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ABSTRACT

Sidney Webb is often represented as a descendent of the utilitarians. Social democracy and the welfare state thus stand as the continuing development of Enlightenment rationalism. Alternatively, Webb appears as the representative of a new managerial and administrative class. Social democracy and the welfare state here stand as the elitist and bureaucratic expressions of the power of this class. In contrast to these conventional views, this paper locates Webb in the context of a radicalism, peculiar to the 1870s, composed of ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology. He became a socialist because of his positivist ethic. He defined his socialism in relation to an evolutionary philosophy. And he later adopted collectivism as a result of turning to positivist sociology. Webb's collectivism, however, provided little assistance in dealing with the dilemmas of the inter-war years. His ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology led him to turn to solutions apparently offered by the Soviet Union. This reinterpretation of Webb suggests a new view of social democracy and the welfare state. We should see them as the changing products of particular ideational and political contexts such as those of the 1870s and 1930s.

Sidney Webb: Utilitarianism, Positivism, and Social Democracy

Sidney Webb (1859-1947) played a key role in the transition from the radicalisms of the nineteenth century to the social democracy of the twentieth. He is a significant figure in the historiography of progressive thought, itself an arena within which historians explore the rise of social democracy and the welfare state.

In so far as social and political practices require their participants to possess a certain understanding of the world, we can explore the historical roots of the practices by asking how the relevant understanding arose. To do so, of course, we have to treat texts as guides to shifts in thought and language rather than as strategic interventions aimed at producing immediate effects; we have, in other words, to abstract from the short-term considerations embodied in texts so as to explore the ways they instantiate long-term changes in the ideas and concepts at play within a society.¹ Historians as diverse as Michel Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck, and Quentin Skinner have done just this in order to study the epistemes, concepts, and ideologies that made possible social or political formations such as the human sciences, modern society, and the sovereign state.²

When historians explore the rise of social democracy in relation to progressive thought, they often stress its continuity with earlier varieties of radicalism. For those who highlight such continuity, Webb acts as a prime example. Webb was the leading theorist in the Fabian Society, itself widely recognised as the main intellectual force in the development of British socialism.³ Later he became a Cabinet Minister in both of the first two Labour Governments. In addition, he and his wife Beatrice (née Potter) played leading roles in the development of modern social policy: they served on numerous important bodies, most notably the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the

Poor Laws.⁴ Webb often gets portrayed as a descendent of the classical liberalism of the early nineteenth century. He appears, in Brian Crowley's words, as a "utilitarian socialist planner" who followed J. S. Mill to socialism.⁵ The Fabian Society similarly gets portrayed as an organisation that rejected revolutionary socialism for a gradualism linked to the liberal tradition. In doing so, moreover, it allegedly either developed a practical socialism suitable for British soil or undermined the innate qualities of innovation found among working-class socialists.

An emphasis on the continuities between the utilitarians and the Fabians suits both progressive liberals and their critics. Progressive liberals have claimed as their own the gains associated with social democracy, and even tried to insist on the continuing relevance of a progressive alliance.⁶ Their historiography suggests that social democracy and the welfare state arose out of a liberal, utilitarian tradition of enlightened reform. Critics of progressive liberalism, in contrast, have traced the limitations of the welfare state to an excessive Enlightenment rationalism or to the failure of socialists to break properly with bourgeois ideology.⁷ Their historiography suggests that social democracy and the welfare state remain trapped within the rationalist, reformist framework of liberal utilitarians.

Strangely intellectual historians who study Webb's political thought almost never explore his early and largely unpublished manuscripts.⁸ Doing so suggests he belongs in an intellectual milieu peculiar to the late Victorian era. Webb was an ethical positivist in a sense that was common then but had almost no precursors in the early Victorian era and retained few adherents by the 1930s. Although historians have long assigned ethical positivism a place in Victorian thought, they generally locate it exclusively among those who stood on the side of Culture against Society – romantics and idealists rather than utilitarians and rationalists.⁹ Recently, however, historians

such as Stefan Collini, José Harris, and Donald Winch have begun to challenge the dichotomy between Culture and Society in a way that might encourage us to explore the place of ethical positivism in the thought of those once demonised as soulless rationalists.¹⁰ By reading Webb in this way, we will improve our understanding of his ideas and thus the emergence of social democracy. More specifically, we will find that Webb became a socialist for moral reasons reflecting the humanitarian drift of the 1870s; he defined his socialism in terms of an evolutionary philosophy popular among his contemporaries; his socialism took a collectivist turn because of the impact upon him of positivist economics with its historical and institutional alternatives to the concrete-deductive method of J. S. Mill; and he developed his collectivism in relation to contemporary strands of thought such as Social Darwinism and idealism. In short, Webb broke decisively with the utilitarians.

Although intellectual historians rarely pick-up on the discontinuity between Webb and the utilitarians, we can find a gesture towards it within social history. Here historians have accounted for the rise of social democracy and the welfare state by reference to a new class-structure. Within the received historiography, the progressive architects of modern social policy represented a new class whose ideas either blunted the creativity of the working class or dovetailed with the natural tendency of trades unions to adopt labourism rather than true socialism. Webb thus gets portrayed as representative of a technocratic and managerial elite whose class position led them to advocate a bureaucratic and statist form of social democracy or managed capitalism.¹¹ Recently, however, historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones and Patrick Joyce have initiated a linguistic turn that reacts sharply against this received historiography with its assumptions about modernization and class-formation.¹² All too often, the received historiography took for granted the ideas of those it purported to tell us about: if we

assume the welfare state is bureaucratic and social democracy is statist, and if we assume technocrats thrive in bureaucratic and statist systems, it is all too easy to assume the new class actively espoused and built such a system. Once we follow recent historiographical trends and pay greater attention to the beliefs and language of those we study, however, we will find that the bureaucratic rhetoric of Webb's moral exhortations did not translate into excessively centralised or extensive forms of collectivism. Webb's ethical positivism led him to a strong collectivist morality in which individuals had to fulfil themselves through the greater whole; but his positivist social theory did not lead him to an equally strong collectivist vision of the state.

Positivism and Science

Sidney Webb was born in London in 1859 to a lower middle-class family.¹³ His father appears to have worked as a bookkeeper and business advisor, although he lacked any qualifications. A radical liberal in politics, he sat on both the Board of Guardians and the local vestry, and it has been said that he helped J. S. Mill in the latter's Westminster constituency. Webb's mother was a hairdresser with evangelical leanings. She took her children to church every Sunday, scouring London for a low-church preacher suitably free of the taint of ritualism. Webb left school aged about fifteen, and then began work as a junior clerk in a brokerage firm. Before long, he entered the ranks of the civil service, where he progressed rapidly, excelling in examination after examination. By 1884 he had progressed as far as one could by merit to become a first division clerk in the Colonial Office. During the mid-1880s, he also qualified as a barrister, though he only accepted one brief.

Throughout Webb's life, his ideas developed as much through personal discussions, correspondence, and organised societies as through reading. During his

twenties, in particular, he participated in numerous discussion groups, debating societies, and mock parliaments throughout London; the most important of these, for him, being the Zetetical Society, which was formed in 1878 to “search for truth in all matters affecting the interest of the human race.”¹⁴ The titles of the lectures Webb delivered to the Society indicate the religious, ethical, and philosophical nature of his early intellectual concerns, while their content shows Webb rejecting his mother’s evangelicalism for an ethical positivism.¹⁵ The earliest extant lecture, “The Existence of Evil”, describes Christianity as inconsistent with a belief in a material world ruled by the unchanging laws uncovered by natural science. God could not be omnipotent because he could not alter the laws of nature. Webb explained, “I do not believe God could commit a violation of the laws of nature, although I believe he is the author of these laws.”¹⁶ This compromise clearly remained unsatisfactory since, for Webb, God was omnipotent by definition. Science contradicted religion: it made the existence of God implausible. Yet Webb remained reluctant to abandon the religious ideal. He defended a belief in God on the grounds that “any religion is better than no religion” as people need faith in order to prompt them to do their duty and aim for lofty goals. Christianity still had value. It did so, however, not because he thought it true but because he feared that morality would wither in a secular world.

Webb’s doubts about God and concerns about morality reflect a broad strand in late Victorian thought. Many Victorian Christians, especially evangelicals, upheld the verbal inspiration of scripture - the Bible was the bedrock of their faith, and it was literally true. However, geological discoveries, the historical criticism, evolutionary theory, and moral qualms about doctrines such as vicarious atonement, made their religious faith seem increasingly implausible.¹⁷ They feared, however, that to reject God would be to remove all bases for morality. Evangelicals often thought that only

fear of hell made moral an essentially corrupt humanity, so to remove such fear would be to unleash an innate wickedness. Typically these moral concerns alone proved unable to sustain an evangelical faith closely tied to Biblical literalism. Instead the path of doubt led people to a range of beliefs from liberal Christianity and agnosticism, through pantheism and positivism, to a more militant secularism. Victorians turned increasingly to bodies of belief according to which the basis of morality resided within humanity itself. Leslie Stephen, for example, rejected Christianity because evolutionary theory contradicted the type of spasmodic action described in the Bible. Having done so, he turned to the problem of morality, arguing that if there is no God, humanity must have invented hell-fire, so far from our being corrupt and made moral only by belief in hell, “we inevitably accept the conclusion that the virtuous instincts are the foundation, not the outgrowth, of the belief, and may therefore be expected to survive its destruction or transformation.”¹⁸

Numerous Victorian evangelicals shifted their attention from God to humanity.¹⁹ The second extant lecture by Webb, “On Serving God”, shows him explicitly discarding Christianity for a positivist humanitarianism that eulogised the service of humanity. Webb argued that praise of God was valuable only if it promoted human welfare, and yet a religion designed solely to enhance human life in this world was not really a religion at all. Because he accepted that Christians often took “the service of God on earth” to consist “in serving man,” and because he allowed that our reasons for promoting human welfare were unimportant so long as we did so, he would not quarrel with people who claimed they tended to humanity in order to minister to God.²⁰ Nonetheless, he thought a humanitarian religion was “only an allegorical way of stating utilitarian principles”.

Although Webb seems here to accept a utilitarian position, we need to be careful in our analysis. Utilitarianism can be a slippery doctrine. On one level, the identification of the morally good with that which promotes general happiness appears almost as a necessary but vacuous truth since we can subsume most other moral doctrines under the umbrella concept of happiness. On another level, as soon as anyone gives any positive content to the umbrella concept of happiness, utilitarianism becomes highly contentious. Webb, like many of his contemporaries, played on the ambiguous nature of utilitarianism, sometimes appealing to it as a principle, but always with a notion of happiness that made him scarcely a utilitarian at all. For Webb, individuals have a duty to act for the social good rather than their own happiness; it is just that a "happy life" happens to come from "absorption of self in some pursuit, leaving the pleasures to be picked up along the way."²¹ Personal duty and social service effectively swamp the idea of happiness. The result resembles ethical positivism far more closely than it does mainstream utilitarianism.

A historic allegiance to radicalism could encourage an avowal of utilitarianism. However, by the 1870s, the utilitarianism evoked typically differed decisively from that of Bentham. J. S. Mill can be seen as foreshadowing the break with Bentham. He set out as a Benthamite prodigy but tasted the forbidden fruits of Samuel Coleridge and August Comte, so that while he remained attached to the broad thrust of classical liberalism, he acknowledged some of the limitations of a rationalistic, even deductive, approach to human affairs.²² Bentham, he suggested, had proceeded too quickly from the general laws of human nature to actual behaviour in a way that failed to allow for the full impact of history, institutions, and entrenched practices. Despite such criticisms, however, J. S. Mill remained committed to the broad thrust of utilitarianism and classical liberalism. As he saw it, although he altered the tone and feeling of his

predecessors, his reflections ultimately “only laid the foundation of these [his early opinions] more deeply and strongly.”²³

By the 1870s, many radicals had departed considerably from even the modified utilitarianism of J. S. Mill.²⁴ Whereas the London Dialectical Society was formed in the late 1860s to provide a forum for the discussion of his work, its younger offshoot, the Zetetical Society, adopted a tone that one member rightly described as “Malthusian, evolutionary, Ingersollian, Darwinian, Herbert Spencerian.”²⁵ This list of influences captures the new, radical culture that arose in the 1870s following the impact of evolutionary theory. If J. S. Mill remained largely within the philosophy of classical liberalism whilst modifying its anti-interventionist social theory, Spencer transformed its philosophy only to uphold the ideal of the minimal state.²⁶ Members of the Zetetical Society and other such groups often fused the evolutionary philosophy of Spencer with ethical positivism and liberal radicalism. Spencer’s evolutionary approach gave their thought the aura of contemporary science; ethical positivism enabled them to reconcile such science with moral action, specifically the ideals of duty and service; and liberal radicalism gave political content to such ideals.

Several of Webb’s contemporaries poured ethical positivism into the utilitarian bottle. The most famous of these was perhaps Annie Besant, who would later join Webb in the Fabian Society.²⁷ Many others adopted an ethical positivism without bothering much about its relationship to utilitarianism, again including several Fabians such as Edward Pease, Graham Wallas, and Sydney Olivier, the latter of whom worked with Webb in the Colonial Office during the early 1880s.²⁸ Pease later reflected on the extent to which the new learning had distanced his generation from the previous one:

It is nowadays not easy to recollect how wide was the intellectual gulf which separated the young generation of that period from their parents. The Origin of

Species, published in 1859, inaugurated an intellectual revolution such as the world had not known since Luther nailed his thesis to the door of All Saints Church at Wittenberg . . . The young men of the time grew up with the new ideas and accepted them as a matter of course . . . Our parents, who read neither Spencer nor Huxley, lived in an intellectual world which bore no relation to our own; and cut adrift as we were from the intellectual moorings of our upbringings, recognising, as we did that the older men were useless as guides in religion, in science, in philosophy, because they knew no evolution, we also felt instinctively that we . . . had to discover somewhere for ourselves what were the true principles of the then recently invented science of sociology.²⁹

Webb and his friends absorbed this new learning with its evolutionary philosophy, ethical positivism, and sociology.

Several varieties of positivism acquired at least some Victorian adherents. Very few Victorians adhered to Comte's liturgical religion; a few more adopted a republican positivism that sought to integrate the working-class into a political vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity; but many more followed George Eliot in responding to the crisis of faith with a positivist ethic of social duty buttressed by an evolutionary philosophy.³⁰ Webb adopted this latter ethical positivism, as did Besant, Pease, Olivier, and Wallas.³¹ That Webb did so becomes clear when we turn to his ensuing lectures to the Zetetical Society on "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century: Its Influence on Philosophy", "The Ethics of Existence", "Heredity as a Factor in Psychology and Ethics", and "Lecture on the Works of George Eliot". Webb now identified his moral beliefs with those expressed by George Eliot's positivist hymn "Oh may I Join the Choir Invisible".³² He devoted a whole lecture to praise of her novels

for their portrayal of the ideal of social service.³³ Like many ethical positivists, he continued to express his opinions in Biblical language:

The world to a great extent commits its evil by want of thought and is blameable only for its ignorance. But some are unhappy enough to see, and they must beware lest they sin against light. What shall they do to be saved?³⁴

Again like many ethical positivists, he answered this question in terms that echo an evangelical concern with personal duty and social service. He argued that individuals were the products of the community that educated them and gave them meaning. The individual rightly conceived is "a manufactured article, a store of value, an investment of the world's capital," and so should act as a "trustee" holding his "skill and energy" on behalf of "the world."³⁵

Webb renounced Christianity because it clashed with science, particularly evolution. He argued that biology had revolutionised contemporary knowledge as much as had the new learning of the renaissance.³⁶ Curier had started with zoology and botany, Goethe had begun biology, and these sciences had culminated in the Darwinian theory of evolution, which Spencer had since shown to apply to the study of society. Evolution underpinned modern science. It proved that the world existed prior to the human mind so mind could not have created the world. Besides, since every effect has a cause, when we experience an effect of which we do not know the cause, we must admit it nonetheless has a cause; and, since we do not know this cause, it "is not itself in relation to our mind," so we must admit the existence of an "external world."³⁷ Such arguments opposed philosophical idealism but not transcendental idealism. Webb understood Kant to have argued that our belief that two and two equals four was so strong that it could not possibly have come from our experience of the external world. But, he countered, evolution resolved Kant's problem: it suggested

that we knew that two and two was four because of the accumulated experience of the whole human race, not our individual experience.³⁸

By establishing the priority of an external, material world, evolution established the importance of empirical study. British radicals, of course, often prided themselves on their empiricism. Yet historically they based their empiricism on the individualistic, associationist psychology of John Locke or David Hartley.³⁹ Evolutionary philosophy now prompted many to shift their attention to social psychology or sociology.⁴⁰ Webb even argued that the philosophic radicals had had little impact on the world precisely because they tried to implement ideal abstractions.⁴¹ Reform should be based on the scientific knowledge provided by the new learning, for it would fail if it were not. Thus Webb promoted an evolutionary sociology according to which history reveals natural laws that govern the life history of social organisms. Human societies, like species, became increasingly integrated through co-operation whilst constantly shedding those limbs that have ceased to fulfil any function.

Evolution had supplanted individualistic psychology, whether that of Locke or the utilitarians, as the basis of scientific inquiry. For Webb, this made J. S. Mill the last great "pre-scientific" thinker.⁴² Only J. S. Mill's logic and political economy remained undisturbed, at least for the moment, by the new learning. Webb was aware that other strands of political economy seemed to fit better with his evolutionary philosophy. Yet in 1885 he dismissed these alternatives: the "empirical" method of daily observation advocated by Cliffe Leslie "has as yet produced no body of knowledge worthy of the name of a science"; the "historical" method of Thorold Rogers does not cover economics but rather represents "a portion of the great domain of history"; and the "sociological" method of Comte, although promising, has not

produced results to "match those of political economy." Thus, Webb concluded "the only useful method of political economy remains the . . . concrete-deductive method of Ricardo, Mill and Cairnes" and "with slight modifications of Prof. Marshall and Prof. Walker."⁴³

The Moralisation of the Capitalist

Webb's milieu was the new learning - ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology - that arose out of the clash between evangelicalism and evolutionary theory. George Bernard Shaw was also a member of the Zetetical Society. Webb and Shaw met in October 1880, and by 1882 they were serving together on the Society's Committee. Shaw then introduced Webb to the nascent Fabian Society: Webb read the Society a paper on "The Way Out" on the 20th March 1885 and joined it on 1 May 1885.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Webb did not sympathise with the land nationalisation and Marxism that dominated the Fabian Society at that time.⁴⁵ When Shaw asked him to join the Land Reform Union, he explained that he was a land reformer not a land nationaliser but that he would join as land nationalisation was "not an article of faith."⁴⁶ Likewise, in 1884 he said, "I am, I am sorry to say, no believer in state socialism."⁴⁷ Only after he had joined the Fabians did he declare himself to be a socialist. He identified anarchism, collectivism, and positivism as three different types of socialism, expressing obvious sympathy for the last.⁴⁸

To understand Webb's socialism, we have to follow his explorations in abstract economic theory during the mid-1880s. We have no evidence of Webb having written on economics until after the lecture on George Eliot dated 1882 but thereafter he wrote about little else through until 1890. He gave several series of lectures at the Working Men's College, speaking in 1883-84 on "Political Economy", in 1884-85 on "The

Economic History of Society in England”, and in 1885-86 on “The Distribution of Wealth” and “Low Wages”. The following year he began to lecture at City of London College, in 1886-87 on “The Production of Wealth”, in 1887-88 on “The Outlines of Political Economy”, and in 1888-89 on “Capital” and “The Fundamental Principles of Economics, Illustrated by American Examples”. As we have seen, Webb believed, at this time, that the concrete-deductive method of J. S. Mill remained largely valid within political economy, although his evolutionary philosophy inspired an interest in empirical sociology that left him dissatisfied with it. Like Alfred Marshall, he acknowledged the need to adjust pure theory to account for particular circumstances, while nonetheless sticking primarily to abstract theory. Indeed, Marshall, even more than J. S. Mill, acted as his guide to political economy: he wrote to Marshall saying, "I believe that we agree absolutely in Economics"; and to Beatrice he explained, "I do feel a sort of reverence for Marshall as 'our leader' in Economics and I always uphold him as such."⁴⁹

Webb’s turn to socialism relied on his developments of Marshall’s economics. Like Marshall, Webb defined value in terms of the operation of supply and demand at the margin of production.⁵⁰ He believed each factor of production received a payment in proportion to its marginal cost of production. Because this payment was the price paid to each increment of a factor whether or not that increment was at the margin, those increments that were not at the margin received a surplus. A surplus created by marginal advantages went to the owners of the advantageous land, labour, or capital. Here because all land is paid at the rate necessary to bring the last increment of land under cultivation, more fertile or better-situated land generates rent for the landowner. Similarly, although the capitalist would invest some of his capital at a lower rate of

return, he is remunerated for all of his capital at the higher rate of return necessary to induce him to invest the last increment of his capital.

Up to this point Webb followed Marshall and many other economists. These other economists thought that rent differed significantly from interest. Interest, they said, was necessary to maintain the required supply of capital since the capitalist would not invest the last part of his capital unless he was offered a suitable rate of return for it – the same could not be said of rent because the supply of land is fixed. Webb's originality consisted of his inclusion of capital and brainpower, alongside rent, as instances of monopoly. He condemned interest as a form of rent by arguing that the supply of capital, like the supply of land, is fixed, so interest is not necessary to maintain an adequate supply of capital. The distinction between interest and rent failed for Webb because "it is by no means admitted that the accumulation of capital depends solely or even mainly upon the rate of interest."⁵¹ On the contrary, he emphasised that "economists have always laid stress upon the other motives for thrift, which led, for instance, the French peasant up to 1871 and the Maltese cottager up to 1886 to hoard metallic currency without the inducement of interest at all."⁵² Webb then continued the attack by arguing not only that interest does not regulate the supply of capital but also that it is paid primarily because time-lags in the market temporarily fix the supply of capital. Interest, like rent, results from a fixed supply of a factor of production, from monopoly. It is a product of "opportunity and chance."⁵³ Likewise skilled workers receive a "rent of ability" because there is a fixed supply of their skill.

Although Webb's abstract economic theory led him to socialism, to understand why it did so we have to return to his ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology. Rent, interest, and the rent of ability derive from a fixed supply: they go to individuals whose advantageous position means that they benefit from a temporary or permanent

monopoly. Yet these advantageous positions are a result of society, not the individual. For Webb, the workings of the social organism create temporary monopolies of capital and skilled labour. Thus, because these rents are created by society, no individual should have an automatic right to any part of them. They should be used to benefit the society that generates them, not the individual who happens to occupy the relevant position. Even "the skilled labourer is exactly in the position of the landlord or the capitalist; he is a trustee who possesses social force: his brain does not belong to himself but to society at large, and he is bound to use it to the full extent - to use it for all, not for himself."⁵⁴ In this way, Webb's economic theory fitted in neatly alongside his ethical positivism with its calls for personal duty and social service. Those people who find themselves occupying an advantageous situation have a duty to use the benefits they thus obtain to promote the social good. Only social service can justify the wealth associated with rent, interest, and the rent of ability. As Webb explained to his middle-class audience, we should live frugally and use our wealth to benefit society as a whole since "we are the cause of the misery of the poor by consumption of more than our share of the produce."⁵⁵

The surpluses associated with rents arise as a necessary product of any economy. They cannot be returned to the producers since they are a social product, not a result of, say, treating labour as a commodity. Hence, Webb insisted on the importance of their being used for social purposes - "interest, or rent, consumed without adequate service rendered is simply robbery."⁵⁶ The moralisation of capitalists would eliminate such robbery just as effectively as would collectivism. If capitalists rendered service in proportion to the interest they received, the interest would become a social resource. What matters is that the monopolists do not use their wealth for personal consumption, for the balance between what they receive and what they

consume "is almost of necessity devoted to purposes of public utility, even if it be only reinvested in production."⁵⁷

Webb favoured the moralisation of the capitalist over collectivism for several reasons. For a start, he echoed Comte's faith in a business elite. Collectivism would place wealth in the hands of the state, where the state represents the average citizen and so could use such wealth only for purposes approved by the majority. Moralisation, in contrast, would enable "thinkers who are at the head of the column of progress" to have a greater say.⁵⁸ Webb also suggested that moralisation would be easier. Whereas collectivism presupposes great advances in the education and morality of the masses, moralisation requires only a slight extension of current behaviour since monopolists already reinvest more than they consume. Finally, Webb followed J. S. Mill in arguing that individualist motivations help to ensure efficient production, so the system of production should be left in private hands even as reforms are made to the system of distribution. Although private property should continue as it is the best "system of wealth production", and although this "involves great inequality of wealth," "it does not involve great inequality in the consumption of wealth."⁵⁹

When Webb joined the Fabian Society he was not a socialist. Even when he first declared himself to be a socialist, he fused Marshall with Comte so as to propose that the means of production remain private property but with monopolists using their wealth for the social good. His early socialism drew on neo-classical economics together with an ethical positivism:

Socialism is founded upon no new system of political economy, nor upon any new statistics. It is mainly the emphatic assertion of two leading principles.

We recognise, first, as the central truth of modern society, the interdependence of all. No man works alone; by division of labour and mutual exchange all are

sharing in each other's toil . . . We claim, in the second place, to be but applying the doctrines of the economists in insisting on the ethical right of the joint workers, and the workers alone, to the whole produce of their labour, without any deduction for the monopolists.⁶⁰

So defined, socialism requires nothing more than moralisation. Webb wanted to "leave administration mainly as it is at present, in private hands but under some government regulations; equal personal consumption, and by workers only, being realised chiefly by an advance in personal morality."⁶¹ Equating socialism with collectivism was, Webb suggested, as narrow-minded as equating Christianity with Methodism. In the ensuing years, he would develop his positivist socialism in part through critical studies of the main alternatives - anarchism, Marxism, co-operation, and land reform.⁶²

An Institutional Turn

Willard Wolfe has noted Webb's debt to positivism. Yet Wolfe does not properly locate its role in Webb's intellectual development. We already have established grounds for questioning his assessment of the relationship between Webb's positivism and his debt to J. S. Mill. Here Wolfe opposes Shaw's claim that Webb followed the economics of J. S. Mill.⁶³ Yet we have found that while Webb followed an ethical positivist road to socialism, he still adhered to much of Mill's logic and political economy. Webb's positivist socialism rested on a neo-classical theory of rent as well as on a positivist ethic and a positivist strategy of moralising the capitalist. Wolfe acknowledges Webb's debt to Marshall but then idiosyncratically, and certainly contrary to Webb's own view, implies that Marshall's neo-classical economics had more in common with the historical and institutional economists than with J. S. Mill.⁶⁴

The 1870s and 1880s witnessed a hiatus in political economy.⁶⁵ The main doctrines composing the classical theory of distribution simply fell away following J. S. Mill's repudiation of the concept of a wages-fund.⁶⁶ Three main alternatives arose during the ensuing years, all of which rejected or heavily modified the central tenets of the classical school. W. S. Jevons and his followers defined value in terms of marginal utility, and thus argued that the amount paid to each factor of production - capital, land, and labour - depended on its marginal utility.⁶⁷ The positivists, such as Leslie, called for a more historically sensitive, less abstract, approach to economics.⁶⁸ Finally the neo-classical theorists, led by Marshall, although remaining closest to J. S. Mill, placed a novel emphasis on the margin as the site of the interaction of supply and demand. Throughout the 1880s Webb adopted a neo-classical theory indebted to Marshall and thus J. S. Mill. When we turn to the later development of his thought, however, we will find that positivism played a role, unrecognised by Wolfe, in his political economy as well as his ethics. Although Wolfe identifies such a role through his idiosyncratic account of Marshall as a positivist, he pays little attention to the impact on Webb of positivist economists such as Leslie. Rather, he explicitly contrasts his account with G. D. H. Cole's claim that Webb concentrated on finding institutional ways of giving effect to ideas.⁶⁹ In contrast, we will find that after 1888 Webb turned increasingly to the historical and institutional approaches of the positivist economists. Webb's collectivism ultimately arose out of his interest in promoting positivist ideals through social organisations.

In 1886 Webb believed, like Marshall, that the "universally approved" concrete-deductive method provided the starting point for economics but that it relied on an over-simplified model of human nature so one later had to make a "correction for actuality."⁷⁰ Webb's concern to make a "correction for actuality" had an important

consequence. He began to study historical sociology as a way of doing so; he became interested in patterns of social organisation and how they modified the operation of the laws of political economy. We have virtually no evidence of his pursuing such an interest prior to about 1888.⁷¹ His earlier writings begin with the philosophical implications of evolution and end by considering how to reform society in line with economic science and a positivist ethic. Around 1888, however, he switched his attention to positivist economics and social organisation. He even defined socialism as a "principle of social organisation" in a paper titled "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology" and subtitled "a lecture upon the development of the social ideal in European history" - a paper, moreover, that contains large passages that he repeated word for word in his contribution to the famous Fabian Essays.⁷²

Webb's interest in positivist economics and social organisation provide the context within which he moved from the moralisation of the capitalist to collectivism. By 1888, Webb gave content to his socialism by drawing on evolutionary sociology rather than concrete-deductive economics. Socialism is not an economic system but "a statement of the principles of social organisation" derived from "positive knowledge of sociological development."⁷³ J. K. Ingram, a historical economist and positivist, thus could become the archetypal socialist, for socialism is the efficient organisation of society and empirical sociology teaches us how to organise society efficiently.⁷⁴ Webb, like Comte, stressed the gains in efficiency - the reduction of costs and the elimination of wasteful competition - associated with economic centralisation, the concentration of capital, and mass production. Besides, his application of evolutionary theory to history implied that societies, like organisms, became more and more efficient by growing in complexity and adopting integrated, co-operative forms of organisation. Evolution, and here he quoted T. H. Huxley, consists of the "substitution of consciously regulated

co-ordination among the units of each organism, for blind anarchic competition.”⁷⁵

Thus, Webb now identified socialism, defined as the efficient organisation of society, with co-operative and co-ordinated organisation, with state activity. Capitalism is an unscientific form of social organisation since it is inefficient as a way of maximising production let alone welfare. The declining marginal utility of incomes, for example, means that the rich attain little welfare or happiness for large parts of their income in comparison with that which the poor would from such an amount. Because the poor are unable to create “effective demand,” moreover, a capitalist economy produces commodities to meet the whims of the rich rather than the basic needs of the poor. Finally, because capitalism thus fails to meet the basic needs of the poor, it undermines their efficiency and so impairs the process of production.⁷⁶

The moralisation of the capitalist would no longer suffice since moralisation would not necessarily either increase social integration or limit competition. Only collectivism would do so: it would bring the requisite increase in social efficiency and social solidarity through an extension of state institutions. Hence socialism now involved "the gradual public organisation of labour for all public purposes, and the elimination of the private capitalist and middle-man."⁷⁷

For Webb, collectivism had two main requirements. The first was that the state should tax the rents of land, capital, and ability, and then use them for public purposes. This requirement reworked his earlier economic theory but with the state taking over the role earlier ascribed to the moralised capitalist. Under socialism, the state would enforce the social duties that went with wealth: taxation would preclude the possibility of the wealthy using their rents for selfish ends. The revenue raised by taxation would fund the public provision of things such as education, libraries, museums, and parks. The second requirement for collectivism was that the state should regulate industry so

as to establish an integrated, co-operative, and thus efficient form of organisation.

This requirement followed from his new interest in positivist economics, and the way in which his evolutionary sociology tied efficiency to co-operation and co-ordination.

The state would play a more active role as social organisation adopted increasingly complex patterns.

Webb's ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology facilitated his combining his collectivism with other contemporary strands of thought. One such strand was social Darwinism.⁷⁸ Webb believed that the principle of natural selection taught that more efficient societies thrived. The Prussians, for instance, beat the French in the war of 1871 because they were better organised. Sometimes Webb adopted a national focus, arguing that only socialism could ensure the survival and prosperity of Britain in the struggle for survival. At other times, he took a more general view, arguing that because evolutionary sociology taught us that socialism was an efficient form of social organisation, the more socialist a society was, the more it would thrive over time. In this way, socialism appeared as an empirical version of a Hegelian world-historic idea. Here Webb also combined his collectivism with themes in British Idealism. He argued that socialism was emerging everywhere without people even realising: he depicted "both great parties drifting vaguely before a nameless undercurrent which they fail utterly to recognise or understand."⁷⁹ Society already was saturated with examples of practical socialism, examples ranging from the Post Office and state education to the Factory Acts and a ferry across the Thames.⁸⁰ Although people might not recognise such interventions as socialism, that is what they were, for Webb's collectivism defined socialism to include any extension of state intervention. Similarly, socialism was also a growing force in modern ideas. "Through Comte and John Stuart Mill, Darwin and Herbert Spencer, the conception of the social organism has at last

penetrated to the minds, though not yet to the books, even of our professors of Political Economy."⁸¹

The positivist background to Webb's collectivism helps to explain two of its best known features - gradualism and permeation. Webb defined socialism in terms of co-ordination, co-operation, and efficiency, all of which were bound together in the natural process of social evolution. Each incremental advance in state activity or intervention takes us further along this necessary process. For Webb, socialism had begun to develop as soon as people first co-operated within society, it continues to expand, and it will reach higher stages as people became increasingly conscious of the laws governing social evolution. "There will never come a moment when we can say 'now Socialism is established'" because it is not a distinct form of social organisation but only the fuller recognition of principles informing all social organisation.⁸²

Webb's contemporaries thus could further the socialist cause by gradually extending municipal enterprise, that is, by gas and water collectivism. They could create socialism even through Vestry Elections:

Select good candidates whom you can depend upon to provide a proper sanitary staff, large enough to cope with the new work which the Public Health Acts require. Insist on the payment of Trade Union wages to all men in Vestry employ. See that the Vestry has the dust collected by its own men, and no longer employs contractors who make the bigger profit the more they neglect their duty. Discourage false economy by preventing the Vestry from employing unfair printers, or purchasing goods from sweaters, who, by low wages and long hours are filling the work-houses and increasing the poor rates. Demand proper baths and wash-houses.⁸³

Webb saw no need for a radical break, no need for a sudden shift in the underlying constitution of social life.

The strategy of permeation also appears in a new light once we appreciate the positivist background to Webb's socialism.⁸⁴ For a start, the idea of permeating other political parties clearly resembles that of moralising the capitalist. The Fabians could act as positivist experts, providing information and policies to diverse politicians. In addition, Webb's evolutionary sociology suggested that socialist policies represented the outcome of scientific knowledge of the requirements of an industrial economy. All types of politicians might be expected, therefore, to recognise the inherent rationality of such policies; and if they did not, the inexorable process of evolution might be expected to overtake them anyway. Socialism was the outcome of a positivist science - a part of the necessary process of social evolution - that in some respects could remain apart from, or unrecognised in, political struggles for power and office. Hence, Webb at times suggested that "the avowed Socialist party in England will probably remain a comparatively small disintegrating and educational force, never itself exercising political power, but supplying ideas and principles of social reconstruction to each of the great political parties in turn as the changing results of English politics bring them alternatively into office."⁸⁵

So, Webb's collectivism arose out of his interest in positivist economics. At first, he combined this interest with a continuing commitment to abstract economic theorising.⁸⁶ Later his courtship and marriage to Beatrice ensured that this became less and less so. Beatrice shared many of the same influences as Sidney: she was tutored by Spencer and continued to believe in evolutionary sociology long after rejecting the latter's political views; she reviewed her early life in her diaries from the perspective of one of George Eliot's heroines; and her work for Charles Booth convinced her of

the importance of empirical studies of social practices and institutions as alternatives to an abstract political economy.⁸⁷ By the time she met Sidney, she had written a study of the co-operative movement from the perspective of an evolutionary sociology.⁸⁸ Soon afterwards, she persuaded Sidney to give up his plan to write a study of economic theory: she almost made it a condition of marriage that he should devote his scholarly activities to works of a more positivist and sociological character.⁸⁹ By then, as we have seen, Sidney too had become increasingly interested in such an approach.⁹⁰ He had begun to concentrate on the detailed application of collective principles to the institutions and problems of modern society. Together the Webbs thus embarked upon their massive studies of trade unions and local government.⁹¹ Through detailed studies of actual institutions, they sought to establish an evolutionary sociology to guide social reform.

Bureaucracy and Elitism

While intellectual historians typically emphasise the continuities between Webb and the utilitarians, social historians often portrayed Webb and the other Fabians as the representatives of a new class of technocrats. In doing so, they pointed to a discontinuity that might seem to fit well with our emphasis on the distinctive nature of the radical milieu of the 1870s and 1880s. Unfortunately, however, these social historians typically took for granted that Webb and his like held the beliefs they associate with the class-interests of a technocratic, even bureaucratic, elite. Fabian socialism, Carl Levy argues, “combine[d] an appeal for ‘social service’ with schemes that substituted for traditional elites and capitalist entrepreneurs a stratum of managers and experts”; and it thereby “aimed firstly, to create effective collectivist forms of capital accumulation in mature industrial capitalist states, and secondly to bring into

being ‘healthy’ productivist bourgeoisies and their disciplined ‘proletarian negators’.”⁹² Just as social historians have now begun to pay greater attention to language and beliefs, so our account of Webb’s collectivism highlights his debt to ethical positivism in a way that inspires a different account of his stance on bureaucracy, elites, and democracy. Although Webb’s ethical positivism informed a strong rhetorical and moral emphasis on the role of the state and independent experts, his actual proposals do not translate this rhetoric into excessively bureaucratic and elitist institutions.

Sometimes Webb appears to suggest that collectivism involves extensive social control - a bureaucratic state invading all aspects of our lives. He adopts a very strong moral collectivism, saying that society has so much priority, “it is of comparatively little importance in the long run that individuals should develop to the utmost if the life of the community in which they live is not thereby served.”⁹³ The individual seems to be subordinated to a soulless machine:

The perfect and fitting development of each individual is not necessarily the utmost and highest cultivation of his own personality, but the filling, in the best possible way, of his humble function in the great social machine. We must abandon the self-conceit of imagining that we are independent units, and bend our jealous minds, absorbed in their own cultivation, to this subjection to the higher end, the Common Weal.⁹⁴

Because individual fulfilment derives from performing a social function, society ends up determining what the individual should do, rather than individual choices defining the nature of society.

Although Webb sometimes wrote as if he favoured extensive state intervention in the economy and even aspects of social and private life, his proposals remained

modest. As a socialist, Webb did not believe in what he saw as the untrammelled individualism of the free market. His theory of rent, moreover, precluded his expecting the state to wither away: he foresaw political conflict more or less disappearing so that the state's role became almost solely the administration of things as opposed to the government of persons, but its role in administering the unearned increment would if anything increase. Yet while Webb suggested the role of the state would grow, he did not envisage the extensive bureaucracy and state control one might expect given the strength of his moral collectivism. During World War One, Webb served on the War Emergency Workers' National Committee with H. M. Hyndman, a leading British Marxist. When Hyndman called for public control of major industries, Webb put forward an alternative proposal that acknowledged public ownership as a before effectively replacing it with the call for higher rates of taxation to fund social welfare.⁹⁵ Indeed, whenever Webb discussed his socialist ideal, he called for collectivisation of only a few industries.⁹⁶ The crucial things were, first, taxation of unearned increment to finance the provision of things such as museums and parks, and, second, an extension of municipal enterprise. Local government constituted the main arena for socialist activity. Even when municipalities provided services or controlled industries, they usually were envisaged as doing so in competition with private enterprises, although the greater efficiency of socialist organisation virtually guaranteed they would compete effectively.

The Webbs ascribed surprisingly few coercive powers to the state given the strength of Sidney's moral collectivism. In the Minority Report on the Poor Law, they suggested that "industrial malingers" who refused to look for work and turned down employment provided by National Labour Exchanges might be sent to Detention Colonies.⁹⁷ This proposal should be understood, however, less as an attempt to extend

the powers of the state than as a response to contemporary concerns, particularly in the Charity Organisation Society, about the damaging effect on individual responsibility and enterprise of the state providing welfare outside of institutions of incarceration. Well might the Webbs protest that “the Socialist State, far from being a centralized and coercive bureaucracy, presents itself to us as a highly diversified and extremely numerous set of social groupings in which, as we ourselves see it, governmental coercion, as distinguished from National and Municipal Housekeeping, is destined to play an ever dwindling part.”⁹⁸

How can we reconcile the strength of Webb’s moral collectivism with his relatively modest proposals? We can do so by recognising the continuing role of ethical positivism in his thought. Even before Webb adopted collectivism, he subordinated the individual to society in moral terms that derived from ethical positivism with its powerful sense of social duty. He argued in the mid-1880s that:

The sphere covered by definite ethical rules of conduct constantly increases in extent . . . We now believe that in any given circumstances, one course, if only we knew which, would produce more social happiness than any other course . . . There are no purely self-regarding acts. Every act, even the seemingly most "morally indifferent" affects the universe for good or for evil, everlastingly, irreparably. There is no forgiveness of sins . . . [Thus] if society knew all, society would naturally and properly, supervise all.⁹⁹

After he adopted collectivism in about 1887, he defined it in moral terms as just such a “subordination of personal interest to the general good.”¹⁰⁰ His strong moral collectivism simply restated his ethical positivism with its emphasis on social duty:

We are not isolated units free to choose our work: but parts of a whole, the well-being of which may be inimical to our fullest development or greatest

effectiveness . . . I think George Eliot meant to say this in *Maggie Tulliver*. 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 in the world?¹⁰¹

According to Webb, when society had scarcely evolved, functional differentiation and specialisation were limited, so the individual's actions did not always have direct effects on others. Today, in contrast, society had evolved into a complex organism based on a division of labour such that there were no self-regarding actions. A profound interdependence dramatically extended the arena within which people should pay heed to their social duty. Because all actions have social consequences, individuals can never merely do as they please. Rather, they always should subordinate personal desires to the requirements of the organic whole. In this way, Webb's emphasis on social duty combined with his analysis of the complexity of modern society to inspire a strong moral collectivism. He subordinated the individual to society not because he identified socialism with a centralised, bureaucratic, and coercive state, but because of his ethic of social duty.

Sometimes Webb appears to suggest that collectivism entails a move away from democracy towards rule by an administrative and managerial elite. He adopts a strong faith in experts as sources of neutral, compelling advice. Much of the activity of government can be left to the "disinterested professional expert who invents, discovers, inspects, audits, costs, tests or measures" so as to discover the facts about social life and its requirements.¹⁰² The knowledge gleaned by these scientists would allow them to administer effectively and also to provide indispensable guidance on policy matters. Moreover, the authority of this elite sometimes makes Webb seem rather dismissive of democracy. Elections can appear to be token gestures designed to secure a vague sense of popular consent for the policies the experts design.

Although Webb thus sometimes wrote as if he favoured elitism over democratic government, his proposals again remained modest. He always laid great stress on the democratic nature of his socialist ideal, often defining socialism as “the inevitable outcome of Democracy.”¹⁰³ He also highlighted the creative and democratic capacity of the workers, whose trade unions “offer the century-long experience of a thousand self-governing working class communities.”¹⁰⁴ Democracy was a pre-requisite of good government. Experts and other civil servants could provide advice and even implement policies, but the making of decisions had to remain the provenance of elected representatives. When Webb eulogised scientific expertise, he generally did so in order to contrast the rational co-ordination he believed would characterise socialism with the industrial anarchy of capitalism: he did not mean thereby to limit the claims of parliamentary democracy. Experts would help to overcome the chaos of an industrial system in which the major decisions arise out of a series of arbitrary judgements by numerous unconnected industrial autocrats. However while Webb thus evoked the disinterested professional expert, he immediately continued by saying that this expert “will have no power of command, and no right to insist on his suggestions being adopted” - “his function is exhausted when his report is made.”¹⁰⁵ Authority and the power to command would be vested exclusively in elected bodies. “The ultimate decision on policy rests in no other hands than those of the citizens themselves,” as the Webbs often explained.¹⁰⁶

Not only did Webb staunchly defend the authority of representative institutions over the executive and civil service, he also wanted to extend the scope of representative institutions within society. When R. B. Haldane defined democracy as the rule of an assembly of representatives who once elected are free to decide the general will, Webb objected to the dangers of such a concentration of power and

sovereignty, highlighting the importance of institutional pluralism in deciding the general will - “already we have several elections concurrently, Parish, District, Borough and County Councils; Trade Unions or Professional Associations and Co-operative Societies; as well as Parliament.”¹⁰⁷ In the Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth (1920), the Webbs advocated extending democracy from the state to economic and social institutions, appealing, for example, to democracies of consumers and of producers as well as to need for workers to participate in all areas of industrial management.¹⁰⁸ Earlier in Industrial Democracy (1897), they had evoked new professional representatives who might maintain a more “intimate and reciprocal” relationship with their representatives, thereby hopefully bringing “the ordinary man into active political citizenship” and increasing “the real authority of the people over the representative assembly, and of the representative assembly over the permanent civil service.”¹⁰⁹ The Webbs wanted to open the public sphere to working men and women. They persistently put forward proposals to extend representative and democratic institutions far beyond the place they occupied in Britain either then or now.

We can reconcile the strength of Webb’s faith in experts with his belief in democracy by recognising the continuing role of evolutionary sociology in his thought. His belief in a positivist science led him to distinguish sharply between facts and values, where rational individuals would agree on the facts once they were made clear. Science thus could provide a basis for agreed political action. More importantly, evolutionary theory had opened our consciousness to the facts, that is, to the way societies evolve to become ever more differentiated into functional units held together through co-operation and co-ordination. Knowledge of evolution meant, on the one hand, that politicians have fewer choices to make since the broad path of social

development will follow this given route, and, on the other hand, that experts have more to do since they can develop proposals designed to ease our way along this route. As Webb explained in the Fabian Essays, “the importance of complete consciousness of the social tendencies of the age lies in the fact that its existence and comprehensiveness often determine the expediency of our particular action.”¹¹⁰ Webb argued, finally, that the process of functional differentiation would establish a sharper distinction between elected representatives and their expert advisers. A socialist society would differentiate between our roles as producers, consumers, and citizens. The pattern of government within each role would require both popular control and administrative efficiency. In all these ways, Webb’s evolutionary sociology inspired him to put his faith in experts. He gave an enlarged role to a scientific elite not because he cared little for democracy but because of his belief in the inevitability of functional differentiation.

Social historians sometimes equate the welfare state and social democracy as they developed after 1945 with the bureaucratic and elitist nature of a new class of technocrats. They assume that Webb, as a representative of this class, must have held a bureaucratic and elitist vision. A study of Webb’s milieu suggests otherwise. His statist collectivism provided a powerful rhetorical and moral stick with which to beat the legacy of laissez-faire and individualism. The good of society would not arise magically out of individuals pursuing their private advantage. Yet Webb easily combined this position with a commitment to democracy. No doubt because Webb’s account of democracy was largely a liberal one, it will seem inadequate to those committed to primitive democracy or syndicalism.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, we should recognise the democratic, even pluralist, nature of his socialism. Received opinion goes astray in holding that his collectivism, in Stanley Pierson’s words, “tended to

reduce socialism to a science of public administration.”¹¹² Webb’s collectivism arose within his continuing commitment to ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology. It thus rested on a conscious recognition of both our social duty and the laws of social development.

Unemployment and Planning

Historians who condemn Webb’s bureaucratic elitism usually read his works anachronistically in relation to developments after 1945 rather than the milieu of the late nineteenth century. In contrast, we might suggest just as evolutionary positivism wrought a break with utilitarianism so it gave way soon after to an atomistic and analytical modernism.¹¹³ This modernism had precursors prior to 1914, but it flourished following the rise of theoretical, social, and moral dilemmas that proved comparatively intransigent to the resources of evolutionary positivism.¹¹⁴ World War One, for example, challenged the link between technological development and moral improvement that had sustained positivist ideas of progress. It lent a fillip instead to forms of scepticism - themselves often responses to the Victorian crisis of faith - that sought to build up from atomistic units rather than draw sweeping pictures of human development. In the inter-war years, Webb’s theories proved unable to generate viable solutions to social problems such as cyclical depressions and unemployment. The field lay open for new proposals for social reform and economic management, notably those of the liberal socialists and Keynesians. Social democracy and the welfare state as they developed after 1945 drew not only on ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology, but also on theories and proposals developed long after Webb had settled on his main convictions.

After World War One, Webb's evolutionary sociology informed an immobility rooted in a faith in the inevitability of collectivism. It was as if hidden social forces would establish socialism whatever we did. Webb suggested that "for socialism to secure universal assent", it was enough that there should be no "clear determination" to hamper it.¹¹⁵ He often expressed such faith in the collectivist future, and he spent considerable energy devising collectivist policies he thought might attain immediate political backing, but between these two activities lay unresolved issues about how to cope with economic and social difficulties prior to the adoption of collectivist solutions. Typically social and economic problems would be solved by the spread of collectivism: the rationalisation of the economy, for example, would eliminate shortages, temporary blockages, and all the other problems he associated with anarchic competition. Yet a faith that co-operation and co-ordination could solve problems does nothing to alleviate them prior to collectivism. Ethical positivism led Webb to prefer collectivism to the market; evolutionary theory taught him that collectivism necessarily would come into being; together they made it difficult for him to look beyond collectivism even for short-term solutions to social problems.

Webb's long-term programme for collectivising the economy was of little help in dealing with the mass unemployment of the 1920s. Worse, his proposed policies were largely supply-side measures, intended to eliminate wasteful duplication and other undesirable features of competition, which in the short term probably would worsen the problem of unemployment. Yet Webb's views made it difficult for him to look to alternative economic strategies. His vision of the state rationalising an anarchic economy led him, for instance, to dismiss any long-term role for relief work.¹¹⁶ Relief work for the unemployed organised by the state could contribute little to collectivism because it did not co-ordinate enterprises but only set up isolated, albeit

co-operative, ones. Besides, his acceptance of Marshall's accounts of the relationships between supply and demand, and the various factors of production, led him to suspect that relief work might cause further unemployment. State-sponsored workshops or farms would compete with private enterprise in ways that might lead to the bankruptcy of the latter. If the state raised finance on the capital markets, it might raise interest rates and so make it more difficult for private industry to obtain loans; but if it did so by raising taxes, it might lead to a fall in demand. Typically relief work would draw resources away from the private sector just when expansion of that sector was needed to create new jobs. So, although Webb did not oppose relief work, he severely restricted its extent.

Behind Webb's lukewarm attitude to relief work lay his social philosophy. His evolutionary sociology implied the economy was becoming increasingly co-ordinated as state activity replaced the market. His ethical positivism implied this process should be welcomed because it reflected our social nature and obligations. Webb thus saw the market as unacceptable in a way that precluded his looking to it as a mechanism for coping with slumps and unemployment. He and Beatrice pointed to "inherent defects in the motive of profit-making" that inevitably led to "malignant growths and perverted metabolisms."¹¹⁷

The profit-maker is, by the nature of the case led to damage and destroy, not only the most valuable instruments of production, but also some of those that are irreplaceable; he tends to adulterate (or to produce inferior substitutes for) necessary commodities; he often employs his own and other people's labor in producing commodities and services of no social value - sometimes, indeed, ruinously pernicious; and he is found eager to use his own and other people's capital and credit in ways productive of profit to himself, but of nothing else.¹¹⁸

Hence, Webb's debt to the new learning does much to explain his hostility to expansionary strategies based on increasing purchasing power so as to expand demand and thus employment.

J. M. Keynes, and others who favoured such strategies, did so in part because they belonged to the generation that broke with this new learning. In the early twentieth-century, we find across Europe intellectual eruptions associated with the rise of modernism. The earlier focus on wholes and their evolution gave way to atomistic and analytical approaches to discrete and discontinuous elements and their assemblage. At the edges of modernism, moreover, we find ideas of self-reference, incompleteness, and radical subjectivity. These ideas shattered the smooth surface of Webb's new learning. G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell inspired an atomistic and analytical style opposed to the speculative and moralistic tone of evolutionary philosophy. At least after 1920, the social sciences drew increasingly on a logical or linguistic positivism very different from Webb's ethical and evolutionary thought.¹¹⁹

Keynes, raised in the Cambridge of Moore and Russell, stood apart from the moralistic and organic social science typified by the Webbs. As an undergraduate, Keynes, along with other future members of the Bloomsbury group, adopted much of Moore's ethics. Keynes recalled how he accepted Moore's view about the good in relation to oneself in a way that "made morals unnecessary" at least with respect to social duty.¹²⁰ Although neither Moore nor Keynes neglected morality in quite the way the latter thus suggested, when compared to ethical positivists, they undoubtedly focused on good states of mind and personal relations at the expense of a common good. Local intuitions and friendship gained ascendancy over social practices.

Cambridge mathematics provides a context for both Russell's philosophy and Marshall's economic theory. Whereas Webb increasingly turned to an evolutionary

and institutional economics, Cambridge economists, including the youthful Keynes, applied and developed the analytical aspects of Marshall's work.¹²¹ Despite holding a theory of moral evolution, Marshall fought hard to divorce economics from the Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge. Keynes, as a disciple of Moore, was even more eager to cut the cord between economics and ethics. Nowhere in Keynes's work do we find anything resembling Webb's vision of a positive, evolutionary science of economics tracing the course of a moral development. Instead he expanded, modified, and even supplanted the analytical tools and theories of Marshall's neo-classical synthesis. He did so initially in the study of money and later, largely in response to dilemmas of policy, through his repudiation of the quantity theory of money on to his general theory of employment.¹²² So, Keynes adopted a style of thinking that was more atomistic and analytical, a style, which, in conjunction with his greater acceptance of the market, facilitated his turning to fiscal and monetary policies, intended to increase purchasing power and thus reduce unemployment.

Just as Webb's immersion in the new learning helps to explain his rejection of Keynes's approach, so it illuminates his own response to the depression and unemployment of the inter-war years. Rather than offering short-term solutions within the framework of a capitalist economy, he insisted that the only viable solution was the long-term one of industrial reorganisation within a collectivist economy. He had long believed that the gradual increase in state and municipal activity would transform the nation's productive capacity so as to all but eliminate trade cycles.¹²³ By the 1930s, however, he was rather disillusioned with the apparent slowness of the process of evolutionary development. He found himself a member of the second Labour government, which, under pressure from foreign bankers, attempted to solve an economic crisis at the expense of the unemployed and poor.¹²⁴ Worse still, large parts

of Europe seemed to be turning to fascism in the wake of this crisis. His evolutionary and positivist faith had not led him to expect such developments.

In the context of such disillusionment, Webb turned to the Soviet Union. He visited it with Beatrice in 1932 and again alone in 1934 before they published Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation? the following year.¹²⁵ The Webbs mentioned several problems with the Soviet Union, including terror and “liquidations”. However, even if we also allow that there was little reliable evidence available to them, they did not sufficiently question the official rhetoric. On the contrary, Webb was only too ready to believe it. One reason for this was the extent to which the rhetoric resonated with his evolutionary sociology and ethical positivism while seeming to resolve the economic problems of the inter-war years. He turned to the Soviet Union because the “outstanding discovery” of “planned production for community consumption” appeared to rationalise the economy for the social good in a way that had abolished “mass unemployment, together with the devastating alternation of commercial booms and slumps.”¹²⁶ Although Webb was no longer quite so sanguine about the inevitable, gradual emergence of socialism, his sociology still implied that human progress would consist of further co-operation and co-ordination. Thus, collectivisation and planning could appear as the vital tools of rationalisation. Planning can ensure a co-ordinated evenness that makes possible an efficient and moral economy, an end to the financial panics that infect capitalist money markets, and the abolition of involuntary unemployment.¹²⁷ By abolishing profit-making, the Soviet Union had rid itself of the ills plaguing capitalist economies. Webb accepted the rhetoric of efficiency and rationality without paying sufficient attention to the actual criteria by which goods were distributed. In addition, he still emphasised the social duty of the individual. Hence, the exhortations and ideology of the Soviet Union could appear as expressions

of social solidarity. “First among the moral obligations that communist morality imposes on the individual man or woman is that of service to the community in which he or she resides,” wrote the Webbs.¹²⁸ More specifically, the abolition of profit-making means that each producer has a “universal and continuous” incentive to provide the “utmost service” thereby increasing the common wage-fund from which he or she benefits.¹²⁹ Trade unions thus favour increasing productivity by means of piece-work, mechanisation, and other measures to which they are hostile in capitalist economies. Webb accepted the rhetoric of planning for social consumption without paying sufficient attention to the extent to which the practice of planning represented enforced accumulation. We might add, finally, that the Webbs projected on to the Soviet Union extensive features of their vision of a reformed democracy. In spite of the control exercised by the Communist Party, Webb regarded the political system as a “multiform democracy” in which the individual can participate as a citizen, producer, and consumer through “an amazing variety of channels.”¹³⁰

The official rhetoric of the Soviet Union offered Webb his own collectivist vision - a planned economy and a religion of humanity. In recognising this, we bring into view an important flaw in Webb’s socialist theory. He significantly underplays the ineluctable place of conflict in social life. In general, Webb postulates an evolutionary movement towards a society from which conflict is largely absent since everyone will work for a common good upon which they agree. Evolutionary sociology convinced him that society was developing towards a fully co-operative and co-ordinated ideal; and ethical positivism encouraged him to see such an ideal as desirable for the proper fulfilment of the individual. In particular, Webb’s faith in such an ideal appears to have made him insensitive to the extent to which Soviet rhetoric belied a reality of violent resolutions of conflict. While Keynes and others

accepted the market as a means to determine wages, prices, and distribution, Webb would not do so because the market embodied an irrational and immoral conflict. He turned instead to the model apparently given by the Soviet Union without recognising how it too embodied conflict and violence.

Concluding Reflections

“Two typewriters clicking as one” has proved a popular image of the Webbs. Its popularity derives in part from the closeness of their collaboration but even more from the suggestion of a mechanical mode of being based on a severe efficiency and a repression of emotion, aesthetics, and other areas of judgement. Sidney in particular comes across as crudely rationalistic in his personal life, writings, and public activities. To some, his rationalism represents an extension of the utilitarian mindset. To others, it signifies the managerialist tendency of a new class of technocrats. Whatever Webb’s emotional life might have been, these accounts of his socialism are inadequate. Few scholars have explored his early and largely unpublished writings. Doing so reveals the extent to which he drew on the new learning associated with Comte, Darwin, and Spencer. His socialism emerged out of a radical milieu dominated by ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology. Once we recognise this, we can explain the otherwise rather odd gap between the strong moral emphasis he placed on society and scientific knowledge and the comparatively modest nature of his collectivist proposals.

Accounts of Webb as a descendent of utilitarianism or a representative of a new class bolster up particular views of social democracy and the welfare state. On the one hand, the welfare state appears, for better or worse, as an extension of a programme of social reform and social control based on an Enlightenment notion of reason. On the other, it appears as a response to contradictions within the capitalist

system, perhaps even as an attempt to smooth-over some of the class conflict inherent in that system so as to prolong its otherwise fragile existence. Our study of Webb does not compel us entirely to reject either of these views. However, it does encourage us to pay greater attention to more particular developments in the history of ideas. No doubt Webb had some ideas or concerns in common with the utilitarians, and no doubt his career reflects changes in the roles of different classes in British society. However, we can explain his socialism only by shifting our attention to a particular radical milieu that arose in the 1870s in response to the theory of evolution. In this view, early forms of social democracy and the welfare state owe much to a distinctive culture that thrived between the third Reform Act and World War One. Scientific naturalism and ethical positivism inspired a broad culture of humanitarianism, public duty, humanitarianism, and social service. This culture differs notably from the evangelicalism and individualism of the early Victorian period and also the scepticism and statism of the mid-twentieth century. Our study of Webb also suggested that this culture was transformed in the inter-war years. Developments in philosophy and sociology inspired more atomistic, analytical studies. Equally Webb's thought provided few resources to deal with problems such as unemployment. Keynesian ideas became increasingly accepted as a viable response to these problems.¹³¹ Even the techniques of national economic planning were developed by liberal socialists who were willing to use the market.¹³² Webb, in contrast, thought that planning required a context of far greater state control and ownership. The Labour governments that did so much to establish social democracy and the welfare state after 1945 owed at least as much to Keynes and the liberal socialists as to Webb.¹³³

Perhaps, therefore, we should avoid tying social democracy or the welfare state to a moment of origin, core idea, social structure, or teleology. We should be wary of

any attempt to identify them with fixed historical essences. Instead, we should see them as the changing products of particular ideational and political contexts. We should trace the ways in which they have unfolded as people grappled with dilemmas and struggled for power. Social democracy and the welfare state have no true or proper form. In Britain, they began to emerge in the nineteenth century, often in the context of the new learning, and thereafter they have developed in response to a host of dilemmas and conflicts such as the unemployment of the inter-war years.

¹ M. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (London: Tavistock, 1972); R. Koselleck, “Social History and Begriffsgeschichte”, in I. Hampsher-Monk, K. Tilmans, & F. van Vree, eds., History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 1998); and Q. Skinner, “Rhetoric and Conceptual Change”, Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought 3 (1999), 60-73. Also see M. Bevir, The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² M. Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (London: Tavistock, 1970); M. Richter, The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Q. Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

³ Historians do not ascribe to the Fabians the political influence they themselves did. See A. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

⁴ A. McBriar, An Edwardian Mixed Doubles: The Bosanquets versus the Webbs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

⁵ B. Crowley, The Self, The Individual, and the Community: Liberalism in the Political Thought of F. A. Hayek and Sidney and Beatrice Webb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 1. Also see E. Barker, Political Thought in England, 1848-1914 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 213-7; G. Cole, British Working Class Politics, 1832-1914 (London: Routledge, 1941), pp. 122-3; and M. Mack, “The Fabians and Utilitarianism”, Journal of the History of Ideas 16 (1955), 76-88. A

modified version of this view recognises that Webb owed a debt to positivism only to equate it with a rationalism easily assimilated to utilitarianism at the expense of ethical positivism. Webb appears as dismissive of “the moralistic” concern with altruism and duty found in some socialists; while the Fabian Society, under his influence, adopted “a form of utilitarianism” - a socialism “limited to practical efforts to modify the existing industrial order.” See S. Pierson, British Socialists: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 31-2. More generally, innumerable portraits show him as a soulless machine, remarkably akin to the young J. S. Mill, concerned only with utilitarian reforms and the political machinations necessary to get them adopted. The most amusing example is the satire by H. G. Wells, The New Machiavelli (London: Bodley Head, 1911).

⁶ The Fabians themselves stressed the continuity of progressivism. See S. Webb, “The Progress of Socialism”, Fabian Tract no. 13 (1890). A recent attempt to use a similar historiography to defend a progressive alliance is E. Biagini & A. Reid, Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour, and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 18-9.

⁷ See respectively Crowley, The Self, The Individual, and the Community; and G. Foote, The Labour Party’s Political Thought (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

⁸ Interestingly the only exception is the study that comes closest to recognising Webb’s ethical positivism: W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism: Men and Ideas in the Formation of Fabian Socialist Doctrines, 1881-1889 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 183-214.

⁹ See, for example, M. Richter, The Politics of Conscience: T. H. Green and His Age (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964); and A. Vincent & R. Plant, Philosophy,

Politics, and Citizenship (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). The classic pronouncement on the Webbs from within the Culture and Society tradition is F. Leavis, “Mill, Beatrice Webb and the ‘English School’”, Scrutiny 15 (1949), 104-26. This tradition has influenced both historians who read Webb’s socialism as rationalist and utilitarian in contrast to romantic and idealistic alternatives – S. Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); and Pierson, British Socialists – and those who seek to rescue a religious and ethical socialism defined in contrast to Fabian rationalism – R. Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950 (London: Penguin, 1961); and S. Yeo, “A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896”, History Workshop 4 (1977), 5-56.

¹⁰ S. Collini, Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); J. Harris, Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870-1914 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and D. Winch, “Mr Gradgrind and Jerusalem”, in S. Collini, R. Whatmore, & B. Young, eds., Economy, Polity, and Society: British Intellectual History 1750-1950 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 243-66. Challenges to the view that other Fabians were cultureless rationalists include M. Bevir, “Annie Besant’s Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought”, Journal of Ecclesiastical History 50 (1999), 62-93; I. Britain, Fabianism and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); P. Clark, Liberals and Social Democrats (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); and M. Weiner, Between Two Worlds: The Political Thought of Graham Wallas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Given Webb’s dominant role in the formation of Fabian doctrine, he might be said to be the still unchallenged crux of the case for Fabianism as soulless utilitarians.

¹¹ On Webb see R. Harrison, "Sidney and Beatrice Webb", in C. Levy, ed., Socialism and the Intelligentsia 1880-1914 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 35-89.

On the Fabians as a whole see E. Hobsbawm, "The Fabians Reconsidered", in Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964), pp. 250-71. More generally still see A. Gouldner, Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class (London: Macmillan, 1979).

¹² G. Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism", in Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-class History, 1832-1982 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and P. Joyce, Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and, for general overviews, M. Bevir & F. Trentmann, "Social Justice and Modern Capitalism: Historiographical Problems, Theoretical Perspectives", European Legacy (2001); and J. Thompson, "After the Fall: Class and Political Language, 1780-1900", Historical Journal 39 (1996), 785-806.

¹³ A neglected source is his brother's notes: C. Webb, "Notes on Sidney Webb", in Tawney Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES), London. Otherwise most of our information comes from his contemporaries. See B. Webb, Our Partnership (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 1-11; and M. Cole, ed., The Webbs and their Work (London: F. Muller, 1949), pp. 3-26. Biographical studies include M. Hamilton, Sidney and Beatrice Webb (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1932); and L. Radice, Beatrice and Sidney Webb (London: Macmillan, 1984).

¹⁴ "Prospectus of the Zetetical Society", Passfield Papers (PP), BLPES, PP:VI:4.

¹⁵ Many of the lectures are preserved in the Passfield Papers. Although the recorded dates are often estimates, many of those discussed here are confirmed by Zetetical Society, “Programme for the Autumn and Winter Terms, 1881-82”, Shaw Collection, Harry Ransom Center (HRC), University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁶ S. Webb, "The Existence of Evil", PP:VI:1 (nd).

¹⁷ See, on Victorian Christianity generally, O. Chadwick, The Victorian Church (London: A. & C. Black, 1971); on theology and geology, C. Gillespie, Genesis and Geology (New York: Harper & Row, 1959); on theology and evolutionary theory, F. Turner, Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian Britain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and on moral doubts, J. Altholz, “The Warfare of Conscience with Theology”, in J. Altholz, ed., The Mind and Art of Victorian England (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), pp. 58-77.

¹⁸ L. Stephen, Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking (London: Longmans, 1873), p. 107. Significantly Stephen rejected utilitarianism because it did not incorporate an evolutionary sociology. See L. Stephen, The English Utilitarians, 3 vols. (London: Duckworth, 1900), Vol. 3: John Stuart Mill, pp. 373-5. On Stephen see N. Annan, Leslie Stephen: His Thought and Character in Relation to His Age (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952).

¹⁹ Beatrice Webb wrote of how “the impulse to self-subordinating service was transferred, consciously and overtly, from God to man”: B. Webb, My Apprenticeship (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1926), p. 143.

²⁰ S. Webb, "On Serving God", PP:VI:1 (nd).

²¹ S. Webb, "The Ethics of Existence", PP:VI:3 (1880/81). Later Webb became highly critical of utilitarianism as an encouragement to selfishness. "Utilitarianism became the Protestantism of Sociology, and 'how to make for self and family the best of both worlds' was assumed to be the duty, as it certainly was the aim, of every practical Englishman." See S. Webb, "The Historic Basis of Socialism", in G. Shaw, ed., Fabian Essays, intro. A. Briggs (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 77. Webb's contribution to the Essays is discussed in detail by C. Hill, "Sidney Webb and the Common Good, 1887-1889", History of Political Thought 14 (1993), 591-620.

²² J. Mill, "Coleridge" & "Auguste Comte and Positivism", in The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-91), Vol. X: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society, pp. 117-63 & 261-368. Mill's views on Coleridge, and Comte, and his continuing allegiance to utilitarianism are considered in A. Ryan, J. S. Mill (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 53-8, 228-36, & 95-124. We should not over-emphasise the civic-minded nature of Mill's thought, as does E. Biagini, "Liberalism and Direct Democracy: John Stuart Mill and the Model of Ancient Athens", in E. Biagini, ed., Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals, and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21-44. By the time we reach Mill, the idea of civic virtue has been transformed to highlight self-development and responsible public participation. A useful corrective to Biagini's view derives from a reflection on the extent to which later theorists turned to Greece - or Rome, as with Webb - to find communitarian themes absent from the utilitarian tradition. See J. Harris, "Platonism, Positivism and Progressivism: Aspects of British Sociological Thought in the Early Twentieth Century", in Biagini, ed., Citizenship and Community, pp. 343-60.

²³ J. Mill, “An Autobiography”, in Works, Vol. I: Autobiography and Literary Essays, p. 175.

²⁴ One discussion of Mill’s followers scarcely mentions utilitarianism, locating them instead within a culture of altruism. See Collini, Public Moralists, pp. 60-90.

²⁵ G. Shaw to A. Henderson, 17 January 1905. Cited in A. Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), pp. 135-9. Robert Ingersoll (1833-99) was an American lawyer, writer, and lecturer, famous for his attacks on Christianity. See, for example, R. Ingersoll, Why Am I An Agnostic (London: Freethought Publishing, 1902).

²⁶ On Spencer’s mixture of an organic, evolutionary sociology with and individualist politics see T. Gray, “Herbert Spencer: Individualist or Organicist?”, Political Studies 33 (1985), 236-53; and M. Taylor, Men Versus the State: Herbert Spencer and Late Victorian Individualism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 133-51.

²⁷ A. Besant, The True Basis of Morality (London: Freethought, n.d.).

²⁸ E. Pease, “Ethics and Socialism”, Practical Socialist 1 (1886), 16-19; G. Wallas, “Personal Duty Under the Present System”, Practical Socialist 1(1886), 118-20 & 124-5; and the extracted letters in M. Olivier, “Memoir”, in M. Olivier, ed., Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948), pp. 60-7.

²⁹ E. Pease, The History of the Fabian Society (London: A. Fifield, 1916), pp. 17-18.

³⁰ See respectively W. Simon, “August Comte’s English Disciples”, Victorian Studies 8 (1964), 161-72; R. Harrison, Before the Socialists (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965); and B. Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 214-60. More generally see T. Wright, The Religion of Humanity: The

Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986),

³¹ Although Webb adopted a positivist ethic and sociology, he complained that Comte unfortunately “enveloped” these things “in a dense mass of other doctrines which have impeded their progress.” S. Webb, *The Economic Function of the Middle Classes*”, PP:VI:20 (1885).

³² Webb, "Ethics of Existence".

³³ S. Webb, "George Eliot's Works" PP:VI:6 (1882).

³⁴ Webb, "The Way Out" PP:VI:19 (1884/5).

³⁵ Webb, "Ethics of Existence".

³⁶ S. Webb, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century and its Influence on Philosophy", PP:VI:2 (1880).

³⁷ Webb, "New Learning".

³⁸ S. Webb, "Hereditary as a Factor in Psychology and Ethics" PP:VI:5 (1882).

³⁹ J. S. Mill again sign-posted the shift without adopting anything like an evolutionary sociology. He criticised associational psychology as an educational principle in Mill, “Autobiography”, pp. 141-3. For discussion see E. Eisenach, “Mill’s Autobiography as Political Theory”, History of Political Thought 8 (1987), 111-129.

⁴⁰ This complex process, and the place of Spencer therein, is the subject of J. Burrow, Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 179-227.

⁴¹ Webb, "Hereditary".

⁴² Webb, “New Learning”.

⁴³ S. Webb, “On Economic Method”, PP:VI:25 (1885?).

⁴⁴ Webb, "Way Out".

⁴⁵ On the early history of the Fabian Society, see N. & J. Mackenzie The First Fabians (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977); as well as Pease, History.

⁴⁶ S. Webb, The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), Vol. 1: Apprenticeships, 1873-1892, p. 80.

⁴⁷ Church Reformer, March 1884.

⁴⁸ S. Webb, "What Socialism Means: A Call to the Unconverted", The Practical Socialist 1 (1886), 89-93.

⁴⁹ Webb, Letters, Vol. 1, pp. 124 & 229.

⁵⁰ Most commentators assimilate Webb to classical liberalism because they fail to notice how his debt to Marshall distances his theory of rent from Ricardo's. See McBriar, Fabian Socialism, pp. 29-47; and Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism, pp. 119-23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁴ S. Webb, "The Economics of a Positivist Community", The Practical Socialist 1 (1886), 39.

⁵⁵ S. Webb, "The Need of Capital", PP:VI:28 (1886).

⁵⁶ Webb, "Way Out".

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Webb, "Economic Function".

⁶⁰ Webb, "What Socialism Means", 91.

⁶¹ Ibid., 92.

⁶² See respectively S. Webb, "Considerations on Anarchism", PP:VI:18 (1884/5); S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages: Being a Criticism of Karl Marx and a Statement of Economic Theory", PP:VII:4 (1886); S. Webb, "Economic Limitations of Cooperation", Co-operative News, 12 January 1889; and S. Webb, "Henry George and Socialism", Church Reformer January 1889, 11-13 & March 1889, 60-61.

⁶³ Wolfe, Radicalism, p. 184.

⁶⁴ Wolfe, Radicalism, p. 204. Marshall was sympathetic to the historical economists in ways Wolfe does not indicate. He divided his lectures into half on theory and half on history: M. Marshall, What I Remember (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), p. 20. Moreover, he hoped to write a study showing the importance of history for economics, though in the event he published only a shortened version: A. Marshall, Industry and Trade: A Study of Industrial Technique and Business Organisation (London: Macmillan, 1919). However, Marshall did not reject the analytical approach and concerns of J. S. Mill for the alternatives of the positivists. His major work clearly shows he belongs in a neo-classical school concerned to rework J. S. Mill in response to the dilemmas associated with the collapse of the classical theory of distribution. A. Marshall, Principles of Economics, 2 vols., ed. C. Guillebaud (London: Macmillan, 1961).

⁶⁵ T. Hutchison, A Review of Economic Doctrines, 1870-1929 (Wesport, CT: Greenwood, 1975).

⁶⁶ J. Mill, "Thornton on Labour and its Claims", in Works, Vol. V: Essays on Economics and Society, pp. 631-68.

⁶⁷ W. Jevons, The Theory of Political Economy, ed. R. Collison Black

(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

⁶⁸ T. Leslie, Essays in Political Economy, ed. J. Ingram (Dublin: University of Dublin Press, 1878).

⁶⁹ Wolfe, Radicalism, p. 184. Although Hill too describes Webb's thought as moving away from "a residual Comteanism," the emphasis he still finds on public spirit and institutions appears to resemble just the ethical positivism, as opposed to strict Comteanism, we have found to be widespread in Britain at the time. See Hill, "Webb", 618.

⁷⁰ Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages". He told his students at the Working Men's College that although political economy begins with "self-interest", it "must have regard for history" - it "must correct for real life": S. Webb, "Notes for Lectures on Political Economy" PP:VI:23.

⁷¹ Webb provided a historical analysis of economics in a series of lectures preserved in the Passfield Papers. See S. Webb, "Feudalism", PP:VI:10; S. Webb, "The Growth of Industrialism", PP:VI:11; and, S. Webb, "The Reformation", PP:VI:12. The tentative date given for these lectures is 1883 since they are taken to be a lecture series he gave at the Working Men's College in 1883-84. However, the leaflet announcing Webb's lectures at the College lists the headings of the various lectures and none correspond to the lectures preserved in the Passfield Papers. See "Working Men's College Session 1883-4: Political Economy: Leaflet announcing a series of eight lectures by Sidney Webb" PP:VI:8. Moreover, a covering note in the Passfield Papers draws attention to a letter from Webb to James Baldwin, 10 June 1889 in which he says he read the first two lectures to the Literary and Philosophical Society. The covering note then adds:

"as the letter was presented to the Collection when Section VI was already completed, it was thought unwise, in the absence of precise data, to shift 10-12 forward - perhaps erroneously - to yet another presumed date." My judgement is that the lectures are characteristic of his writings in the late 1880s.

⁷² S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology", PP:VI:34 (1887-88?). The paper was published as S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology", Our Corner 12 (1888), 53-60 & 79-89.

⁷³ S. Webb, "The Economic Basis of Socialism and Its Political Programme" PP:VI:33 (1887).

⁷⁴ Webb, Socialism in England (Baltimore: American Economic Association, 1889), pp. 47-9. Ingram edited Cliffe Leslie, Essays, and wrote studies of political economy and of Comte: J. Ingram, A History of Political Economy (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1888); and J. Ingram, Human Nature and Morals According to Auguste Comte (London: A. & C. Black, 1901).

⁷⁵ Webb, "Historic Basis", p. 92.

⁷⁶ S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism", Fabian Tract no. 69 (1896).

⁷⁷ S. Webb, "Historic Basis", p. 87.

⁷⁸ See in particular S. Webb, "Twentieth Century Politics: A Policy of National Efficiency", Fabian Tract no. 108 (1901).

⁷⁹ Webb, "Historic Basis", p. 64.

⁸⁰ Webb gave seven pages of examples: see *Ibid.*, pp. 78-84.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸² Webb, "Economic Basis of Socialism".

⁸³ The Fabian Society (drafted by S. Webb), “Manifesto to Progressive Londoners on the Vestry Elections”, 1893, Shaw Collection, HRC.

⁸⁴ M. Bevir, “Fabianism, Permeation and Independent Labour”, Historical Journal 39 (1996), 179-96.

⁸⁵ Webb, Socialism in England, p. 20.

⁸⁶ In 1889, after writing the paper on Rome, Webb lectured to Section F of the British Association, vigorously defending the idea of a science of economics divorced from questions of “particular social arrangements”: S. Webb, “On the Relation Between Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product” PP:VI:41 (1889).

⁸⁷ Webb, Apprenticeship. Like Sidney, Beatrice has been located in a line of descent from Bentham and J. S. Mill in a way that ignores the impact of ethical positivism and evolutionary sociology. See S. Letwin, The Pursuit of Certainty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). Yet Beatrice could hardly have been clearer about their shift away from utilitarianism. She acknowledged early utilitarian influences. She identified broad areas of agreement, notably “that human action must be judged by its results.” But because they insisted that such results must include a “noble character” and “sense of conduct”, they “altogether reject the ‘happiness of the greatest number’ as a definition of our own end.” Webb, Our Partnership p. 210.

⁸⁸ B. Webb, The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891).

⁸⁹ Webbs, Letters, Vol. 1, p. 178. On their relationship see J. Mackenzie, A Victorian Courtship (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979).

⁹⁰ He began to contrast the concrete-deductive method with a new sociological method that could uncover "natural" laws: S. Webb, "History of Economic Theory", PP:VI:64.

⁹¹ S. & B. Webb The History of Trade Unionism (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1894); and S. & B. Webb, English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act, 8 vols. (London: Longmans, 1906-29). For a useful account of their sociological approach see the preface to S. & B. Webb, Industrial Democracy (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1920).

⁹² C. Levy, "Conclusion: Historiography and the New Class", in Levy, ed., Socialism and the Intelligentsia, p. 275.

⁹³ Webb, Difficulties of Individualism, p. 16.

⁹⁴ Webb, "Historic Basis", p. 90.

⁹⁵ R. Harrison, "The War Emergency Workers National Committee", in A. Briggs & J. Saville, eds., Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923 (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 211-59.

⁹⁶ Webb drafted the 1918 constitution of the Labour Party including the famous demand for common ownership. Even here, however, we should be cautious in ascribing to him a belief in wholesale nationalism. For one thing, the main impetus behind the demand appears to have been to include socialist rhetoric to appease groups such as the Independent Labour Party; and for another, there is growing evidence that socialists rarely understood common ownership to entail wholesale nationalisation. See D. Tanner, "The Labour Party, Social Ownership and Clause 4", unpublished paper.

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- ⁹⁷ S. & B. Webb, The Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission, Vol. 2: The Public Organisation of the Labour Market (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1909), p. 306.
- ⁹⁸ S. & B. Webb, "What is Socialism", New Statesman, 21 June 1913.
- ⁹⁹ Webb, "Considerations on Anarchism".
- ¹⁰⁰ Webb, Socialism in England, p. 12.
- ¹⁰¹ Webb, Letters, Vol. 1, p. 158. The reference is to G. Eliot, The Mill on The Floss (New York: Penguin, 1979).
- ¹⁰² S. & B. Webb, A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain, ed. S. Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 198. On the place of such ideas within the British tradition of administration see R. Thomas, The British Philosophy of Administration (London: Longman, 1978).
- ¹⁰³ Webb, "Historic Basis", p. 64.
- ¹⁰⁴ Webbs, History of Trade Unionism, pp. 475-6.
- ¹⁰⁵ Webbs, Constitution, p. 198.
- ¹⁰⁶ Webbs, Industrial Democracy, p. 848.
- ¹⁰⁷ Webbs, Letters, Vol. 3: Pilgrimage 1912-1947, p. 152.
- ¹⁰⁸ Webb, Constitution, pp. 164-7.
- ¹⁰⁹ Webb, Industrial Democracy, pp. 70-1. The relationships of their theories to those of Bernstein and Lenin are discussed in R. Harrison, "The Webbs as Historians of Trade Unions", in R. Samuel, ed., People's History and Socialist Theory (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 322-6.
- ¹¹⁰ Webb, "Historic Basis", p. 82.

¹¹¹ Many of the complaints about Webb's bureaucratic elitism come from historians committed to the latter accounts of democracy. See most recently L. Barrow & I. Bullock, Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement, 1880-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 30-38. Webb outlined his more liberal account in S. Webb, "The Machinery of Democracy", Fabian News, November - January 1897. He and Beatrice explained their objection to things such as delegation and referenda in Webbs, Industrial Democracy, pp. 38-65.

¹¹² Pierson, British Socialists, p. 95.

¹¹³ Although such breaks inaugurate new ages, they are not sudden all or nothing affairs. For a series of studies of how individuals, including Keynes, negotiated that between ethical positivism and modernism see S. Pedersen & P. Mandler, eds., After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain (London: Routledge, 1994); and for how aspects of ethical positivism continued to inform the welfare state, J. Harris, "Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy", Past and Present 135 (1992), 116-41.

¹¹⁴ On early modernists see W. Everdell, The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth Century Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). On the parallel turn from positivism see H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930 (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

¹¹⁵ S. Webb, "English Progress Towards Democracy", Fabian Tract no. 15 (1892), 14.

¹¹⁶ S. Webb, The Government Organisation of Unemployed Labour (London: Fabian Society, 1886). As early as 1926, Beatrice acknowledged that their proposals needed

supplementing, but significantly she looked for control, not intervention. “For a long time,” she wrote to Keynes, “I have felt that the particular line of research which we in the Fabian Society started in the nineties - the working out of a national minimum of civilised life, so far as regulation and public services can secure it - is now exhausted as a discovery though not yet applied, and that the new inventiveness must necessarily concern itself with the control of capitalist enterprise and landlordism at the top . . . It would certainly be an immense service, not only to the Labour Movement but to the world, if you and your friends could discover how national finance and international trade could be controlled in the interests of the whole community.” Webbs, Letters, Vol. 3, p. 256.

¹¹⁷ Webbs, Decay, pp. 109 & 108.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-10.

¹¹⁹ The moralism, faith in progress, and naïve realism of ethical and evolutionary positivism also fell before the growing interest in the unconscious, the local, and the personal, particularly with the First World War undermining, for many, the idea of a social order based on individual or universal reason. On the European nature of this development see Hughes, Consciousness and Society, pp. 395-401; and for a British example from among Webbs fellow Fabians see G. Wallas, Human Nature in Politics (London: Archibald Constable, 1908).

¹²⁰ J. Keynes, “My Early Beliefs”, in The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. X: Essays in Biography, p. 436. Keynes’s debt to Moore is discussed in R. Skidelsky, John Maynard Keynes 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1983-92), vol. 1: Hopes Betrayed, 1883-1920, pp. 133-60. On modernism, the Bloomsbury group, and the impact on it of Russell and Moore, see D. Gadd, The Loving Friends: A Portrait of

Bloomsbury (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), pp. 20-5; and P. Stansky, On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹²¹ On the importance and nature of Marshall's legacy, see J. Keynes, "Alfred Marshall", in Collected Works, vol. x, pp. 161-231. Keynes's debt to Marshall is discussed in Skidelsky, Keynes, pp. 40-50 & 206-21.

¹²² The importance of dilemmas of policy in this process appears throughout P. Clarke, The Keynesian Revolution in the Making, 1924-1936 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

¹²³ S. Webb, "Review of Edwin Jones, Economic Crises", Fabian News, May 1901.

¹²⁴ His retrospective views are in S. Webb, "What Happened in 1931: A Record", Fabian Tract No. 237 (1932).

¹²⁵ S. & B. Webb, Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1935).

¹²⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 602.

¹²⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 647-71.

¹²⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 1048.

¹²⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 1124.

¹³⁰ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 427.

¹³¹ On the acceptance of Keynesian ideas see D. Winch, Economics and Policy: A Historical Study (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1969).

¹³² E. Durbin, New Jerusalems: The Labour Party and the Economics of Democratic Socialism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 133-85.

¹³³ Both the uneasy relationship between Keynesian and physical planning, and the rejection of the latter are brought out by S. Beer, Modern British Politics: Parties and Pressure Groups in the Collectivist Age (London: Faber, 1982), pp. 189-200.