficiency?", The Nation, November 9, 1907.

Hobson, like many of his contemporaries, was strongly prejudiced by Webb's reputation for being an elitist schemer. As he wrote in 1906,

> Are we really convinced that the bright galaxy of humanised Mr. Haldanes, glorified Mr. Webbs and redeemed Lord Roseberys can really work the secular miracle of harmonising order with progress for the pacified World-State?[18].

Yet it should not be forgotten here that he, too, received for similar reasons his full share of severe criticisms. In 1902, for example, The Westminster Review argued that "Mr. Hobson seizes hold of the fact that recent discoveries show that the cells of an organism have some degree of mobilityand consciousness to rehabilitate the argument in favour of enslaving the units to the whole"[19]. Given the rather ambivalent nature of Hobson's stand towards collectivism, this charge now sounds highly surprising. In fact, it is obvious that the fundamental divergence between Webb's and Hobson's

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18. J.A. Hobson, "The New Aristocracy of Mr. Wells", The Contemporary Review, LXXXIX (April, 1909), p. 493.

19. Henry Wilson, "Society as an Organism", The Westminster Review, CLVIII (September, 1902), p. 294.

views of the state consisted in their respective emphasis on the importance of individual liberty. In contrast with Webb's pragmatism, Hobson seemed to expect almost too much of human nature and he remained an individualist until the end. His major aim, generous as it seemed, was doomed by its very nature to remain what it was: an ideal. When Hobson wrote in 1914, for example,

> Only as education and closer and more reliable communications elevated the organic structure of Society, imparting higher spirituality, more centrality and clearer consciousness to its life, should we expect any considerable rationalisation of the general will[20],

it is actually hard to believe that he could really have been so certain that he was right, so convinced that reason would triumph in the end. For predictably, events turned out differently, and the progressives' projects were confronted everywhere in Europe by the resilience of traditional ideas. After all, as Arno J. Mayer rightly argues, "until 1914 the forces of inertia and resistance contained and curbed this dynamic and expansive

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20. J.A. Hobson, Work and Wealth: A Human Valuation, p. 358.

new society"[21].

Both Webb and Hobson believed that a simple re-organization of the government's global social policies, and not a brutal attack on the existing economic system, could guarantee the triumph of their ideals. In a sense, they both suffered during the Edwardian years from a type of capitalistic myopia that prevented them from becoming partisans of the public ownership of industry. Somewhat paradoxically, they were friends of the state, and would never go as far as to advocate the complete destruction of the prevailing economic order. State intervention, they felt, primarily ought to play a tremendous role in the struggle to ameliorate the living conditions of the English people; indeed, they believed that its main purpose should be to provide England with mature and enlightened citizens (through measures such as the reform of education, or the abolition of Poor Laws). They dreamed of collectivism on the municipal level, but thought that the central government should merely control the most obvious abuses of industry and thus ultimately sponsor a healthy

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21. Arno J. Mayer, The Persistence of the Old Regime-Europe to the Great War (New York, 1981), p. 6.

capitalism. Like most Edwardian progressive intellectuals, Webb and Hobson felt that the state ought to collaborate with industry, largely via the development of an efficient working force. In short, the harmonious and democratic society designed by them was essentially a perfect, waste-free capitalist structure.

As a comparative analysis of the views of Sidney Webb and J.A. Hobson on crucial issues (the modern state, Eugenics, and education) clearly shows, what most differentiated their thoughts was their personal attitudes towards politics. Both men were undeniably intellectuals in politics and played prominent roles in the shaping of social policies by Edwardian governments, but Sidney Webb certainly was the more political of the two. Because of the very nature of his involvement in the London County Council, Webb was in close contact with some realities that Hobson perceived only in an abstract fashion. Whereas Webb was fascinated by the drafting of workable social legislation , Hobson sometimes found the definition of general principles more congenial. Nevertheless, their global visions of the world were quite similar. Webb's municipal "dream", with its provisions ranging from tramways to

water supply, was also shared by Hobson. Moreover, both thinkers were strongly convinced that Eugenics and education ought to become means to promote the development of a better social environment for English citizens. In fact, it was only on the burning issue of imperialism that their thoughts really differed.

In retrospect, it is quite evident that both Webb's and Hobson's ideas belonged to the same progressive movement which had aimed to create a "Great State" rooted on justice and democracy during the pre-war years. Despite its cataclysmic ending, the Edwardian era had successfully initiated the development of a new British collectivity. The dissenters' struggles had not been without enduring results. As Peter Clarke sees so clearly, the period's most dramatic achievement was that "already by 1910 the collectivities upon which politics were based had changed from communities to classes"[22]. As partisans of the modern state, Webb and Hobson had in fact enthusiastically contributed to the birth of modern Britain. Political democracy,

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22. Peter Clarke, Lancashire and the New Liberalism, p. 6.

they were proud to observe, was at last making progress. As Hobson wrote in 1938, analyzing the evolution of mentalities in recent years:

> The old notion that any ordinary man is equal to the doing of any job, or at any rate to judging how it should best be done, is still widely prevalent among the less educated classes. It must be displaced by a clear conviction that an effective operative democracy requires close attention to the inequalities in men in order that special abilities may be utilized for the common welfare[23].

This notion of individual liberty as closely linked with common welfare had been the Edwardians' creative motto. First artisans of the welfare state (although the term had not been invented yet), they nevertheless seriously feared the establishment of the servile state as defined in 1912 by Hilaire Belloc, where "a number of the families and individuals are constrained by positive law to labour for the advantage of other families and individuals"[24].

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23. J.A. Hobson, Confessions of an Economic Heretic, p. 214.

24. Hilaire Belloc, The Servile State, (1912), (London, 1927), p. 16.

Because of ideological reversals so frequent in the history of ideas, the welfare state is now often perceived as an expression of conservatism. Yet in the original will of its creators, it clearly was an instrument of progress. Since historical writing is, in the words of Hannah Arendt, "always the supreme justification of what has happened"[25], we should try to study the Edwardians' achievements remembering what their frame of mind was. Hobson's and Webb's roads towards social democracy and modernity belonged to the spirit of their day, but at the same time they still unmistakably sound our contemporaries. To those who, like Samuel Hynes, unjustly contend that the Edwardian era merely was "that curious decade between the death of Victoria and the First World War, a time as remote from our present as the reign of William and Mary, and a good deal more remote than Victoria's age"[26], one should give the advice of reading the Edwardians again. For the collectivist ideal shared by men like Hobson and Webb, they would soon find out, is still largely our own.

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25. Hannah Arendt quoted in Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt- For Love of the World (New Haven, 1982), p. 201.

26. Samuel Hynes, Edwardian Occasions-Essays on English Writings in the Early Twentieth Century (London, 1972), p.105.

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