

## FABIAN SOCIALISM AND THE RHETORIC OF GENTILITY

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AFTER SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB FOUNDED THE *NEW STATESMAN* in 1913, one of their inaugural projects was a series of short articles entitled “What is Socialism?,” which ran from April through September of that year.<sup>1</sup> A telling example of their attempts to frame the debate occurs in installment twelve, in which they liken choosing equality as a social ideal with “teach[ing] ourselves to be gentlemen” and instituting a new “national standard of good manners” (364). They struck a similar note in *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation* (1923), condemning capitalist competition as inherently vulgar (36) and tracing “the democratic conception of good manners” to those “strata of society where a practical equality of material circumstances happens to prevail, and social position depends” upon circumstances other than wealth (40). This seemingly anomalous mix of socialism and the behavioral conventions of gentility signals a broader rhetorical strategy employed by the Webbs and other Fabian spokesmen to promote their political brand from the 1880s on.

The essentially middle-class character of Fabian socialism has been well documented. Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, excludes it from the main line of working-class socialism and attributes their characteristic ideological stances in large part to the desire to advance the position of the new, salaried white-collar work force from which so many of them sprang (257). The Webbs borrowed the term “*nouvelle couche sociale*” from French politician Leon Gambetta, who used it to designate those elements of the petit bourgeoisie on whom he based the future of the Republic. Similarly, it served as the Webbs’ label for the “black-coated proletariat” of “humble clerks,” teachers, minor officials, and tradesmen (“What is Socialism?” 14), in whom they similarly saw the future of socialism. Harold Perkin agrees in seeing Fabianism as “a self-interested movement of marginal members of the professional middle class” (*Rise of Professional Society* 130). While valuable, such analyses tend to gloss over significant issues involved in the rhetorical construction of class character, particularly efforts by lower-middle-class men to remodel the gentleman to serve their own ends in the late Victorian period. So do Marxist dismissals of the Fabians as simply bourgeois (see Caudwell, for example). As Geoffrey Crossick argues, the Victorian use of class terminology usually signals an effort to intervene in social reality, not simply to describe it (152). My goal is to illuminate further the ways in which the Fabian invocation of the “languages of class”

operated as such an intervention, one that exploited what Raymond Williams identifies as the ambiguous overlap between definitions of status based on social distinction and those based on economic relationships in this period (65–66). The Fabians’ professed agenda was to revise the economic basis of society, but for them this entailed a reassignment of social and civic virtue, particularly to the newly-credentialed brain workers who filled their ranks. I examine in particular the ways in which the Fabian leadership appropriated conceptions of character and ethos that had traditionally helped reinforce the status of conventional elites – for instance, the stigmatizing of materialism, the valorizing of disinterested self-culture, and the moralizing of work as service – and used them not just to validate their vision of an alternative social order but also to justify the central position of certain segments of the middle class within it.

*The Socialist as Gentleman*

SEVERAL MUTUALLY-REINFORCING STRANDS OF THOUGHT shaped the Fabians’ earliest conceptions of their mission and methods. The Victorian conviction of sin and the stigma on selfishness joined forces to shape the social conscience of the 1880s and beyond. The recognition of the fundamental injustices of their society amounted to what Beatrice Webb characterized as a class consciousness of sin: “a growing uneasiness, amounting to conviction, that the industrial organization, which had yielded rent, interest and profits on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain” (*My Apprenticeship* 180). George Bernard Shaw attributed such feelings to “the more generous souls among the respectable and educated section” of the middle class, who were attracted to socialism in part by the realization of how Victorian institutions “had starved, thwarted, misled and corrupted them spiritually from their cradles” (qtd. in MacKenzie and MacKenzie 40), although one should note that at least in his early days of socialist activism, Shaw’s inclusion of himself in this part of the middle class represented more of an aspiration than a reality. That members of this group should see it as their duty to right such wrongs sprang as much from a sense of social obligation as from their dominant intellectual influences: an Evangelical responsibility to shape a more moral world and a Comtism that cast the rich as stewards of the poor and reinforced what Stefan Collini has characterized as a more general “culture of altruism” among Victorian intellectuals (61).

The Fabians were from the beginning philosophically at odds with the class analysis in Marx’s model of socialist change: for class warfare they substituted permeation of existing institutions, for the dictatorship of the proletariat they substituted the competent administration of experts. While appreciative of workers’ grievances and aspirations, they considered unions to be counterproductive and mass democracy intellectually inadequate to bring about the larger scale transformation of society they desired. The revolutionary unrest of the late 1880s had shown them the destabilizing potential of working-class radicalism like that supported by H. M. Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation. Moreover, as Sidney Webb explained in a letter to Edward Pease, “nothing in England is done without the consent of a small intellectual yet practical class in London not 2000 in number. We alone could get at that class, & we shall give up that work if we compete with the SDF” (qtd. in MacKenzie and MacKenzie 62). Their case for the higher morality of socialism was shaped to echo the social ideals of the middle-class audiences they targeted but also to exploit a kind of class shaming. Central to their arguments was the characterization of free-market competition as

a form of vulgarity typical, as the Webbs put it, of an “imperfectly civilized” society (“What is Socialism?” 365). Shaw also framed the issue by characterizing an egalitarian society as more gentlemanly than a competitive one. In “Socialism and Superior Brains,” his response to W. H. Mallock’s attack on socialism, Shaw noted that “every professional man, every country gentleman, every man of honor, gentle or simple,” asks of society “no more than a sufficient and dignified subsistence in return for the best service he is capable of giving to his country and the world.” For Mallock to argue that property owners alone should profit from the expansion of wealth enabled by their capital was an obvious violation of this ethos: it “is not a question of the difference between the Socialist and the anti-Socialist: it is a question of the difference between the gentleman and the cad” (251). Although elsewhere Shaw blamed the “commercial method of organizing production” for condemning the middle-class man to be “a cad who does everything for pay and nothing for honor, love, or patriotism” (“What about the Middle Class?” 111–12), he nonetheless stigmatized the desire for exclusively personal gain as in itself vulgar. Tradesmen (always the symbolic foil to the gentleman) might be “base enough to demand for themselves every farthing that their business ability adds to the wealth of their country” (“Socialism and Superior Brains” 253), but the doctor no more than the fireman sells his skills to the highest bidder. In *The Acquisitive Society* (first published in 1920) R. H. Tawney drew upon similar ideals of professional service: “when really important issues are at stake every one realizes that no decent man can stand out for his price” (178); the general didn’t haggle over payment for victory, the sentry didn’t charge for his protection. Even the industrial foreman could be endowed with this esprit de corps. In Sidney Webb’s 1918 lecture “The Works Manager Today,” he dismissed as a mere “highwayman” (17) the foreman who simply assisted his employer to drive down wages. Managers should instead resemble army officers who have not just to follow the orders of the general but to “raise to the highest point the achievements of their men” (103). Indeed, Webb asserted, the professional manager was motivated by “an ideal no lower and no more ‘Philistine’ than that of the most Utopian poet,” because by maximizing the efficiency of his work force, he provided them with greater access to “fullness of life” outside of work (12).

To craft socialist cooperation into a gentlemanly ideal, false forms of gentility had also to be stigmatized, a task readily undertaken by Shaw. Shaw might argue that the goal of socialism was to make all men gentlemen, in the sense of being provided with the “generous subsistence” needed to allow them to become cultivated and altruistic persons (“The Case for Equality” 143), but in practice he disqualified various groups from being able to achieve this goal. Shaw largely excluded the lower classes from access to gentlemanly collectivism. He stigmatized shopkeepers, servants, and hotel keepers as prime examples of the “Parasitic Proletariat” who resisted socialism because they were dependent upon the plutocrat’s wealth and thus “defend[ed] the institution of private property with a ferocity which startles their principal” (“On Driving Capital Out of the Country” 68). Although he predicted that equalizing income might eventually teach even the commercial class “good manners” (77), if only by eliminating obsequious shopkeepers as well as insolent customers, he turned the prospect of democratic empowerment into a liability where the working classes were concerned, especially during the period when the Fabians felt threatened by the growth of an independent labor movement. In 1896 he warned against placing an “organized, intelligent and class-conscious Socialist minority at the mercy of the unorganized and apathetic mass of routine toilers, imposed upon by the prestige of the aristocratic, plutocratic and clerical forces of reaction” (“Report on Fabian Policy” 13). In “The Illusions of Socialism” (1897)

he characterized wage-earners as being “far more conventional, prejudiced, and ‘bourgeois’ than the middle-class” (14). He elaborated further in his 1907 essay “A Socialist Program,” where he argued that the Labour Party (unlike the Fabians) failed to recognize the workman’s capacity for snobbery and humbug. He predicted that Labour’s drive to increase workers’ wages would merely encourage them in their hopes of attaining middle-class respectability and would ultimately turn them into defenders of the plutocratic status quo (42–43). In “What about the Middle Class?” (1912) he allowed that deciding to be a gentleman might put the English working man on the “road to emancipation,” but not if “he has only resolved to be a successful tradesman and have the full product of his labor to himself” (115). Whereas Shaw encouraged clerks to think of unionization as a form of professionalization (“doctors and lawyers were the original trade unionists,” “A Foreword to the Clerks” 8), in the case of the working class, “Trade Unionism is not Socialism; it is the Capitalism of the Proletariat” (*The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* 186).

However, he was hardly more sympathetic to the “black-coated proletariat,” whose ranks had exploded with the expansion of the service economy in the last third of the century. Shaw’s analysis of the lower-middle classes stressed their conformist attitudes by employing conventional stereotypes of their priggish enslavement to respectability. In 1892, Shaw noted how Board School education had transformed “the commercial clerk, with his reading, his writing, his arithmetic, and his shorthand,” into “a proletarian, and a very miserable proletarian, only needing to be awakened from his poor little superstition of shabby gentility to take his vote from the Tories and hand it over to us” (“The Fabian Society” 157). In later years he was less sanguine about this awakening. In his 1906 reply to George Sims, who portrayed the middle classes as victimized by the demands of both labor and capital, Shaw put the blame instead on their futile pursuit of genteel respectability. This class stratum had become the dumping ground for incompetent young aristocrats, socially ambitious working-class children, and the offspring of clerks who could not risk the social stigma of better-paying manual labor. In “The Bitter Cry of the Middle Classes” he observes that even though this work condemned them to genteel poverty and despite being

underfed, under-trained, [and] under-educated, [such people] insist on being middle-class ladies and gentlemen without either the energy or the capital to go into the business of their class as employers of labor. They are too genteel to learn or practise trades, too genteel to go to public elementary schools, [and] too ignorant, too weak, too infatuated with their social points of honor to do anything but the unskilled labor of the counting-house. (17)

For the most part, they were also too respectable to go to socialist meetings and thus failed to understand how Fabian policies would benefit them. The character Gunner, the clerk and would-be assassin who invades the nouveau riche Tarleton household in *Misalliance* (1910), is something of an exception in this last respect, insofar as he bitterly denounces the Tarletons as decadent bourgeois culpable of “Debauchery! gluttony! selfishness! robbery of the poor!” (169). But in other respects Shaw portrays him as typical of the pathetic clerkly stereotype of the day. Gunner’s indignant claims to have “an intellect: a mind and a brain and a soul” (171) wasted on bookkeeping are undercut by his torrent of popular-fiction cant, just as his efforts to prove himself a man are betrayed by his cowardly collapse in the face of opposition from his social betters. Although Shaw’s comment that “Gunner is ME” (*Collected Letters*

3: 233) suggests a degree of empathy with the clerk's resentments, he left no doubt that he had long since transcended the crippling illusions of clerkdom.

Positioning himself in this class matrix required a cagey balancing act on Shaw's part, one that stigmatized false forms of gentility while trading on the prestige of genuine distinction. He had himself begun his working life as a shabby-genteel clerk and understood the illusions that normally kept the black-coated proletarian in his place. Shaw implied that it was not just "accident" or even genius but also his own freedom from humbug that had propelled his escape from their ranks ("A Foreword to the Clerks" 6). In the facetiously contrarian "A Socialist Program," he staked out the liberally-minded high ground for himself and fellow Fabians, who were able to critique the faults of capitalist society precisely because they had "had enough of being gentlemen" (46) and were no longer held hostage by the priggish constraints of middle-class respectability. This argument had the benefit of attributing working-class resistance to Fabian leadership not to the Society's failure to represent their interests but to the workers' inherent social conservatism, which rejected the Fabians as "cynics who have been clean through the genteel ideals and broken out on the other side of them." On the other hand, claiming such freedom from middle-class cant conceded no real social ground; Shaw made clear that the Fabians would continue to welcome "disinterestedly irregular and insubordinate persons" but only "provided they are ladies and gentlemen" (46). His boasting elsewhere of the Fabians' middle-class distinction was only partly tongue in cheek: from their ostentatiously erudite name (one "that could have occurred only to classically educated men," *Intelligent Woman's Guide* 185) to the tasteful Walter Crane designs on their materials (Figure 13), their identity as "cultural snobs" ("Sixty Years of Fabianism," 226) allowed him to eat his cake and have it, too: to position himself above conventional social distinctions but to benefit from their prestige.

H. G. Wells had a similarly complicated relationship to this kind of class critique. Always loud in his criticism of shabby gentility, he had also experienced it from the inside and could afford at least a wry sympathy for his fictional clerks and shopmen – Kipps, Polly, Hoopdriver – as the victims of a pernicious snobbery and a substandard education. This did not stop him from blaming the social pretensions of the black-coated proletariat for condemning them to low wages, inferior education, and intellectual narrowness. As for his own position in this social order, he like Shaw somewhat upgraded his family's humble origins in the retelling, and he rivaled Shaw in his defiant confidence in his own abilities: "I am a typical Cockney without either reverence or a sincere conviction of inferiority to any fellow creature" (*Experiment in Autobiography* 238). But as much as he might chafe against the Fabians' drawing-room manners, he attempted to enlist their high-minded idealism in his own visions of the Utopian future.

These attempts at self-fashioning by Shaw and Wells highlight something implicit in much Fabian rhetoric: that the leveraging of social prestige was usually imagined in gendered terms, focusing particularly on gentlemanly ideals. Several factors shaped this bias. The relationship between work and status was different for the "New Women" than it was for the "new men" who joined the Fabian Society. Earlier in the century, middle-class men had reinforced their advances in social and economic power by appropriating aristocratic definitions of the gentleman and moralizing the concept to justify their own positions in society, particularly by making work and not leisure central to it. Middle-class women, on the other hand, had secured status by redefining the lady according to her domestic virtues. As increasing education enabled large numbers of lower-middle-class men to enter the





Figure 13. Walter Crane, frontispiece for *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1889). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

white-collar work force in the last quarter of the century, they found their own attempts to claim gentlemanly status largely rebuffed by a middle class that impugned them as vulgar pretenders and narrow-minded conformists who struggled unsuccessfully, like Gunner, to assert full manhood (Young 58–69; see also Wild). Shaw and Wells reinforce these stereotypes about the black-coated proletariat while simultaneously positioning themselves on higher – and implicitly more manly – professional ground. This made them typical of the “new men” attracted to the Fabian Society, those who according to Hobsbawm were successfully “rising through the interstices of the traditional social and economic structure of Victorian Britain, or anticipating a new structure” (257).

While for men particular levels of “brain work” could be a ticket to higher status, for women, working outside the home was more likely to compromise their claim to be “ladies.” This of course was the point for many feminists wanting to break the yoke of what Shaw called the “womanly woman.” In an era when most professions were closed to women, the independence afforded even by clerical work could serve their ends and compensate for any loss of caste. However, it was also the case that even for women who worked to support rather than to fulfill themselves, most white-collar work open to them entailed a level of education that implicitly endowed them with a claim to middle-class status. The estimated twenty to twenty-five percent of early Fabian membership constituted by women skewed toward those already securely in the middle class (Hobsbawm 257). This was even more the case with the Fabian Women’s Group, founded in 1908. With a membership dominated by teachers, lecturers, journalists, writers, and the wives and daughters of educated and professional men, it clearly represented the voice of “the educated woman” (Alexander 155). Although Fabian women agreed in seeing women’s lack of financial independence as a tool of their oppression, their preferred solution to it, like subsidies for child-bearing, tended to reinforce women’s domestic roles, rather than prioritizing careers for women. For this and other reasons, the Fabian focus on advancing status through professionalism was largely conceived in terms of male roles and expectations.

#### *The Socialist as Professional*

CENTRAL TO FABIAN POSITIONS was a move to base social regard at least in part on superior intellect and the large-mindedness that supposedly went with it. As “eminent cerebrocrat[s],” to borrow Shaw’s half-facetious coinage (“Socialist Program” 44), they could claim to rise above narrow class interests and cast themselves as patrons of society at large. But making this move involved not just appropriating existing professional ideals but also recasting the origins and objectives of brain work so as to combat Victorian prejudices against practical skills and specialization by endowing these with the ethos of liberal cultivation that had long been associated with the gentleman.

Characterizing socialism as the ethical antidote to vulgar self-interest was useful in tapping in to British anxieties about good breeding, but the Fabians got more powerful rhetorical leverage from allying themselves with the ideals of the professional gentleman rather than with those of the gentleman of leisure. They not only underscored the similarities between their form of socialism and the ethics and conditions under which professionals operated; they worked more particularly to endow with professional respectability the new kinds of white-collar brain work that their vision of social change depended upon. In the process, they promoted the claims of the *nouveau couche sociale* to gentlemanly status.

For Harold Perkin in *The Rise of Professional Society*, the Fabians were professionals first and socialists second (130) – that is, for him the move toward state intervention that triumphed in the twentieth century can be read as a triumph of professional ideals as much as of state socialism. The two groups shared much rhetorical common ground: to the extent that professions set their own price for their services, they sidestepped the competitive marketplace that for socialists distorted human relations. The professional, Perkin writes, had “a stake in creating a society which plays down class conflict (in the long run if not in the short term) and plays up mutual service and responsibility and the efficient use of human resources” (117), values also embraced by the Fabians. Most importantly, the professional advocated leadership that was determined meritocratically and justified by its service to the greater good of society, an ideal embodied in the Fabians’ vision of a society whose inequities would be reformed by the management of bureaucratic experts. Of course, the late-Victorian professional ideal could also be seen as a natural evolution out of older concepts of the gentleman. Historically professions had drawn their status as much from the social prestige of their members, recruited almost entirely from the younger sons of the gentry and upper middle classes, as from the nature of the work itself. Over the course of the century, this older kind of status professionalism began to give way to an occupational professionalism in which prestige derived from specialized training and competence certified by fellow professionals (Collini 32). The qualities of disinterestedness, service, and liberal cultivation that characterized the Victorian ideal of the gentleman found their counterpart in professional ideals. As Robin Gilmour explains, “the belief that a man’s ultimate loyalty ought to be to something larger than his own pocket underlay the traditional gentleman’s commitment to the honour of his name and of his country, and it was a characteristically Victorian achievement to broaden this basis of honour to include professional ethics as well” (97). Similarly, it was a characteristically Fabian achievement to shape the socialist brain worker in this kind of professional mold as a person serving something larger than his own self-interest and thus deserving of inclusion in the community of professionals that helped to constitute a “new gentry” in the second half of the century (the term is part of the title of chapter 8 of Kitson Clark’s *The Making of Victorian England*, 1962).

The socialist brain worker served various rhetorical ends for the Fabians, advancing both their wider vision of a meritocratic society and the aspirations of the *nouveau couche sociale* from which many Fabians came. The collectivist state run by cooperative methods necessarily demanded a higher level of organization than the laissez-faire state, and a higher level of bureaucratic expertise was required to achieve this kind of order. Muddle and waste were equally the downfall of free market capitalism and of the culture of amateurism that dominated contemporary life; empowering exceptional talent was the antidote. The Fabians effectively exploited more general worries about efficiency in the late Victorian period, as perceived declines in military readiness, industrial competitiveness, and eugenic soundness sparked a crisis of confidence focused on the inadequacy of British leadership. Their championing of meritocracy over pedigree as the qualification for leadership reinforced underlying criticisms of the injustice of class society. Not only did the upper classes live on unearned wealth, they ruled by unearned merit: as amateurs they were unable to provide the kind of leadership that efficient government required. Shaw’s scorn for governance by a “mob of grown-up Eton boys” (section 7 of *The Revolutionist’s Handbook*, addendum to “Man and Superman,” 1903) was echoed more pointedly by Beatrice Webb, who angrily reacted to what she saw as A. J. Balfour’s dilettante approach to educational reform: “We do not want clever school



boys at the head of our great departments. We want grown men, ‘grown up’ in the particular business they have taken in hand, doing their eight or nine hours’ work for ten months of every year, whether in office or out of office; behaving towards their profession as the great civil engineer, lawyer or medical man behaves” (*Our Partnership* 133). She saw their goal as being to destroy the notion that “any clever man, trained to any profession whatsoever, will succeed in politics” without knowing anything of “the details of public administration” (134).

Critique of conventional political leadership inevitably involved critique of the stratification that put the Victorian educational system “in a straitjacket of social class,” to use Perkin’s term in *The Origins of Modern English Society* (302). Educational segregation served as a primary means of policing access to the kinds of cultural capital that were crucial to establishing social status. Education for the lower classes, particularly in forms subsidized by government funds, was strictly limited to practical skills. Parents desiring more for their children had to purchase it in a complicated hierarchy of private schools geared to their class status (and aspirations). At its apex were elite public schools dispensing a liberal education that drew its prestige in part from its explicit repudiation of immediately practical skills (symbolized by the ostentatious uselessness of the classical studies at its core), in part from its promise to mold gentlemanly character, and in part from its claim to provide a philosophical breadth of perspective necessary to govern effectively and to enable enlightened use of specialized training. Although the civil service reforms of the 1850s had made employment dependent on performance in competitive examinations, the content of these tests substantially overlapped with the public school and university curricula and was thus calculated to favor their graduates. Hence reform did little in the late Victorian period to change the underlying assumption that a broad basis of liberal learning and the kind of character formation provided by that kind of schooling constituted the best qualification for positions of authority, nor did it do much to significantly expand the ruling elite beyond those who traditionally had most direct access to this kind of academic preparation.

Even though Sidney Webb was an exception to this trend – a man from a modest lower-middle class background who used the civil service examination system to advance from a lower division clerk in the War Office to a first division clerk in the Colonial Office – the continuing link between a gentleman’s education and gentlemanly status (including membership in the “new gentry”) still rankled. As Royden Harrison explains, in order to “make their way as gentlemen,” lower-middle-class men closed out of the public-school/Oxbridge network had to rely on accomplishments at evening institutes and other institutions that were originally founded to further “practical” training and were “imbued with the traditions of scientific, provincial, bourgeois culture” (12). Lower-middle-class demand spawned an alternative credentialing process in the last quarter of the century, one that furnished certificates and examination scores as proof of their worthiness for occupational and, by extension, social status. Successful performance in examinations freed H. G. Wells from the shop counter by earning him grants for Midhurst Grammar School, a Bachelor of Science from London University, and a diploma from the College of Preceptors. Although he criticized the superficiality of the examination and certificate system that had grown up to correct the deficiencies in private education in the last third of the century, Wells blamed these on the stranglehold maintained by traditional education: “London was jerry-built because the ground landlords were in possession; English national education was jerry-built because Oxford and Cambridge were in possession” (*Experiment* 279). Sidney Webb

exploited to the fullest this alternative credentialing process, earning an astonishing number of certificates and awards through his stellar performance in courses and examinations, many offered by the City of London College (Harrison 9). In 1883 he went on to win the second Whewell Scholarship in international law at Trinity College, Cambridge, but was prevented from accepting it by the requirement that he must reside in college. According to Harrison, “Sidney certainly felt that he had been cheated” (12) when his efforts to waive this requirement failed, and the incident did much to focus him on the conflict between traditional and more concretely meritocratic reward structures in late Victorian England.

In his *Socialism in England*, for instance, Sidney cautioned against mistaking true ability for the “advantages of social position and the possession of an expensive education” (94) and lamented that Oxbridge still had an outsize role in supplying the administrative elite, despite the fact that they had long “ceased to occupy the position of leaders in advanced thought in any department of study” (74). Shaw was typically less temperate: “the practical identity of the governing class with the university class in England has produced a quite peculiar sort of stupidity in English policy” (“Socialism for Millionaires” 113). Little had changed by 1917, according to the Webbs’ report on professional associations in the *New Statesman*. In it William Garnett, Sidney’s colleague on London’s Technical Education Board, served as their proxy for criticizing the structure of the contemporary civil service. Garnett lamented that the man who “studies things rather than character” and who offers progressive ideas was unlikely to succeed in an administrative structure that continued to reward not the advanced theorizing of the scientifically-trained expert but the *savoir faire* of the Oxford graduate, distinguished by his “elegant diction” and his ability to quote Plato and Aristotle (qtd. in the Webbs’ “Special Supplement on Professional Associations” 31). In this same document, Sidney also criticized the traditional professions for excluding all but a tiny minority of the population from their membership by making entry dependent on “a long and expensive schooling,” regardless of other evidence of exceptional intellectual attainments (47). His alternative model was in part embodied in his vision for London University, conceived as a “technical school for all the brain-working professions of its time” where specialized training in science, technology, commerce, and public administration would supplant the Oxbridge emphasis on liberal cultivation (*Education for National Efficiency* 143). The Webbs’ desire to convince the “ordinary citizen . . . that reforming society is no light matter and must be undertaken by experts specially trained for the purpose” (*Our Partnership* 86) was instrumental in their founding of the London School of Economics in 1895. The LSE’s ambitious curriculum in economics, statistics, banking and finance, commercial law, political science, and public administration indicates the scope of specialized education necessary to equip such experts for public service.

The Fabians’ implication that “natural” superiority (*Decay* 40) should be allied with intellectual attainments was (rightly) read not just as a neutral argument for meritocracy but as a challenge to traditional class power. Civil service reforms had targeted not just the nepotistic aristocrat, as W. L. Burn notes, but also “ruthless and rootless expert[s]” (263) loyal to programs and abstract political principles rather than to the ideals of caste – a good description of the Fabians. The reformers’ coordination of examination content with a conventional liberal curriculum was a means of insuring that power would not flow to “rootless intellectuals good at passing exams” (Gowan 30) and who, if enabled by political power, might promote their own interests at the expense of the larger community. Reinforcing such logic were deeper and less articulated prejudices: that objective measures

of performance like examination scores were the result of mere cramming rather than true intellectual attainment; that specialization was inherently narrow and illiberal; that both were pursued for immediate material gain rather than cultivation of mind and character. As the white-collar work force ballooned in the last third of the century, such prejudices easily mapped onto conventional stereotypes against lower-middle-class people as materialistic social climbers and reinforced resistance to their aspirations to be accorded the status and respect conventionally due to middle-class professionals. The Fabian leadership nominally championed the cause of the black-coated masses, but their real focus was on the claims of a more elite “intellectual proletariat” denied the full value of their labor in a capitalist economy that had “no prizes” for them (*Decay* 125). In the eyes of an upper-class opponent like Geoffrey Drage, however, their arguments for meritocracy were simply a screen for their class aspirations. Drage, the secretary for the Royal Commission on Labour, was personally nettled by Beatrice Webb’s attack on the commission for what she considered its dilettantish and unprofessional investigative methods and its consequent slighting of workers’ concerns. But he chose to dismiss her defense of labor as a screen for advancing the agenda of the Fabians’ “so-called Socialist movement,” which in actuality mounted “an effort on the part of the lower middle class to obtain social recognition, political power and place, by means of the trade union movement, which it dislikes and misrepresents” (455). Obliquely reinforcing Shaw’s critique of the underlying conventionality of the working classes, Drage asserted that the average trade unionist shared the values of those currently in political power, “the upper middle class – that is, the class educated at the large public schools” (455), and that they rejected the kinds of state intervention through which “the lower middle class expect to ride to power, and in the administration of which they hope to find jobs for their poets, moralists, lawyers, and economists” (460).

Blunting suspicions of themselves as social climbers and self-promoting ideologues required a reworking of both the Victorian ideology of work and the ideal of liberal cultivation. Despite their criticisms of the superficiality of much conventional liberal education, the Fabians wanted to capture some of its prestige for their own purposes. Constructing the brain worker’s intellectual labor as pursued by the most talented for its own sake and the sake of the public good and not for material gain or social status helped to undercut traditional prejudices against specialization as being narrow and inherently illiberal. While acknowledging that some professions operated to protect the economic self-interest of their members, the Webbs instead played up their intellectual function – to nourish the “creative impulse” that would advance “the disinterested development of the science and art of the vocation” (“Special Supplement” 36–37) and looked forward to seeing all brain workers embrace such goals. Like the idealized liberal education, the Fabians’ version of specialized intellectual work was pursued for the purposes of developing one’s abilities to the fullest, not for immediate gain. Shaw’s “Socialism and Superior Brains” makes this case for brain work as an intellectual vocation most explicitly. In response to W. H. Mallock’s argument that without capitalist rewards, talented people would not work, Shaw argued that Mallock “seems never to have considered the very first peculiarity of exceptional ability, namely, that unlike mere brute capacity for the drudgery of routine labor, it is exercised for its own sake, and makes its possessor the most miserable of men if it is condemned to inaction” (275). He parried similar arguments in “On Driving Capital Out of the Country” (1907) by assuring his readers that those with real leadership talent (as opposed to mere “routineers” 67) are driven to fulfill their potential through work. The very best brain work “is done today, and always has been

done, for nothing but the satisfaction of doing it" (66). For example, one might try to force a captain to be a private, "but if he is a born captain you will make him so unhappy that he will be glad to do captain's work for private's pay . . . sooner than waste his life by leaving the best he can do undone" (65).

Similarly, although the Webbs acknowledged that the "imperfectly civilized man of genius" might, like "the last of the robber barons," hold out for a rent in excess of what he truly needed to cultivate his talent ("What is Socialism?" 365), they generally portrayed brain workers as insulated from concerns with material gain or self-aggrandizement. In *Decay* they pointed to the "development of an honest, an efficient, and an instructed 'salaried'" demanding "honourable service as their means of livelihood" as evidence of "the steadily narrowing sphere of the profit-making motive" (125). In *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) Wells concurred in linking "the salaried type of mind" with being "brought up in a tradition in which money was a secondary matter" (282–83). Readers of R. H. Tawney's *The Acquisitive Society* were similarly assured that professional managers are unlikely to be motivated merely by salary, for "if a man has important work, and enough leisure and income to enable him to do it properly, he is in possession of as much happiness as is good for any of the children of Adam" (179). The Webbs branded as "vulgar" the suggestion that the talented worker in a socialist society would require more than "public honour and a sense of social service and the joy of exercising his faculties" as an incentive to take a position of authority; rather, what "the strong man craves" is primarily the satisfaction of success in his chosen work ("What is Socialism?" 365). This was especially true of the "best intellects of the country," in which category they included the artist, the inventor, and most notably for their argumentative purposes, "the enthusiastic administrator." They expressed confidence that such a man would be "too busy exercising his faculty to be able to indulge in great personal expenditure on luxuries and pleasures. All this type of man seems to demand is opportunity to exercise his function to the fullest degree, with security of livelihood for himself and his family, and, above all, the personal influence and public consideration that such a position affords." Indeed they had no doubt that in a properly organized socialistic state such men of genius would find more reward in public service than in private enterprise, since "all experience shows it to be just the person of exceptional talent who is the first to respond to the motive of social service" ("What is Socialism?" 366). They also credited professional bureaucrats with promoting a "purity of administration" uncontaminated by the self-serving interests of corrupt councilmen ("Special Supplement" 33). Precisely by so obviously not seeking profit, the public brain worker showed himself worthy of receiving that "sufficient and dignified subsistence" ("Socialism and Superior Brains" 251) that, according to Shaw, every professional gentleman had a right to expect in return for his service to the community.

Notably, the Webbs also located the most likely origin of this kind of worker in the lower reaches of the middle class. In their "What is Socialism?" series they assured their readers that the wealthy classes were statistically the most barren when it came to art, religion, or "intellectual production" (461). They felt that other things being equal, the nation that produces the most genius would be the one "which has the largest proportion of its population living in a home atmosphere of honourable public work, of moral and intellectual refinement," and in possession of enough wealth to insure well-being "but not for many more luxuries of the material sort." This was "exactly the home atmosphere that the Socialist State intends to secure for the whole population" (462). It was also exactly the background that had produced Sidney, according to Beatrice's biographical sketch of "The Other One" at the beginning

of *Our Partnership*. She is defensively insistent on cataloguing the Webb family's lack of distinction – no members of any of “the older and more dignified professions” (2) – but she is also careful to stress that their respectability was not the status-conscious priggishness or materialism stereotypically ascribed to the lower-middle class. They eschewed any desire to “climb up the social ladder, or enjoy luxury, as distinguished from comfort”; they “neither admired nor objected to social superiors – they ignored them” (4). Sidney might have been inspired by his father's radical sympathies, but he was not contaminated by “class bitterness” or notions of “class war” (4). Presumably this characterized the public face of Fabian socialism as well, driven not by class resentment but by a principled desire to bring about a more just social order through the intervention of trained specialists.

#### *The Socialist as Aristocrat*

FOR THE FABIAN LEADERSHIP, THE ULTIMATE GOAL of a more equitable distribution of national resources was not a strictly egalitarian society but the empowering of true merit, which in their case meant intellectual ability safely buffered by a disinterested ethic of public service. The Webbs attributed the “bad manners” of capitalism to the fact that people who possessed “no natural superiority” had to use “artificial privilege[s]” like rank and wealth to assert power in society (*Decay* 40). The MacKenzies aptly characterize “the civil servant” as the Fabians’ “modern counterpart to Plato’s guardians” (250). The Utopian implications of this kind of meritocratic vision were most elaborately worked out by Shaw and Wells, who pushed beyond ideals of the gentleman to imagine new and presumably more genuine forms of aristocracy. Although Shaw’s championing of income equality was a factor in his break from formal Fabian leadership in 1911, this was more of a disagreement over means than ends. Shaw simply saw equality of income as the quickest way to achieve the kind of social equality that “is indispensable to natural authority and subordination,” because “only where there is pecuniary equality can the distinction of merit stand out” (*Intelligent Woman’s Guide* 337, 71). Gareth Griffith aptly labels Shaw’s position “an egalitarian doctrine dedicated to the pursuit of inequality” (118). Shaw argued in later years that socialism was essential to transform every family into “a potential breeding place for an aristocracy of talent” (“Sixty Years” 218). He had articulated the characteristics of this aristocracy in earlier works like *Man and Superman* (1903) and *Back to Methuselah* (1921), turning “metabiologist” to argue that the Life Force worked itself out through the Superman who could reject all of the convenient hypocrisies that made contemporary society work, a logical extension of his earlier scorn for the shibboleths of middle-class respectability. Only by breeding a “democracy of supermen” (*The Revolutionist’s Handbook*, section 5 of appendix to *Man and SuperMan*) could society solve its problems, and only by eliminating artificial barriers of social class could the fittest members of society intermarry and produce this new race.

Wells’s Samurai, first imagined in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), embodied his desire to create a “voluntary aristocracy” of Platonic scope, one that brought both professional skill and creative imagination to bear on governance and infused scientific and technical expertise with the more expansive and disinterested intellectual vision traditionally associated with the gentleman’s liberal learning. He offered the rules of the Samurai order as a behavioral code that would promote “a fine attitude of mind” and develop the efficiency, discipline, and intellectual training necessary to promote socialism (qtd. in “First Public Conference” 9). Wells “laughingly remarked” to Beatrice Webb that his “chapters on the Samurai will



pander to all your worst instincts” (*Our Partnership* 305). And indeed the Samurai model was quite appealing to Fabians like Maurice Browne and Harold Munro, who tried to organize a regimen of self-discipline and study that would promote a “voluntary nobility” with “the common purpose of imagining their best and striving for it” and bringing “wisdom and will” to bear on society’s problems (Browne and Munro 12).

After Wells failed in his attempts to mold the Fabian Society to his own purposes, his resentments against the Webbs took the form of portraying them as too conventionally middle class to develop the kind of “aristocratic” virtues required to transform society. In *The New Machiavelli* (1915) he parodied them as Oscar and Altiora Bailey, would-be mentors to the protagonist, Dick Remington. Always adept at biting the hand that fed him, Wells plays the class card by having a character denounce Oscar Bailey as “a nasty oily efficient little machine” (155; bk. 2, ch. 2, sec. 4), whose figurative black hands and plumber’s bluntness render him worse than useless in promoting the broader cultural development of society that Remington’s vision of a “new liberal education” entails. In place of the Baileys’ narrow efforts to “fix up” the machinery of human affairs, Remington endorses a windy set of quasi-Arnoldian ideals. He aims to transform intellectual life by infusing it with “love and fine thinking,” making “the best and finest thought accessible to everyone,” in order to enable “an enormous free criticism” of existing institutions and practices (238, 240; bk. 3, ch. 1, sec. 9). What is needed for genuine social transformation is not democracy or even bureaucracy, but a “vast complex” of powerful, clever, enterprising people who will produce a “self-conscious, highly selective, open-minded, devoted aristocratic culture” (242; bk. 3, ch. 2, sec. 1).

Wells embodied this kind of “modern aristocracy” in William Porphyry Benham, the protagonist of *The Research Magnificent* (1915), who makes his life an experiment in testing the possibilities for human nobility by systematically disciplining his propensity for fear, self-indulgence, jealousy, and prejudice. In later years Wells’s advocacy of an “open conspiracy” of likeminded intellectuals who would bring the power of “naked reasonableness” (*Anticipations* xvi) to bear on the world’s problems took on a more technocratic cast, but it still depended upon the empowerment of an intellectual aristocracy, one above self-interest and embracing a philosophically expansive definition of the public good.

### *Conclusion*

IT WAS NOT SO MUCH THAT THE FABIANS DESIGNED THEIR SOCIALISM to promote their professional and class aspirations, as that both their political and social aspirations were served by the same kinds of rhetorical appeals: to the court of “Professional Honour” and not the “Court of Profit” (*The Decay of Capitalism* 174), to a dynamic of cooperation and not competition, to a society in which talent was put in the service of the public good and true merit determined one’s position and rewards. A socialism administered by experts clearly appealed to the Fabians’ professional self-interest, but professional expertise alone was insufficient to secure the status they desired. They might characterize themselves as an intellectual proletariat seeking a just rent for their abilities, but their objective was to assert a right to be considered gentlemen – if not intellectual aristocrats – instead.

Just as they couched an appeal for socialist collectivism in the behavioral norms of good breeding, they attempted to exploit significant late-Victorian ideologies of distinction to justify their actions and their aims. Against the stereotype of the lower-middle-class climber

they posed the image of the disinterested professional, putting his expertise in service to society and deserving of the rewards and regard due to other professional gentleman. In place of the rootless, ruthless intellectual and the inherently illiberal specialist, they substituted the man of exceptional ability who pursued his life's work for its own sake, seeking self-fulfillment rather than self-aggrandizement. And against elite schooling's monopoly on character formation, they offered a new form of intellectual aristocracy, insulated from class prejudice and claiming a philosophical perspective on human civilization that derived from their comprehensive understanding of social systems. Although they wound up formulating a justification for the rent of their own abilities that proved to be as relevant under twentieth-century state socialism as under capitalism, that justification was originally validated by its success in co-opting conventional social distinctions in late Victorian England.

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#### NOTE

1. The twenty-two *New Statesman* articles titled "What is Socialism?" (1913) are on pages 13–15, 44–46, 76–77, 107–08, 138–40, 172–74, 204–06, 236–38, 268–69, 300–02, 332–34, 364–66, 397–99, 430–32, 461–63, 492–94, 525–26, 557–59, 590–91, 622–23, 654, 685–87.

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