'MAKING REFORM THE INSTRUMENT OF REVOLUTION': BRITISH SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, 1881–1911

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ABSTRACT. *The Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was the major representative of Second International socialism on British soil. As a socialist organization it is usually viewed through the distorting prism of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. This article sets out to analyse the organization's strategy in its proper context – that of the struggle to transform Victorian and Edwardian Britain into the co-operative commonwealth. SDF views on the nature of revolution and what members called 'palliative' reforms are considered, as are their views on the character of the British state, the nature of democracy, the role of parliament, and the potential for violence at times of change. For them, the transition to socialism would be effected by well-fed, organized workers with a degree of education and culture, and their social reforms were designed to bring this revolutionary class into being. Campaigns against unemployment, work on school boards, boards of guardians, and local councils are found to have been conducted both as ends in themselves, and as a part of a grander strategy for the attainment of socialism. The SDF was a 'parliamentary revolutionary party' which sought to use reforms constructively in order to bring about the transformation of British society.*

For most of the twentieth century the major division between socialists has been that between reformists and revolutionaries. After the First World War social democratic parties throughout Europe split into bolshevized communist parties affiliated to the Third International, and constitutional social democrats. Over the years communism and social democracy diverged over questions of theory, strategy, and tactics.[1] For most communists in Europe the experience of the Russian Revolution and the newly acquired theoretical works of Lenin were to transform their views of politics in the following decades. The role of parliament and the nature of the state became much more clearly perceived. The state was intrinsically 'bourgeois', and the aim was to 'smash' it, replacing

[1] There is a useful summary of this process in Donald Sassoon, *One hundred years of socialism: the west European left in the twentieth century* (London, 1996), ch. 1. For the peculiarities of Britain's development see Walter Kendall, *The revolutionary movement in Britain, 1900–1921: the origins of British communism* (London, 1969), pt 2; Andrew Thorpe, '"The only effective bulwark against reaction and revolution": Labour and the frustration of the extreme left', in Andrew Thorpe, ed., *The failure of political extremism in inter-war Britain* (Exeter, 1989); David Marquand, *The progressive dilemma* (London, 1992), pp. 40–5; Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', *English Historical Review*, 94 (1984), pp. 297–331.

it with organs of proletarian power and a transitional 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (although Lenin had to remind his supporters – not least his British supporters – of the propaganda value of parliaments, and to warn of the excesses of 'ultra-leftism').[2] These views were anathema to most of those who remained social democrats; to them the road to socialism was to be peaceful and constitutional. In the democracies and republics of western Europe, they saw their role as the attainment of socialist majorities in their respective parliaments. To some extent these later developments have clouded analyses of earlier socialist parties.

In the years before the First World War and the Russian Revolution the issue of reform and revolution was keenly debated among the parties affiliated to the Socialist International, but the development of strategies was more fluid, and demarcation lines were not so firmly drawn. A variety of views existed; anarchists were excluded following the Zurich congress of 1893, but Rosa Luxemburg, for instance, argued for an unequivocal revolutionary position, coexisting alongside the more conciliatory Karl Kautsky, with Eduard Bernstein representing the moderate reforming wing of the movement.[3] This range of views was to some extent reflected among the different British affiliates between whom there was little fraternal feeling within the confines of the International. In particular the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), as a social democratic party in the Marxist tradition, felt that it was the only British body deserving recognition in an international association which prided itself on its socialism.[4] British trade unions in particular were felt to be a threat to the socialist nature of the International.[5] In this respect the SDF had the benefit of logic on its side: the other British affiliates were not really in the European mould, especially after the Paris congress of 1900 stipulated that only bodies acknowledging the 'class war' could be members. Their membership of the International was based on the acknowledgement that the trade unions, the Independent Labour party (ILP), and the Labour party were more rep-

[2] V. I. Lenin, '*Left-wing' communism, an infantile disorder* (Beijing, 1970).

[3] For an introductory overview see James Joll, *The Second International, 1889–1914* (London, 1974), ch. 4.

[4] Their role within the Socialist International is considered in Douglas J. Newton, *British Labour, European socialism and the struggle for peace, 1889–1914* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 42–9, and chs. 7 and 8, passim. In the interests of consistency, and to avoid confusion, the organization is referred to here as the SDF: it was formed in 1881 as the Democratic Federation, changed its name to the Social Democratic Federation in 1884, and to the Social Democratic party in 1907 (although it continued to be known as the SDF). It dissolved itself into the newly formed British Socialist party in 1911. The literature on the SDF is extensive; there is a review of recent writings in Jeffrey Hill, 'Requiem for a party?: writing the history of social-democracy', *Labour History Review*, 61 (1996), pp. 102–9. The most recent full length study is Martin Crick, *The history of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele, 1994), but this does not entirely supersede the biography of the organization's leader: Chushichi Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman and British socialism* (London, 1961).

[5] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1894* (London, 1894), pp. 28–30; SDF, *Annual conference report, 1895* (London, 1895), p. 11. See also SDF, *Annual conference report, 1908* (London, 1908), p. 22; H. Quelch, 'The Socialist International and the British trade unions', *Social-Democrat*, 11 (Sept. 1907), pp. 521–8.

resentative of the organized working class in Britain than the more theoretically astute SDF.[6]

The ILP and the Fabian Society (who also attended the congresses of the International) were clearly parties of social reform, as was the Labour party to which both were affiliated.[7] They believed that gradual piecemeal change would bring the co-operative commonwealth into being; the SDF on the other hand argued in terms more familiar to their continental comrades.[8] The objective of this article is to explore the way British social democrats saw the role of social reform in their strategy for the attainment of socialism. In later parlance this would undoubtedly have been construed as reformist, and given the centrality of parliament and social reforms, this would seem to be a fair definition. The terminology, however, is problematic. In modern accounts reformism is often presented, in part, as a belief in a neutral state.[9] This was not true of the SDF, apart from a brief spell in the 1880s. The word is accepted here in the sense of a strategy for the attainment of socialism which involved using existing state institutions.[10] A further problem arises over the use of the word revolutionary, which has come to mean a variant of insurrectionary politics. A revolutionary today tends to be categorized as someone who aspires to the violent overthrow of the existing state.[11] This was not the sense in which the word was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Being a revolutionary meant that one wanted to see the replacement of the existing economic machinery and social relationships with an alternative which put the down-trodden and oppressed in the place of the current rulers: a turning of the world upside down implied in the word's origins.[12] To be a revolutionary was not a commitment to a particular strategy for the attainment of socialism. For most of the SDF's existence the obverse of the word revolutionary was not

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[6] Newton, *British Labour*, pp. 40–2 and 196–201; Chris Wrigley, 'The ILP and the Second International; the early years, 1893–1905', in David James, Tony Jowitt, and Keith Laybourn, eds., *The centennial history of the Independent Labour party* (Halifax, 1992).

[7] The SDF affiliated to the Labour party on its formation in 1900, but left a year later. The most accessible study of the Labour party and the relationships between these different organizations in the build-up to its formation is Henry Pelling, *The origins of the Labour party, 1880–1900* (London, 1965). The fullest study of the early years of the ILP is David Howell, *British workers and the Independent Labour party, 1888–1906* (Manchester, 1983). See also James, Jowitt, and Laybourn, eds., *Centennial history*; R. E. Dowse, *Left in the centre: the Independent Labour party, 1893–1940* (Evanston, 1966), ch. 1. For Fabianism see A. M. McBriar, *Fabian socialism and English politics, 1884–1918* (London, 1962); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring men: studies in the history of labour* (London, 1964), ch. 14. There is a useful modern synthesis in John Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain since 1884* (Oxford, 1990), chs. 1–5. See also Stanley Pierson, *Marxism and origins of British socialism: the struggle for a new consciousness* ((London, 1973), passim; Keith Laybourn, *The rise of socialism in Britain, c. 1881–1951* (Stroud, 1997), chs. 1–2.   [8] Newton, *British Labour*, pp. 44–5.

[9] Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), p. 177.

[10] For a discussion of socialist strategies and the use of 'reformism' in this sense see Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and politics* (Oxford, 1977), ch. 6.

[11] There is a useful discussion of these concepts as they developed in the Marxist tradition in Tom Bottomore, ed., *A dictionary of Marxist thought* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 409–10, 425–8.

[12] For its origins and development see Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Glasgow, 1977), pp. 226–30.

reformist, but evolutionary; yet even here its members were unwilling to allow a dichotomy. It was possible, they argued, to have an evolutionary view of social development and to see revolutionary change as a part of that process.[13]

Members of the SDF would have considered themselves revolutionaries; they were not alone in this. *The Times* produced a series of articles in 1909 on the socialist movement in Britain. Here the SDF was considered the most revolutionary of the main socialist groups and the assessment of its relative position would have raised no objections from the SDF's membership: 'The Social Democratic Party is the most downright and straightforward of the larger Socialist organisations. It is more outspoken and consistent, less hazy and opportunist, than the Independent Labour Party or the Fabian Society. It derives its inspiration from the Social Democrats of Germany and boldly upholds the ideal of revolutionary Socialism.'[14] In what follows, the problems of the transition to socialism as perceived by SDF members will be studied in detail: the nature of revolution, the character of the state and the value of parliament, the usefulness of municipal politics and 'palliative' reforms, and the likelihood of violence.[15]

I

In most areas of Marxist theory SDF members had to stumble their way towards an understanding; they were political pioneers with limited access to the works of Marx and Engels, or the classical texts of continental social democracy in general.[16] In no area was this more the case than that of the nature of the state and political power. In the early days there was a tendency to adopt prevailing liberal conceptions wholesale. In his seminal *England for all*, the book distributed at the founding conference of the SDF, H. M. Hyndman, who was to be the organization's leader for most of its existence, spoke of the 'State … the organized common-sense of public opinion', which 'must step in, regardless of prejudice, to regulate that nominal freedom which simply strengthens the dominant few'.[17] This idea of the state as something above

[13] H. M. Hyndman, *The economics of socialism* (London, 1909), p. 4; H. Quelch, 'Reform and revolution', *Social-Democrat*, 11 (June 1907), p. 332. This is discussed at length in Graham Johnson, 'Social democratic politics in Britain, 1881–1911: the Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation' (Ph.D. thesis, Hull, 1989), pp. 125–36.

[14] *Times*, 9 Jan. 1909. The articles were later published as a booklet: *The socialist movement in Great Britain* (London, 1909).

[15] The SDF's interpretation of economic theory and the question of imperialism also have a bearing on the nature and timing of the transition to socialism. The emphasis here is upon the reform/revolution dichotomy. These subjects (to which I intend to return) have been explored in Johnson, 'Social democratic politics', chs. 2 and 5.

[16] For a list of 'English language editions of Marx and Engels' with publication dates see Stuart Macintyre, *A proletarian science: Marxism in Britain, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 91–2; Dona Torr, *Tom Mann and his times* (London, 1956), p. 326; Frank Jackson, 'Marx's works available in Britain before 1900', *Marx Memorial Library Bulletin*, 9 (Jan./Mar. 1959), pp. 2–3. See also Kirk Willis, 'The introduction and critical reception of Marxist thought in Britain, 1850–1900', *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), pp. 417–59.

[17] H. M. Hyndman, *England for all* (London, 1973), p. 6.

politics, which could be influenced to work in the interests of the majority, was common, and this could be linked positively to a demand for adult suffrage. From the mid-eighties, however, it was suggested that the state played a role in the maintenance of class rule, so that: 'To get complete control of the state departments for the people was the main object in order to democratize them entirely, and thus do away with that State as class domination for ever.'[18] It was further noted that the state contained elements of socialized production in embryo and 'in this direction lies the best prospect of reform and re-organisation without bloodshed'.[19] It was the 'greatest employer in the country. Yet the State Departments are no better than gigantic sweating dens. All this could be changed, as a mere matter of administration, tomorrow.'[20] The post office, for instance, was often cited as a model of public enterprise, only marred by the poor treatment of its workforce, a difficulty easily remedied once socialists were placed in control. The state, then, was to be a vehicle for peaceful transformation.

By the 1900s more emphasis was being placed on the class nature of the state, and the ways in which the civil service, the army and the navy were being used more overtly in the interests of commerce.[21] In 1901 Theodore Rothstein, a member from the Russian émigré community, warned of the growth of state power, linking it to the spread of imperialism, and he suggested that that 'thorough bastard' and 'mongrel', the Fabian Society, would be one of the beneficiaries.[22] It was in responding to the Fabian view of the state in the early twentieth century that members of the SDF asserted most forcefully their views on the state as a class institution and began to develop a more elaborate understanding of state power. Fabians were attacked for being too bureau-cratic, at the expense of democracy.[23] J. B. Askew bemoaned their 'baneful influence' which meant that for many English socialists their socialism 'sums itself up as an indefinite extension of the powers of the State'.[24] In a debate between Ernest Belfort Bax, the SDF philosopher, and George Bernard Shaw, they disagreed over the character of the state, with Bax asserting that a public servant in a 'Capitalist Class State' could not be considered a servant of the community. 'Not until THE PROLETARIAT AS A CLASS has asserted its political

[18] Speech by Hyndman reported in *Justice*, 19 Jan. 1884, p. 7.
[19] H. M. Hyndman and William Morris, *A summary of the principles of socialism* (London, 1884), p. 58.
[20] Hyndman in his chairman's address to the 1894 annual conference, SDF, *Annual conference report, 1894*, p. 5.
[21] H. W. Lee, *A socialist view of the unemployed problem* (London, 1902), p. 14; E. Belfort Bax and H. Quelch, *A new catechism of socialism* (London, 1902), p. 4.
[22] Theodore Rothstein, 'The coming of the state', *Social-Democrat*, 5 (Dec. 1901), p. 361.
[23] Debate between E. Belfort Bax and George Bernard Shaw in *Wilshire's Magazine*, Nov. 1902; J. B. Askew, 'Socialism and parliamentarism', *Social-Democrat*, 12 (Feb. 1908), pp. 54–5. There is a detailed discussion of the differences between the Fabian Society and the SDF regarding the nature of democracy and the role of public officials in Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic ideas and the British labour movement, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 30–43, 146–53, 162–77.
[24] Askew, 'Socialism and parliamentarism', pp. 54–5.

and economic supremacy over the exploiting classes, will these classes begin to disappear', and only then could a socialist community be said to exist in which each citizen was a public servant.[25] Askew made the point more tellingly when considering their respective attitudes towards strikes. Fabians regarded strikes, he said, as intolerable evils to be avoided by compulsory arbitration 'by judges armed with the full powers of the State to compel submission to their decision', and who were presumed to be impartial.

To the Marxian, on the other hand, the only guarantee for the workers lies in the independence of their organisations of the bourgeois State, and the fact that the right to strike remains to them as their last resort. In the class State there are no classes who are independent of the class antagonism, and the so-called independent classes are really governed in all their thinking by the narrowest class ideas, however unconscious they may be of the fact.[26]

Concurrently with this deepening perception of the centrality of class came a conviction that the mere election of a socialist government would be inadequate to bring about the desired-for transformation. 'The ruling class' said Harry Quelch, the editor of the SDF newspaper *Justice*, 'will not be made to submit to law and order which is not their law and order, except by overwhelming superior force.'[27] Such beliefs, however, were not to prevent them making use of the political machinery available to them in Britain.

II

SDF candidates stood in most of the general elections held between 1881 and 1911 as well as contesting numerous by-elections. The number of candidates varied depending on the state of the organization's finances, but to have SDF members of parliament was clearly seen as an important objective and suggests that parliament had a role to play in the transition to socialism. *Socialism made plain*, the document that first committed the Democratic Federation to socialism, contained demands for complete adult suffrage, a more democratic political machinery, and the abolition of hereditary authority, but a rider was added that 'mere political machinery is worthless unless used to produce good social conditions'.[28] In the early eighties there were a variety of opinions within the SDF as to the value of parliament. At a meeting early in 1884 where strong views were expressed against it, Hyndman won general approval by saying that a democracy needed 'some parliament or convention to carry out the orders of the people'.[29] It was the ambiguous word 'convention' with its revolutionary

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[25] E. Belfort Bax in *Wilshire's Magazine*, Nov. 1902, pp. 88–9.

[26] Askew, 'Socialism and parliamentarism', pp. 54–5.

[27] H. Quelch, 'Socialism and soldiering', *Social-Democrat*, 11 (Oct. 1907), pp. 590–1; see also H. Quelch, 'Parliamentarism, anti-militarism and direct action', *Social-Democrat*, 13 (Oct. 1909).

[28] Democratic Federation, *Socialism made plain* (London, 1883), pp. 3–4; see also Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation, 1880–1885: from O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, 37 (1992), pp. 207–29.

[29] See the report of the meeting held on 11 Jan. 1884 in *Justice*, 19 Jan. 1884, p. 7; H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social-democracy in Britain* (London, 1935), p. 57.

implications that won the day, a point verified by H. H. Champion in *Justice* a few weeks later: 'Any real reform of Parliament being almost hopeless, the idea of a National Democratic Convention spreads every day.'[30] The rhetoric of revolution was strong among members in these early days, but there was little clear idea of what the concept implied.

The issue of parliament was raised at the 1884 annual conference, the decision being taken not to stand candidates in elections 'or in any other way countenancing the present political system'.[31] The motion was moved by Joseph Lane who along with William Morris, Ernest Belfort Bax, and H. H. Champion drew up a distinctly non-parliamentary programme for the SDF. Most of the anti-parliamentarians within the SDF, however, left the organization for Morris's Socialist League at the end of 1884, and in April 1885, an extraordinary conference of the SDF was called at which the old political programme was re-adopted. 'With a political programme,' said Hyndman, 'we develop into a party.'[32] The question was placed in sharp relief by the controversy over the 'Tory gold' scandal of 1885 when money provided to stand SDF candidates in the general election of that year was discovered to have originated from Conservative sympathizers, intent on splitting the Liberal vote, and no candidates were stood in the following year's general election.[33] However, apart from the embarrassment and the loss of some of their best activists, the experience did not cause them to abandon parliamentary politics.[34]

An adherence to democracy and parliamentary forms became a distinguishing feature of the SDF's politics, and in defining the main characteristics of a social democrat in 1897, Hyndman listed as one of them the use of political institutions to prepare peacefully for socialist revolution.[35] This was in keeping with the motion passed on political action at the Zurich congress of the Second International.[36] Towards the end of the century when French socialists divided over the Dreyfus affair, SDF support was unequivocal: 'It is necessary to defend all the liberties that we possess in order that we may use them to achieve those greater liberties for which we fight.'[37] Although Hyndman in his state of disillusionment at the end of the century came to the conclusion that democracy

[30] *Justice*, 2 Feb. 1884, p. 5; see also H. M. Hyndman, *The coming revolution in England* (London, n.d. [1883?]), pp. 23–5. [31] *Justice*, 9 Aug. 1884, p. 7.

[32] Cited by Tsuzuki, *Hyndman*, p. 69.

[33] For 'Tory gold' see Lee and Archbold, *Social-democracy*, ch. 12; Tsuzuki, *Hyndman*, pp. 70–2; Pelling, *Origins*, pp. 40–1.

[34] Hyndman's biographer Tsuzuki suggests that there was dissent over the question in 1888 because a manifesto was issued which committed them to support only candidates who were willing to wage the class war in parliament, but the sense of division in his account derives from a misunderstanding of the notion of the class war as inherently violent. Tsuzuki, *Hyndman*, p. 83. For the exact meaning of the 'class war' within the SDF see Johnson, 'Social democratic politics', ch. 6.

[35] H. M. Hyndman, 'Social-democrat or socialist?', *Social-Democrat*, 1 (Aug. 1897), p. 229; Barrow and Bullock, *Democratic ideas*, pp. 9–17. [36] Joll, *Second International*, p. 71.

[37] 'L'affaire Dreyfus', *Social-Democrat*, 2 (Dec. 1898), p. 358. For Dreyfus and the French left see Aaron Noland, *The founding of the French socialist party, 1893–1905* (New York, 1970); Harvey Goldberg, *The life of Jean Jaurès* (Madison, WI, 1962).

without adequate education was a reactionary force, and agreed with the anarchist Bakunin that anything which brought about socialism was justifiable, he none the less conceded that he would prefer to see social transformation coupled with democracy.[38]

A lengthy list of political demands became an important part of the SDF programme, including payment of MPs and all election expenses, proportional representation, the second ballot, and abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords.[39] On the last issue they declined a number of invitations to participate in the activities of the national league for the abolition of the House of Lords; believing it to be an insincere Liberal body, the general council expressed their willingness 'to take part in any demonstration or agitation against the House of Lords if there were coupled with it a demand for the abolition of the House of Commons as at present constituted'.[40] Proportional representation and the second ballot, however, can be seen as measures for the reconstitution of the Commons, precluding its abolition. A keen interest was taken in what were felt to be the more representative systems developing on the continent, and views developed over time as to the system they felt would give them the greatest advantage. Hyndman put the organization's views on these issues to the royal commission on systems of election sitting in 1909. The existing electoral system was felt to be unsatisfactory: it was costly and biased in favour of the rich; it encouraged 'indirect corruption', undue emphasis on local and sectional issues, made success by a candidate receiving a minority of the votes 'increasingly probable', and small swings in the number of votes could have a disproportionate effect on the final result. The second ballot, although not solving all the problems, would constitute 'a substantial improvement' but by 1909 this method had been discredited by the experiences of French and German socialists, against whom bourgeois parties had begun to unite. The SDF favoured the system used in Belgium whereby each organization issued a list of candidates, as it was felt that this method favoured political combinations at the expense of individuals. Voting, they suggested, should be made compulsory and the number of MPs in the House of Commons substantially reduced; further, the new system should be accompanied by 'the initiative and referendum on the Swiss system, or some modification of it'. Had their methods been applied, they believed that there would have been at least twenty social democrats in parliament at the time.[41]

At the turn of the century a strong 'impossibilist' current developed within the organization; strongly influenced by the American industrial unionist, Daniel De Leon, they emphasized the role of industrial organization and were contemptuous of pragmatic constitutional methods. These individuals either

[38] *Challenge*, 20 Mar. 1901; H. M. Hyndman, 'Democracy', *Social-Democrat*, 5 (Feb. 1901), pp. 38–41.

[39] See for instance the programme and rules printed in SDF, *Annual conference report, 1895*, p. 25.

[40] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1894*, p. 15.

[41] Cd 5163/1910, Royal commission on foreign electoral systems, minutes of evidence, pp. 129–35 [493–9].

left the SDF of their own accord or were expelled between 1902 and 1904.[42] Prior to their departure the 'impossibilists' had been opposed to the emphasis on electoral concerns, but in their absence there was a renewed concern with electoral politics. Harry Quelch, who had been their most vociferous opponent was to warn, in the aftermath of the 1906 election, that too much importance was being given to the parliamentary side of the socialist movement. 'Parliamentarism', he said, 'of itself, with no more than a "pale cast" of Socialism about it, is a very thin compound indeed.'[43] However, when in later years, political action as such came in for criticism from adherents of direct action and the general strike, Quelch jumped to its defence, arguing that such activities were not to be seen as alternatives to their political activities, but complementary to them.[44] When the question of reform and revolution and the value of involvement in existing state institutions was raised in the international socialist movement, the SDF tended to follow the lead given by the leadership of the Second International. In the key debate at the Paris congress of the International over the participation of the French socialist Millerand in a bourgeois government, the SDF delegation with one exception supported the compromise resolution put to the congress by Karl Kautsky. This suggested that such participation was not good practice, stated that the class struggle forbade alliances with fractions of the capitalist class, but allowed for exceptional circumstances given party backing. The delegates who supported it believed that this resolution did not amount to support for Millerand, but they were none the less attacked for their action at the following SDF conference. The conference treated the issue as one of political and electoral flexibility versus 'impossibilism'. The leadership defended the decision to support Kautsky's resolution, with Herbert Burrows expressing his satisfaction at having been instrumental in drawing it up. The vote in their favour was an acknowledgement that all means were to be available to them in the struggle for socialism.[45] However, when Bernstein went beyond tactical flexibility to a reassessment of the fundamentals of socialist theory and strategy, the SDF position was clear. Bernstein's criticisms struck at the foundations of Marxist socialism and his 'revisionism' was to be opposed; it was analogous to Fabianism and involved the erection of parliamentarianism into an ends instead of a means. The only difference of opinion was over the issue of expelling Bernstein from the German party.[46]

[42] C. Tsuzuki, 'The "impossibilist revolt" in Britain', *International Review of Social History*, 1 (1956), pp. 377–97; Raymond Challinor, *The origins of British bolshevism* (London, 1977), pp. 19–26; Robert Barltrop, *The monument: the story of the Socialist party of Great Britain* (London, 1975), pp. 6–8.

[43] H. Quelch, 'Socialism and parliamentarism', *Social-Democrat*, 10 (Aug. 1906), p. 462.

[44] H. Quelch, 'Social-democracy and political action', *Social-Democrat*, 12 (May 1908); idem, 'Parliamentarism, anti-militarism'.

[45] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1901* (London, 1901), pp. 15–19.

[46] E. Belfort Bax, 'Treacherous toleration and faddist fanaticism', *Social-Democrat*, 4 (Jan. 1900); J. B. Askew, 'Treacherous toleration and faddist fanaticism', *Social-Democrat*, 4 (Feb. 1900); E. Belfort Bax, 'Factitious unity', *Social-Democrat*, 6 (Feb. 1902); J. B. Askew, 'Bernstein

Given the SDF's evident lack of success in national elections, a major problem for members in most electoral contests was not the winning of votes for the SDF, but the stance to adopt at times when no social democratic candidate was able to stand, and what advice to give their supporters where there was no obvious socialist alternative. A number of different strategies were available to them and different ones were advocated and adopted at different times. First there was the possibility of abstaining. In the 1892 general election there had been only two SDF candidates, so a number of branches including Burnley, Reading, and Tottenham issued 'manifestos urging the workers to abstain altogether from voting, as the nominees of both political parties were not worthy of their support', and for the 1895 election this policy was recommended by the executive.[47]

This kind of approach eventually gave way to more constructive electoral tactics. It was argued that, as capitalist parties, neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives were worthy of support, and that socialists should be indifferent to which group obtained power. The socialist should approach elections with an eye to political expediency, the vote being used in the best interests of the party 'according to the exigencies of the time and place'. In adopting this method they were modelling themselves on the Irish who had used it so effectively, although critics noted that it could lead to confusion among those uninformed about the principles of socialism. Fred Knee argued in favour of this approach at the 1910 annual conference:

He regarded politics in the same way as he regarded war – mainly as a question of tactics. If he thought that by voting Liberal he would gain some advantage for Socialism, he would vote Liberal; and if he thought that by voting against the Liberals he would get an obstructive party out of the way, he would vote Tory. In fact, if he thought that he could enter the Kingdom of Heaven, politically, by voting for the Devil himself he would do it. As long as they recognised that it was necessary and advantageous to organise and use their vote, he did not care which way they decided to cast it.[48]

Although a logical argument, the major problem arose over which party to support given the obvious distaste of members and supporters for voting in

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and the German party', *Social-Democrat*, 6 (Mar. 1902); E. Belfort Bax, 'Bernstein and the German party', *Social-Democrat*, 6 (June 1902); J. B. Askew, 'Bernstein and the German party', *Social-Democrat*, 6 (July 1902); E. Belfort Bax, 'Last words on the Bernstein question', *Social-Democrat*, 6 (Aug. 1902); Editorial brevity, 'The end of revisionism', *Social-Democrat*, 8 (Sept. 1904); J. B. Askew, 'The International Congress and revisionism', *Social-Democrat*, 8 (Sept. 1904); H. Quelch, 'The rout of revisionism', *Social-Democrat*, 9 (Jan. 1905); H. M. Hyndman, *Wilshire's Magazine*, Jan. 1902.

[47] Secretary's report to 1892 annual conference, *Justice*, 6 Aug. 1892, p. 3; SDF, *Annual conference report, 1895*, p. 5.

[48] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1910* (London, 1910), pp. 13–15; Frederick M. Boyd, 'Palliatives, politics, and the socialist vote', *Social-Democrat*, 14 (June 1910); J. Addison, 'The survival of the fittest in politics', *Social-Democrat*, 14 (July 1910).

either party, especially the Conservatives. In political terms, the Liberal party was seen as the biggest enemy of the socialist movement. There was no fear that advanced and progressive workers would be attracted to Conservatism, but the Liberals made direct appeals to the very people the socialists regarded as likely converts, and what was worse, when socialist candidates were put up in particular constituencies, the Liberals often responded by contesting their most advanced radical candidates.[49] A motion was put to the 1898 conference proposing that the socialist vote be used solidly in support of the Conservatives, but this was amended to become a general commitment to organize the vote against either Liberal or Tory.[50] Given the controversial nature of this step, the following year the executive canvassed the branches for their views, but the response was so weak that they shelved the issue until the next conference. Here the motion was passed that 'the organised vote of the Social-Democratic Party in Great Britain should be directed solidly to the extinction of Liberal candidates by the votes being cast steadily on the Tory side up to and through the General Election'.[51] The conference then adjourned for lunch, and immediately on reconvening, frightened by their own pre-lunch boldness, suspended the motion's operation until a return had been made of branch members entitled to vote in national elections.[52] The policy was abandoned at the following year's conference in the light of what was referred to in the motion as 'the collapse of the Liberal Party', but more importantly, so that they could give their support to candidates who opposed 'the capitalist imperial policy in South Africa'.[53] A suggestion that they re-adopt their support for Tory candidates was rejected in 1901. The idea of tactical voting of this kind was held in abeyance for the rest of the decade to be resurrected once again in the exciting parliamentary atmosphere of 1910.[54] In the December election of that year the executive actually recommended that members and supporters vote Tory, and although some members strongly disapproved, the decision was endorsed retrospectively by the 1911 conference.[55]

Despite the hatred of Liberals on the part of some members of the SDF, others found them much easier to see as potential electoral allies with whom deals could be made and alliances formed. When the argument was in full swing about the efficacy of voting Conservative in 1898, members could be

[49] H. Quelch, 'Our electoral policy', *Social-Democrat*, 3 (Nov. 1899), pp. 327–8.

[50] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1898* (London, 1898), pp. 20–4; H. M. Hyndman, 'The socialist vote and the Liberal party', *Social-Democrat*, 2 (Apr. 1898); D. Amos, 'A contribution to the question – what shall we do with our vote?', *Social-Democrat*, 2 (July 1898).

[51] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1899* (London, 1899), pp. 22–5.   [52] Ibid., p. 25.

[53] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1900* (London, 1900), pp. 7–9. The policy was also attacked by Theodore Rothstein, 'Our policy', *Social-Democrat*, 4 (June 1900); H. Quelch, 'Our policy', *Social-Democrat*, 4 (July 1900). For SDF opposition to the Boer War see Johnson, 'Social democratic politics', pp. 194–205; Bill Baker, *The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War* (London, 1974); Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social Democratic Federation and imperialism', *Historical Studies*, 16 (Apr. 1974), pp. 96–9; Crick, *History*, pp. 158–64.

[54] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1910*, p. 13; Boyd, 'Palliatives, politics, and the socialist vote'; Addison, 'The survival of the fittest'.   [55] *Justice*, 22 Apr. 1911, p. 5.

found arguing that the Liberals were more democratic and that a deal with them could help push through their palliative programme. John Ellam, staying with the imagery of the Liberals as the enemy, suggested an 'armed truce' and proposed a seven point strategy of electoral tactics suggesting the way socialists should vote in different circumstances depending on their own strength and the nature of the opposition. In his view a Conservative should only be supported if the Liberals were to advance a candidate at the last moment knowing that socialists were depending upon radical support.[56] On the whole however, outside of the Boer War years, hostility towards the Liberals was the norm.

III

The adoption of a palliative programme by the SDF, and a willingness to work for social reforms at a national and local level, were related to the belief that the working class in its existing form was too debased to instigate more than riots and rebellions.[57] A revolution would require well-fed, educated workers with ample leisure time to study social questions. The British revolution was not to be peopled by the urban poor but by respectable and respectful artisans.[58] At only three points was this approach called into serious question, at first in the early years of the organization's existence when political programmes in general were being attacked by those who were to leave and form the Socialist League (and who were to abandon a palliative programme), during the period of the so-called 'impossibilist revolt', and later at the socialist unity conference in 1911 where the 'long list of absurd palliatives' was attacked and abandoned, the new British Socialist Party beginning life without a programme of social reforms.[59]

The Federation's first official declaration of its socialist principles, *Socialism made plain* published in 1883, contained a list of 'stepping-stones to a happier period' which was put forward 'for immediate adoption'. This was by later standards a circumscribed list calling for the compulsory construction of 'healthy artisans' and agricultural labourers' dwellings', free compulsory education, the eight hour day, cumulative taxation, state appropriation of the railways, the establishment of national banks, the elimination of the national debt, and the nationalization of the land.[60] This relatively limited and eclectic set of proposals was augmented over the years, being extended and systematized at the beginning of the new century to include nationalization of the trusts, as

[56] John E. Ellam, 'Our policy', *Social-Democrat*, 2 (Aug. 1898), pp. 239–40.

[57] H. M. Hyndman, *The social reconstruction of England* (London, n.d. [1884?]), p. 22; Theodore Rothstein, 'Why is socialism in England at a discount?', *Social-Democrat*, 2 (Mar. 1898), pp. 69–70.

[58] Johnson, 'Social democratic politics', pp. 240–2; Rothstein, 'Socialism at a discount?', pp. 69–70; Hyndman, *Social reconstruction*, p. 22; see also Hyndman quoted by Hubert Bland in *Practical Socialist*, 1 (Oct. 1886).

[59] E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: romantic to revolutionary* (London, 1955), pp. 390–5; Tsuzuki, 'The "impossibilist revolt"'; H. Russell Smart speaking at the socialist unity conference, *Socialist unity conference* (London, 1969), p. 10.

[60] Democratic Federation, *Socialism made plain*, pp. 5–6.

well as of the docks, canals, gas, electric light, and the water supply. They called for public ownership and control of the drink traffic and of pawnshops, the public provision of work for the unemployed at trade union rates, and a legislative minimum wage of thirty shillings a week. It was proposed that the workhouse system be abolished, and the poor law reformed, all state churches disestablished, and standing armies abolished.[61] The extensive nature of this list gives some insight into its functional role. The purpose of all of the palliative measures was to help the peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism. They were not believers in a theory of immiseration in which increasing misery would drive the working class to socialism.[62] Capitalism was developing towards its final consummation, but in Britain it was believed that political forms fell short of the existing level of economic development, and gave rise to the danger that there would be economic collapse and disruption but without socialism following in its wake.[63] Capitalism was producing misery and starvation on a large scale, but the only outcome was 'barbarians in our own country, which … will eventually overrun our civilisation of the nineteenth century' unless something was done about it.[64] The object was 'to palliate the worst evils of capitalism', but at the same time 'raise the physical, moral and mental status of the working-class, and to better fit them for the struggle for their emancipation'.[65] The contrast between an immiseration theory and the position of the SDF is expressed most clearly in a pamphlet by E. C. Fairchild, the SDF London organizer, entitled *Arms for the workers* in which the 'arms' of his title were social reforms:

The people who dwell in poverty in its extremest form – misery, are the products of their environment and ancestry. Their imagination cannot go beyond the borders of their narrow world. They think only of work and food and rent. The doctrine that misery will at last drive her subjects to wrest power from the master class, proclaim the Social Revolution, and arrange the economic consequences of that great change, is untenable. It is a doctrine that children are born from sterile mothers, that roses grow on heaps of refuse, and the vine in drains. The poor do not gain heaven, and the meek inherit the least of the earth.

The strength of the Socialist movement is drawn from men and women fortunate enough to enjoy a few of the comforts and pleasures of life. It is a condition that does not lead to contentment and an even satisfaction, but to an ever extending desire for the choice fruits tasted. In a famous passage, Darwin refers to the dependence of the arts upon the existence of a leisured class. It is beyond question that Socialism stands to gain by every addition to the little leisure workers have. Ultimately, the right of all to leisure

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[61] See programme and rules printed in SDF, *Annual conference report, 1903* (London, 1903), pp. 26–8.

[62] Cf. Dona Torr, *Tom Mann and his times*, 1: *1856–1890* (London, 1956), pp. 212–13, who suggests that they were.

[63] See for instance Hyndman's address to the 1894 annual conference: SDF, *Annual conference report, 1894* (London, 1894), p. 7; Hyndman, *Economics of socialism*, p. 252; Joseph Chatterton, *The practicability of social-democracy* (London, 1896), pp. 21–2. Johnson, 'Social democratic politics', pp. 66–8.   [64] John Ward, *Socialism, the religion of humanity* (London, n.d. [1888?]), p. 14.

[65] Bax and Quelch, *New catechism*, p. 34.

will make science and art a common property and heritage. Some freedom from toil is needed in order that the requisite general knowledge and special study may be obtained that enables the workman to understand the process by which capitalism extracts unpaid labour from his body.[66]

As well as educating the working class and building up their health for the morrow of the revolution, the struggle to achieve reforms had value in itself. When their demands were rejected the workers saw examples 'of what the masses have to expect from the governing class, as well as expressing the needs of the people in a concrete form', and work in favour of reform benefited socialists as 'our party gains experience and insight into legislative and administrative questions, as well as discipline, &c.'.[67] The kind of reforms they advocated were considered to be qualitatively different from the reforms emanating from other parties. Social democracy, said Harry Quelch, demanded 'palliatives that are revolutionary and not reactionary in their tendency', reforms won from the master class and not conceded 'for services rendered', and which did not 'tend to make the capitalist system more tolerable and stable'; they had to be 'essentially subversive of that system in their effects'.[68]

It was conceded in some quarters that there was a danger in working for these measures, as they could conceivably give a fresh lease of life to capitalism; but it was felt to be necessary to take risks, learning from experience, and acknowledging that the dangers were 'not nearly so great as those resulting from avoidance of political action. That amounts to sheer "impossibilism". It is indeed the theory of the Anarchists.'[69] 'The Socialist palliatives' concluded Fairchild,

are the stepping-stones to cross the stream, from the wild disorder of private search for gain to the regulated industry of the Socialist Commonwealth… The palliative is the means of arousing that discontent directed by consideration, which shall finally change the basis of the social structure and proclaim freedom by ending man's power to exploit his fellow man.[70]

For the workers, 'the programme of the Social Democratic Party is an armoury of weapons required for revolution and essential for the overthrow of capitalism, which in falling, shall drag away all forms of human oppression'.[71]

The value and importance of the palliative programme, and the SDF's analysis of the issues involved, can best be appreciated from a brief consideration of their campaigns, concentrating on their aims and achieve-

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[66] E. C. Fairchild, *Arms for the workers* (London, 1909), pp. 6–7. See also Democratic Federation, *Socialism made plain*, p. 6; Quelch's speech to the 1889 annual conference in favour of palliatives, reported in *Justice*, 10 Aug. 1889, p. 3; 'Socialism and the future of England', *Social-Democrat*, 2 (Feb. 1898). [67] Askew, 'The international congress and revisionism', p. 531.

[68] 'The month', *Social-Democrat*, 14 (Oct. 1910), p. 463. But cf. H. W. Lee's report to the 1891 annual conference reported in *Justice*, 8 Aug. 1891, p. 3, and Fairchild, *Arms*, p. 15, both of whom welcome *all* social reforms regardless of their origins.

[69] Bax and Quelch, *New catechism*, p. 34; J. Hunter Watts, *State maintenance for children* (London, 1904), p. 10. [70] Fairchild, *Arms*, pp. 15–16. [71] Ibid., p. 16.

ments. The SDF had a long and proud tradition of organization among the unemployed. It was their agitations in the mid-eighties which brought them into public prominence, and their campaigns among the unemployed were to continue, particularly in years of economic depression.[72] Their major aim was to bring pressure to bear, particularly at a local level, in order to secure relief for the unemployed, preferably through the provision of work. A number of schemes of work creation were put forward by members, some of which appear severely authoritarian by today's standards, mainly because they were not averse to punishing 'malingerers'.[73]

The setting up of farm colonies in country districts was a favoured remedy for unemployment. Here land could be nationally or municipally owned, the local council placed in the position of employer, and the land farmed on a scientific basis with factory farms. These schemes were seen as playing the dual role of alleviating urban unemployment and revitalizing a flagging British agriculture. They could also be seen as transforming relationships between employers and workers on the land and as a staging post on the road to social democracy.[74] It was eventually conceded, however, that such schemes were inappropriate for dealing with urban unemployment, and when John Burns, the president of the board of trade in Campbell-Bannerman's ministry, criticized the idea in 1905, they agreed with him, advocating instead the state provision of useful work in the towns, although remaining committed to colonies as a means of dealing with rural unemployment and preventing the migration of unemployed agricultural workers into the towns.[75] Later when colonies were proposed in the minority report of the royal commission on the poor laws in 1909, Quelch attacked them as 'detention colonies'.[76]

As with other palliative reforms the campaigns against unemployment were a part of a grander strategy: 'every step that is taken to organise the labour of

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[72] Tsuzuki, *Hyndman*, pp. 73–9; K. D. Brown, *Labour and unemployment, 1900–1914* (Newton Abbot, 1971), passim; Alan J. Kidd, 'The Social Democratic Federation and popular agitation amongst the unemployed in Edwardian Manchester', *International Review of Social History*, 29 (1984), pp. 336–58; H. Quelch, 'The unemployed', *Social-Democrat*, 8 (Dec. 1904), pp. 715–17.

[73] See for instance the SDF submission to the royal commission on the poor laws, Cd 4755/1910, royal commission on the poor laws and relief of distress, appendix vol. III, minutes of evidence, pp. 61–78; A. A. Watts, 'The proposed break-up of the poor law', *Social-Democrat*, 13 (Mar. 1909), p. 104. Some of George Lansbury's schemes were particularly harsh with regard to 'malingerers', see George Lansbury, 'Social-democrats and the administration of the poor law', *Social-Democrat*, 1 (Jan. 1897), pp. 16–17; idem, 'The position of the poor law in the problem of poverty', *Social-Democrat*, 9 (Mar. 1905); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 289.

[74] D. Campbell, *The unemployed problem* (London, 1892); Arthur Hickmott, *Socialism and agriculture* (London, 1897); A. A. Watts, 'The unemployed', *Social-Democrat*, 8 (Dec. 1904), pp. 719–20.

[75] Editorial brevity, 'Useful work versus useless toil', *Social-Democrat*, 9 (Dec. 1905), pp. 709–10; SDF submission to the royal commission on the poor laws; Watts, 'The proposed break-up', pp. 102–4. Two members came up with a vast and elaborate scheme for the production of 'A national highway for military and motor traffic', A. P. Hazell and W. Cook, *Work for the unemployed!* (London, n.d. [1909?]).

[76] H. Quelch and George Lansbury, *The poor law minority report: a debate* (London, 1910), p. 12.

the unemployed on a national scale, in a co-operative, inter-dependent, self-supporting fashion, is a step towards the abolition of capitalism'.[77] Un-employment was seen as not only an inevitable result of capitalism, but as essential to its continued operation. Disagreeing with the provisions for the unemployed in the minority report of the poor law commission, Harry Quelch said that the 'minority wanted to take and maintain and train men so that when the employer again wanted them he could have them. The Social-Democratic idea was to set a man to work so that when the employer wanted him again he could not have him.'[78] 'Before they talked about malingerers' he said,

it was their duty to give every man and woman the opportunity to work. To do that they must organise the labour of the unemployed on a national scale and on co-operative principles, and get rid of the right of the capitalists to a huge reserve army of labour, and so destroy unemployment altogether, and thus re-organise industry and build up a system of social production and distribution.[79]

Local elected agencies were important sources of power through which social reform could be pursued. Up to 1902 in England and Wales, and beyond this date in Scotland, school boards could provide a means of influencing the provision not only of education, but of food and clothing to the children of the working class. Elected to the local board, two members of the Reading branch 'advocated improvements in the heating and ventilation of the schools, small classes, pianos, swimming, visits to museums and historical buildings, the humanities, woodwork, housewifery, abolition of corporal punishment, raising of age, an increase in teachers' salaries with reduction of the difference between masters and mistresses, increase of caretakers' salaries'.[80] They were surprised at their level of success, particularly over the caretakers, and managed to win a week's holiday with pay for the board's carpenters. They also raised the issues of free maintenance for schoolchildren, secular education, and the payment of trade union rates for board employees. Elsewhere, more often than not it was a case of a solitary SDF member turning out regularly to argue for such things as free boots, free meals, secular education, and trade union rates for employees.[81] Although the humanitarian aspects of their struggles to improve conditions in the schools cannot be ignored, even here the long-term goal was not lost sight of as 'a generation of men and women whose physical and intellectual capacities have been fully developed in youth will soon sweep this foul society into the limbo of dead things'.[82]

The humanitarian element was even clearer in the activities of those who

[77] Quelch, 'The unemployed', p. 715.   [78] Quelch and Lansbury, *Minority report*, p. 13.
[79] Ibid., p. 15.
[80] 'Our representatives. IV. G. H. Wilson', *Social-Democrat*, 3 (July 1899), p. 198.
[81] Ibid.; see also 'Our representatives. VI. C. J. Scott', *Social-Democrat*, 3 (Sept. 1899), pp. 260–1; 'Our representatives. XIII. Harry Majer', *Social-Democrat*, 4 (Aug. 1900), pp. 228–9; G. M. Hale, 'Feeding and clothing of school children', *Social-Democrat*, 14 (July 1910).
[82] Hunter Watts, *State maintenance*, p. 10.

worked as members of boards of guardians, and despite the strivings for social transformation one cannot help noticing the pride taken in the minor victories over the cruelties and petty tyrannies of the workhouse system. A. A. Brooks, an SDF stonemason elected on to the Blackburn board of guardians, succeeded with the help of three Labour guardians in getting a tailor's shop set up at the workhouse during the trade's winter slack period, so that tailors applying for relief had the option of working for trade union rates. They also managed to get a bowling green established for the inmates; it was constructed using inmate labour and materials provided from the poor rates. 'This is the first place' announced the *Social-Democrat* 'at which a bowling-green has been attached to a workhouse in England'.[83] Brooks was particularly pleased with his achievement in getting the workhouse diet improved:

Before he got the dietary scale altered he had a very hard tussle with the other Guardians, who always maintained that the children were well fed. However, not to be beaten, comrade Brooks determined to satisfy himself and others on this point. He attended the workhouse one evening when the children were having tea. They had eaten their allotted quantity of rations when comrade Brooks asked the governor, who was present, if the children had had sufficient to eat. He received an answer in the affirmative. Comrade Brooks, however, was of the opinion they had not, and he stepped up on the platform, where all the children could see him, and called out to them, 'Those who can eat some more bread and butter hold up your hands.' Every hand went up. Brooks ordered a fresh supply, and 300 more slices of bread and butter were eaten … When comrade Brooks reported this to the next meeting of the Guardians he had little difficulty in getting them to agree to an alteration in the children's diet.[84]

As a poor law guardian, George Lansbury also successfully worked for improved diet, as well as the abolition of uniform, the provision of warmer clothing, and newspapers and entertainment for inmates. On one occasion he kicked up a fuss on discovering rat and mouse droppings in the oatmeal porridge served as supper in the Poplar mixed workhouse: 'I stamped and shouted around till both doctor and master arrived, both of whom pleaded it was all a mistake, and promptly served cocoa and bread and margarine.'[85] Following this he 'made it a special study to watch the food', and by 1900 believed it to be 'the most liberal of any scale in the Metropolis'.[86] Mary Gray of the Battersea branch not only participated in the unemployment agitations of the eighties, but in the midst of them had set up a soup kitchen with other members of the SDF. As a member of the local board of guardians she fought successfully for improved conditions for women in childbirth in the workhouse infirmary, as well as striving for the general improvements demanded by other SDF members.[87] So successful was the Rochdale member Tom Whittaker at

[83] 'Our representatives. XIV. A. A. Brooks', *Social-Democrat*, 4 (Nov. 1900), p. 324.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Raymond Postgate, *The life of George Lansbury* (London, 1951), pp. 63–4; 'Our representatives. X. George Lansbury', *Social-Democrat*, 4 (Jan. 1900), pp. 5–6.
[86] 'Our representatives. X. George Lansbury', p. 6.
[87] 'Our representatives. VIII. Mary Gray', *Social-Democrat*, 3 (Nov. 1899), p. 325.

winning the hearts of the workhouse residents with his work on their behalf, that on failing to secure re-election they presented him with a pipe accompanied by a letter to 'the friend of the downtrodden and oppressed', and carrying 'the best wishes of all classes of men and women in this institution, *except the administrative staff*, who have not been asked to contribute'.[88] Their record belies the image of the SDF as insincere about the amelioration of existing conditions.

Successes on boards of guardians, and the potential they offered for the alleviation of poverty, meant that when the minority report of the royal commission on the poor laws recommended the abolition of guardians, Harry Quelch jumped to their defence. Although he expressed dissatisfaction with the existing poor law and its administration, the report's proposals were criticized as undemocratic and bureaucratic. They had proposed a registrar of public assistance with a staff of inquiry and recovering officers, which would mean replacing the 'present democratic "Destitution Authority", the Board of Guardians', with 'a new "Destitution Authority", consisting solely of permanent officials'.[89] He professed 'a horror of experts of all kinds', and noted how often it was necessary for guardians to override the expert advice of relieving officers when giving relief. 'The Guardians were the most democratically-elected body in the kingdom, and if they had not been so good as they should have been, that was the fault of the people, and their business was to educate the people to elect proper Guardians.'[90] The solution, he suggested, lay not in the abolition of the guardians, but in the abolition of pauper status, which would break down the stigma that attached itself to the poor law. In this instance as far as the SDF were concerned, the elected nature of the guardians provided a closer model of the kind of democratic accountability required under socialism than the essentially Fabian bureaucratization and institutionalization of poverty recommended in the minority report.

IV

It was the local councils that provided the greatest scope for social reform at local level. The SDF took the potential offered by municipal or 'gas and water' socialism very seriously. The range of possibilities for socialist activity and social change through local councils is suggested in the seven point model manifesto printed in the *Social-Democrat* in 1897 for use by social democratic candidates:

1. For all persons employed by the Council an eight hours' day, with one day's rest in seven, and sufficient annual holidays; payment of not less than trade union wages, with a minimum of 24s. per week; prohibition of overtime, except in unexpected emergencies; full liberty to combine.
2. Direct employment of labour by the Council wherever possible, but, when contracting

[88] John Moore, 'Tom Whittaker of Rochdale', *Social-Democrat*, 15 (May 1911), p. 230.
[89] H. Quelch, 'The prevention of destitution', *Social-Democrat*, 14 (Aug. 1910), pp. 338–40.
[90] Quelch and Lansbury, *Minority report*, pp. 4–6.

is necessary, the employing only of firms that pay trade union wages and adopt trade union terms; the abolition of sub-contracting, with the insertion of a stringent clause in all contracts enforcing these conditions; the institution of municipal workshops for the manufacture of police and other uniforms.

3. The demolition of insanitary property, and the construction and maintenance of artisans' dwellings and lodging houses by the Corporation, the same to be let at the lowest possible rents.

4. The municipal ownership and control of public monopolies, such as the tramways, electric light, and gas supplies; telephones, water supply, and public houses; also the undertaking of the bread supply, maintenance of markets, hospitals, medical institutions, and chemical and drug stores.

5. The strict enforcement of all Public Health, Adulteration, Weights and Measures, Workshop, and Shop Hours Regulation Acts, &c., that come under the administration of the Council.

6. The reduction of all official salaries exceeding £300 per annum.

7. The abolition of Aldermen, and the formation of the Council exclusively by direct election. Evening meetings of the Council and committees.[91]

As far as the trade union issues of pay, conditions, and contracts were concerned, this was part of the SDF's views on the superiority of political over industrial action for limited ends. Gains achieved by this means were felt to be more permanent than those accomplished by trade unions in times of economic prosperity which were likely to be withdrawn during and following depressions; victories won by municipal or government activity on the other hand 'can seldom be taken away from the working class, even by the most reactionary of political parties'.[92] There was a belief, ironic from the vantage point of today, that there was a ratchet effect in municipal affairs with each click of the ratchet taking them closer to socialism. The above list, however, was far from exhaustive. The municipal achievements of Paris were put forward as examples of what could be done.[93] Dan Irving went beyond the limited idea of the municipalization of public houses in suggesting provision of a recreation ground, library, and reading room 'which could double as a neighbourhood working class club' and 'could act as a counter attraction to the public house'. He also suggested upgrading the public house into 'a decent place of public resort' providing food and non-alcoholic drinks as well as alcoholic ones, with games rooms and 'an indoor Sports Centre for squash-racquets and Badminton and tennis courts and a bowling green attached'.[94] 'What could be more natural' said Irving, 'than a wash bath in every home, a swimming bath in every district, and attached thereto an up-to-date municipal laundry coupled with an organised collection and distribution of clothes, bedding, etc.' and he

[91] C. W. White, 'Municipal elections', *Social-Democrat*, 1 (Oct. 1897), p. 306.

[92] Fairchild, *Arms*, p. 11; Editorial brevity, 'Socialist municipalism', *Social-Democrat*, 8 (Nov. 1904), pp. 643–4.

[93] T. H. Roberts, 'The municipality up to date' (three articles), *Social-Democrat*, 2 (Oct. 1898); 2 (Nov. 1898); 2 (Dec. 1898).

[94] Dan Irving, *The municipality, from a worker's point of view* (London, n.d. [1907?]), pp. 7, 14.

also proposed public nurseries for working women.[95] To more optimistic members municipal activity provided the means for laying the foundations of socialism: 'The pharisees were told that the Kingdom of God cometh not with observation; but the coming of the Co-operative Commonwealth may be observed by many tokens, and to the latter-day inquirer we may indeed say "Lo here and lo there" for the beginnings of it.'[96] Municipal enterprises were discussed at the 1904 annual conference and the only difference of opinion was over what to do with profits.[97]

Although these reforms could be seen as laying foundations for the future, reservations were voiced as to the value and scope of 'municipal socialism'. John Ellam expressed the view in 1903 that public and municipally owned institutions served the interests of the dominant classes; they were preferable to private monopoly, but were none the less examples of '"capitalist collectivism"'.[98] The principle of public ownership was only applied to 'non-productive services' while the wealth producing industries remained 'under class-control'. These industries would only be state owned 'in face of an overwhelming public demand enforced in Parliament by a majority of Social-Democratic representatives'.[99] Criticisms of municipal activity as 'municipal capitalism' were common, but they were not used as an argument against the extension of this kind of work. The capitalist conditions which prevailed were 'modified in proportion to the extent that the class conscious proletariat acquires power'.[100] Their activities in this area were felt to be encouraging, but it was 'important that the administrators of municipal enterprise should be conscious of the real object and end of municipalisation'.[101]

Theodore Rothstein took this type of approach a stage further, rejecting the term municipal capitalist and arguing that municipal industry was neither socialist nor capitalist. He differentiated between the state and the municipality: the state was an instrument of class domination, whereas 'the municipality is the local community itself possessing delegated and purely administrative powers to look after the general good order of the locality'.[102] Municipal undertakings took on a capitalist character because they operated in a capitalist society. Production was carried out for consumers, while producers were 'left out in the cold', being exploited in the same way as in private concerns through the extraction of 'their surplus-labour'; loans had to be repaid and constant capital such as machinery provided from profits funded from the labour of workers. It was not possible to carry on production on socialist lines so long as capitalism existed.[103] Class antagonism could not be ignored, and the perceived threat to capitalists was leading some of them,

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[95] Ibid., pp. 10–11.
[96] James Leatham, *The most important thing in the world* (Peterhead, 1903), p. 10.
[97] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1904* (London, 1904), pp. 22–4.
[98] John E. Ellam, 'Political democracy', *Social-Democrat*, 7 (Mar. 1903), p. 143.
[99] Ibid. [100] Editorial brevity, 'Socialist municipalism', p. 644. [101] Ibid.
[102] Theodore Rothstein, 'Municipal socialism', *Social-Democrat*, 7 (Apr. 1903), p. 208.
[103] Ibid., pp. 209–10.

particularly given the potential profitability of public investment in electricity, to attack municipal enterprise. Rothstein believed that the era of municipal trading was coming to an end, 'and the hopes of the Fabianesque Socialists will be nipped before they have attained their full bloom. The possibilities of Municipal Socialism are just as illusory as its actualities.'[104]

While agreeing with Rothstein's concern over the limitations of municipal activity under capitalism, very few followed through his pessimistic conclusions. Dan Irving, for instance, shared his reservations about existing institutions, but believed that they could be changed by the activities of socialists. Instead he took encouragement from the differences in the nature of the state and municipality noted by Rothstein. 'Remember that your Municipal Council', said Irving,

should not be viewed as something separate and apart from yourselves – something that *governs you*, that may or may not do something *for* you. A right conception of corporate life will make you understand that the Council is but your corporate self – the expression of your corporate *being*, the means whereby you do things for yourselves and order the incoming and outgoing of your common life as a people. A realisation of this truth would at once revolutionise the whole condition of life in all our large centres of population.[105]

The liberating potential envisaged in this statement is an aspect of all of the agitations for social reform, and the possibilities of this transformation were an important aspect of SDF strategy. The SDF distinguished between the reformer or revisionist, and the revolutionary socialist, considering themselves among the latter despite their work for improvement. 'To the reformer a reform is an end in itself, and is good in so far as it amends and consolidates the existing system. To the revolutionist a reform is of the nature of supplies and war material to an army laying siege to a fortress.'[106] It was necessary, said Harry Quelch, to work with the material at hand, not losing sight of the long-term aims in the process, but recognizing that the struggles of the day were a part of the conflict without which socialism would not be achieved.

We have to do the tasks of to-day, deal with present obstacles, despising nothing as too mean or petty which helps to pave the way to Social-Democracy, while never losing sight of the end in the means; making reform the instrument of revolution; conscious, whatever we may do to ameliorate existing evils or to smooth the road to our goal, that 'the Cause alone is worthy till the good days bring the best'.[107]

The SDF sought to involve themselves in the everyday struggles of working people to improve conditions in the belief that the experience of struggle was beneficial both for the socialists and for the recipients. Socialists gained knowledge of administration and organization, and the downtrodden, the oppressed, and the exploited were being transformed into healthy educated

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[104] Ibid., p. 211.   [105] Irving, *The municipality*, p. 15.
[106] Editorial brevity, 'Reform and revolution', *Social-Democrat*, 8 (Sept. 1904), p. 515.
[107] H. Quelch, 'Reform and revolution', *Social-Democrat*, 11 (June 1907), p. 337. 'The Cause alone is worthy … ' is from William Morris, see Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 368.

individuals with leisure time to consider their lot and develop aspirations for better things. Further, the municipal schemes provided insights into what the future could be like if only they worked for it.

<div align="center">V</div>

The aim of the SDF's palliative proposals and their activities on municipal authorities was the peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism. This is not to suggest that they ignored the threat of violence or the role force might play in the process, and had not developed strategies with this in mind.[108] Peaceful methods were, however, always to be given preference. At the 1901 conference during the debate on participation in bourgeois ministries, Quelch, arguing for flexibility in the area of strategy, said that 'he himself was in favour of any means, from the ballot-box to the bomb, from political action to assassinations'.[109] When the 'impossibilists' present cheered his latter remark, he rebuked them sharply for cheering assassination, while refusing to countenance the presence of a socialist in a ministry.

It was widely recognized that, although the SDF favoured a peaceful and constitutional road to socialism, those with vested interests in the status quo were unlikely to allow a smooth transition. 'Whether the shifting of social forces will be effected peaceably or forcibly', said Hyndman, 'depends entirely, now as ever in a revolutionary period, upon the action of the obstructive social strata above'.[110] Further, with the bulk of the population unarmed and untrained in the used of arms, argued Quelch, 'the capitalist class would not be slow to organise bands of armed men to keep the rest of the people in subjection, as had already been done in America with the Pinkertons'.[111] In response to these problems and difficulties they proposed the disbanding of the standing army and its replacement with a citizen's army on the Swiss model. By this means every man (and in some accounts woman) would be armed and trained, and the domestic threat of military intervention removed. Once established, it was believed that this army would have the added advantage of removing the threat of international militarism, as the force established would be purely defensive and would not be used irresponsibly abroad.[112] It would also be beneficial at home in easing the way for the peaceful transition to socialism, as 'it would at least put the working class in a position to understand what a barricade means and how, if need be, to act in their own defence'.[113]

[108] See for instance E. B. Bax on 'Dynamite in England', in *Justice*, 8 Mar. 1884, p. 4.
[109] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1901*, p. 18.
[110] H. M. Hyndman, *Darkness and the dawn of May-day, 1907* (London, 1907), p. 15.
[111] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1900*, p. 22.
[112] SDF, *Annual conference report, 1900*, pp. 21–3; SDF, *Annual conference report, 1910*, pp. 23–5; H. Quelch, *Social-democracy and the armed nation* (London, 1907); idem, 'Socialism and soldiering', *Social-Democrat*, 9 (Oct. 1907); Robert Edmondson, *The national citizen force bill* (London, n.d. [1908?]); Lee and Archbold, *Social-democracy*, pp. 280–3.
[113] Thomas Kennedy, 'The citizen army', *Social-Democrat*, 11 (June 1907), p. 346; see also Guy Bowman speaking at the 1910 annual conference: SDF, *Annual conference report, 1910*, p. 23.

VI

Unlike ILP members and Fabians, for those in the SDF it was important that their politics continued to derive its inspiration from Marx.[114] When Labour politicians responded positively to Bernstein's adaptation of Marx to new circumstances, the SDF leadership were critical and remained committed, like most of their European peers, to the unrevised Marxist canon.[115] Where supporters of the ILP saw socialism as the means whereby class conflict was superseded and the harmony of interests between employers and workers asserted, supporters of the SDF continued to preach class hatred as the 'only righteous thing we can preach' in the circumstances.[116] Where supporters of the ILP perceived the state as neutral and capable of being used to benefit working people, the SDF saw it as an instrument of class domination.[117] Only at the local level were they willing to see the state as something with potential for socialist transformation.

It is in response to developments in Fabian politics, however, that the SDF asserted their views most forcefully. With the passage of time, over most issues of socialist theory and strategy the SDF disagreed with, or came into conflict with, the Fabian Society. There were disputes over economic theory, the class war, attitudes to the state, imperialism, the nature of democracy, and the role of public officials.[118] As the theoretical and tactical differences with the SDF became clearer, the two organizations found it harder to co-operate, and over the years mutual animosity became more common than joint action. Attempts were occasionally made to work together, but this was progressively harder to achieve. In 1893 it had been possible to form a short-lived joint committee of socialists, and William Morris, Bernard Shaw, and Hyndman were able to issue a joint *Manifesto of English socialists*.[119] Increasingly, however, the SDF were to be found calling for the exclusion of Fabians from joint activities, or refusing to participate in initiatives which included the Fabian Society,[120] and at the foundation conference of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 Harry

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[114] John E. Ellam, 'The lack of economic knowledge', *Social-Democrat*, 6 (Nov. 1902), p. 329; W. G. Veals, 'The case for socialism v. individualism', *Social-Democrat*, 11 (Jan. 1907), p. 36.

[115] See n. 46 above; H. Tudor and J. M. Tudor, eds., *Marxism and social democracy: the revisionist debate, 1896–1898* (Cambridge, 1988).

[116] James Leatham, *The class war*, p.10, cited by J. Ellis Barker, *British socialism* (London, 1908), p. 78. For the ILP see Howell, *British workers*, pp. 355–6.

[117] Howell, *British workers*, pp. 360–1, for ILP views.

[118] For the latter, see Barrow and Bullock, *Democratic ideas*, pp. 30–43, 146–53, 162–77. The other disputes are considered at length in Johnson, 'Social democratic politics', passim.

[119] Patricia Pugh, *Educate, agitate, organise: 100 years of Fabian socialism* (London, 1984), p. 44. Although Shaw said of this that it was 'a string of platitudes hiding a disagreement as to methods at a time when the whole concern of the Socialist movement was with methods'. Cited by Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman*, p. 100; *Justice*, 12 Aug. 1893, pp. 5–6.

[120] See for instance Pugh, *Educate, agitate, organise*, pp. 65–6; SDF, *Annual conference report, 1897* (London, 1897), pp. 12–13.

Quelch proposed their exclusion.[121] The more the Fabians developed and articulated a distinctive Fabian politics, the further they drew away from the SDF.[122] In calling themselves socialists many SDF members believed that the Fabians sowed confusion in the minds of potential converts to socialism.

In practical terms the result of the work for social reforms by SDF members varied from place to place, but more often than not, success depended on working closely with local labour and trade union activists, and the outcomes, however revolutionary the SDF's aspirations, were much the same as was achieved by those working for reforms with less revolutionary aspirations, including progressive liberals.[123] Recent reinterpretations of the policies and reforms advocated by prominent Labour and ILP politicians suggest that their justifications, like those of the SDF, were ideologically led, and more sophisticated than hitherto allowed.[124] In particular the 'revisionist' influence of Edward Bernstein and the challenging reformulations of Jean Jaurès had repercussions on the thinking of British socialists.[125] Despite these theoretical differences, relationships between the SDF and ILP were close, especially at the local level, and joint membership was common.[126] Each organization shared a desire to get across the idea of socialism to as wide an audience as possible, and there were concerted campaigns within each organization working for the formal amalgamation of the two bodies.[127] Moreover, despite different theoretical positions, each saw reform as part of a grander strategy for the achievement of socialism.

At a practical level, SDF work for reform was thus indistinguishable from that of other Labour activists and often carried out in conjunction with them,

[121] McBriar, *Fabian socialism*, p. 310; *Report of the conference on labour representation*, *1900* (London, 1900), p. 14.

[122] And, suggests Hobsbawm, the further they drew away from the rest of the British labour movement and the British radical tradition. Hobsbawm, *Labouring men*, p. 253.

[123] Paul Thompson, *Socialists, liberals and labour: the struggle for London, 1885–1914* (London, 1967); Pat Thane, 'Labour and local politics: radicalism, democracy and social reform, 1880–1914', in Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid, eds., *Currents of radicalism* (Cambridge, 1991); Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds, *Liberalism and the rise of labour, 1890–1918* (London, 1984); David Clark, *Colne valley: radicalism to socialism* (London, 1981); Bill Lancaster, *Radicalism, co-operation and socialism: Leicester working class politics, 1860–1906* (Leicester, 1987); Mike Savage, *The dynamics of working-class politics: the labour movement in Preston, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1987); Peter Wyncoll, *The Nottingham labour movement, 1880–1939* (London, 1985); Jeffrey Hill, 'Working class politics in Lancashire 1885–1906: a regional study in the origins of the labour party' (Ph.D. thesis, Keele, 1971); Geoffrey Trodd, 'Political change and the working class in Blackburn and Burnley, 1880–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, Lancaster, 1978).

[124] Duncan Tanner, 'The development of British socialism, 1900–1918', in E. H. H. Green, ed., *An age of transition: British politics, 1880–1914* (Edinburgh, 1997); idem, 'Ideological debate in Edwardian labour politics: radicalism, revisionism and socialism', in Biagini and Reid, eds., *Currents of radicalism*, pp. 275–86.

[125] Tanner, 'British socialism', pp. 49, 51–2, 65–6; idem, 'Edwardian labour politics', pp. 275–86.

[126] The relationship between these two bodies is explored at length in Graham Johnson, 'Social democracy and labour politics in Britain, 1892–1911', *History*, 85 (2000), pp. 67–87.

[127] For details see ibid.

but they theorized their work for reform in a unique and distinctive way. The SDF developed a strategy for the transition to socialism which had a role for social reform and was revolutionary in its implications.[128] Unlike the evolutionary approach of other British socialists, theirs was a strategy which, to repeat the words of Harry Quelch, sought to 'make reform the instrument of revolution' and despite their lack of success, it is in these terms that it should be viewed. SDF strategy was not a question of reform *versus* revolution, it was a case of reform *and* revolution.[129] In the past, socialist parties have often been judged as reformist or revolutionary with an implicit model of the Bolshevik party as an ideal type, the model against which other parties can be judged. The SDF was not a Leninist party and did not have a Leninist conception of the state. Although aware of the possibilities and potential for violence of a capitalist state when threatened, it did not set out to smash the bourgeois state and replace it with organs of proletarian power. In this regard its members were much more firmly steeped in pre-war British parliamentary traditions: their objective was the attainment of power in the name of the working class. Violence was only conceived of as necessary when confronted by the violence of their class enemies. In this regard they were pre-Leninist in that they did not have an elaborate theory of the state and merely saw themselves as seizing *parliamentary* power. 'Hyndman and Quelch', said Harry McShane, the Scottish activist, 'were given over absolutely to the idea of a parliamentary revolutionary party'.[130] Although members of the SDF were revolutionaries, and sang the praises of foreign revolutionaries and revolutionary events, Britain was not a country with a recent revolutionary tradition and they had not theorized the implications of the seizure of state power. Their theories were often complex and multi-faceted, but most importantly they were of their time; they were not post-First World War socialists elaborating their theories in the light of the Russian Revolution, but pre-war social democrats developing a theory of revolution in the unfavourable atmosphere of Victorian and Edwardian Britain. But unlike the ILP and the Fabian Society they *were* social democrats, and it was this social democracy and the desire to theorize their politics in a tradition derived from Marx that differentiated and distinguished them from other groups.

From the vantage point of today, it is possible to be less judgemental, less dismissive, and more ready to acknowledge the richness, subtlety, and even the appropriateness of theories and strategies adopted by earlier socialist thinkers

[128] An alternative way of viewing this might be that, as with European socialist parties, 'entrenched Marxist traditions … encouraged comparatively moderate policies to be wrapped in Marxist rhetoric'. Tanner, 'British socialism', p. 65.

[129] Cf. Crick, *History*, pp. 295, 299. In my doctoral thesis I stated that: 'In SDF theory and strategy, there was a dialectic of reform and revolution lacking in their more theoretically rigorous successors.' I have not repeated this assertion here because the phrase was 'borrowed' – without acknowledgement, and without following through its implications – in Crick's introduction (see p. 10). Johnson, 'Social democratic politics', p. 302.

[130] Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane: no mean fighter* (London, 1978), p. 39.

and socialist organizations, despite their lack of similarity to Bolshevism, and despite their lack of success in achieving the transformations they desired.[131] The SDF's hatred of capitalism was intense and sincere, their objective was to overthrow it and replace it with a co-operative commonwealth. In this sense they were unequivocal revolutionaries, and they would have had no doubt about describing themselves as such. The problem for the SDF was the problem posed by Eric Hobsbawm in the 1960s: 'How far can any party be functionally revolutionary in a country in which a classical revolution is simply not on the agenda, and which lacks even a living tradition of past revolution?'[132] The reformist/revolutionary dichotomy which divided the twentieth-century socialist movement was not present to the same extent when the SDF was formed. Although the Second International debated the issue of reform and revolution, the idea of revolutionary socialists working constructively through the existing state institutions was not dismissed by them in the way it was to be by many of their descendants in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. The SDF was the true representative of Second International socialism on British soil. They argued theoretically, related their ideas to the Marxist tradition, and worked pragmatically for social improvement, never losing sight of the long-term goal of socialism.

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[131] This is true of the whole of the socialist tradition, not just elements of British socialism. See for instance the reconsideration of the work of Kautsky in Peter Wollen, 'Our post-communism: the legacy of Karl Kautsky', *New Left Review*, 202 (Nov./Dec. 1993), pp. 85–93. See also Robin Blackburn, 'Fin de siècle: socialism after the crash', in Robin Blackburn, ed., *After the fall: the failure of communism and the future of socialism* (London, 1991).

[132] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London, 1977), p. 13.