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Social Democratic Politics in Britain 1881-1911  
The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation

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## PREFACE

This study does not purport to be a history of the Social Democratic Federation or a history of socialist ideas in Britain. There already exists the foundations of the former in the works of Lee and Archbold and Tsuzuki; there are also numerous studies of the nature of British socialism, but there is no adequate large scale treatment of the socialism of Britain's leading exponent of Social Democracy before the First World War.<sup>1</sup> A perceptive and analytical article which set out to characterise the Federation's politics was included in the second volume of the Briggs and Saville Essays in Labour History in 1971.<sup>2</sup> The three volumes under this title became formative works in the emergent discipline of labour history.<sup>3</sup> Many of the themes taken up in these essays became starting points for the further study and investigation of political parties, trade unions, and the lives of labour pioneers, but little has been written which follows through the insights of Henry Collins' analysis of the marxism of the SDF.

The original idea for this work emerged from a reading of Stuart Macintyre's A Proletarian Science which is a study of the British Communist Party's marxism in the years 1917 to 1933.<sup>4</sup> Macintyre takes seriously the ideology of the leaders of the party, particularly those working class autodidacts who he suggests dominated the party's intellectual circles at the time. He also compares their ideas, analyses and political practice

with that of the mainstream labour establishment, which he calls 'labour socialism'.

On reflection it seemed clear that most of the people and ideas analysed by Macintyre were in some form the direct descendants of the pre-1914 Social Democratic tradition, yet with the exception of Collins, no-one has treated their pronouncements with the respect shown by Macintyre to those coming after them. At first the themes of his book suggested themselves as the key areas for a study of the SDF. It soon became apparent however, that to ask the same questions and consider the same themes was anachronistic. The dialectic for instance, although not entirely absent from the thoughts of SDF members, did not have the central place it did among later marxists. A study of historical materialism, although important, was inadequate without a consideration of the centrality of religion. Given that the organisation was the first of its kind, its emergence out of the radical environment of the 1870s, and the effects of this on their politics required study. The organisation's development and growth at a time of intense imperial competition and rivalry necessitated studying their analyses of the issues involved and their responses to imperial ideology and Government policy. Finally the absence of the revolutionary example of the Soviet Union, so important to later socialists, meant that their concept of revolution, the role of the state and their own relationship to each of these needed to be considered in a different light, as did their views on the types of reforms and political actions possible this side of the revolutionary change to which they aspired.

The latter points are particularly important given the way historians have tended to approach the SDF with spectacles tinted by the experience of the Soviet Union and the nature of post-1917 revolutionary politics and ideology.

The ideas of SDF members will be presented in the context of the decades through which they lived, and their responses related to the experiences they had to undergo. Their views may seem naive in retrospect, their actions may be construed as 'wrong' in the light of late twentieth century political knowledge, but they did not have the advantage of hindsight or the experience of bolshevism to act as a beacon. There was a different world in which Lenin was a relatively insignificant, diffident character who shared the office of Harry Quelch for a short spell during his London exile, but who was largely unknown outside the offices of the Twentieth Century Press where Quelch worked as managing director. The wranglings of the Russian Social Democrats were very much offstage and likely to be regarded as the rantings of the exiled and dispossessed, patronisingly accepted because, after all, they had suffered deprivations British socialists could only imagine. More relevant were the intrigues of the German Social Democrats, but access to their debates was limited and only filtered through to the British slowly and in a piecemeal fashion, although not without important repercussions. It is to these individuals, shaped by the the British environment, isolated by the parochialism of British culture, fascinated by the international movement to whose debates they had such limited access, that we will turn as we ask



'What made Britain's Social Democrats tick?'

It has long been known that the SDF gave particular prominence to political theory. Henry Collins made a point of this when he referred to their lack of theoretical alertness, which he considered strange in a party so committed to theoretical discipline.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, little emphasis has been given by historians to the nature of their political theory, and little consideration to the pronouncements and debates of their leading thinkers and analysts. Too often the SDF is written off as narrow and dogmatic, and the views of those who left the organisation for the less theoretically rigorous pastures of the Independent Labour Party, or those of the more empirical and mainstream Fabian Society, are accepted as adequate characterisations of the organisation's theory and of the inadequacies and follies of their political practice. In more modern historical works there is occasionally a willingness to concede that the SDF's position was more subtle, but there is no evidence presented to suggest why this was so or in what way it was true.<sup>6</sup>

More often the SDF is studied as part of a process variously described as the origins, advent, emergence or rise of the Labour Party.<sup>7</sup> Consequently they are studied in depth in the 1880s and then abandoned in the 1890s for the more fruitful ILP. One of the results is that historians generalise about the politics of the SDF from the experiences of the 1880s only. This adds to the picture of the SDF as limited and theoretically ill-informed. While other socialists are found adjusting to their times and trying to adapt to developments in

political theory, the poor old SDF is left trapped in the 1880s as if stranded in a broken-down time machine. A further aim of this work will be to help transport them into the 1890s and 1900s.

The study finishes in the year 1911. There are several reasons for this choice of year. It marked a turning point in a number of areas, and to do full justice to the changes, themes, and theoretical debates of the years between 1911 and 1914 would have required another thesis length work. 1911 saw the important transformation of the SDF into the British Socialist Party. Although most historians have tended to present this as merely a change of name pointing out that the leadership, the staff, and the newspaper remained substantially the same, there was nevertheless a genuine attempt at change which would have required detailed analysis in a study finishing in 1914. 1911 was also a turning point in the history of British trade unionism and industrial relations, arguably more significant in its effects on the long term history of the labour movement than the events of 1889.<sup>8</sup> These changes had their impact on the BSP and there was much renewed discussion and debate on the role of trade unionism, many of the new recruits to the BSP being syndicalist in inspiration. Moreover, the build up to the war and the responses to its outbreak would have required a thoroughgoing analysis of international relations and BSP responses to them.<sup>9</sup> The view taken here is that even if the BSP was in essence the same as the old SDF, the world inhabited by its members was changing rapidly and thus 1911 forms an appropriate place to finish a study,

the aim of which is to characterise the politics of the SDF.

The account is divided thematically. In the first chapter the roots of the SDF in the radical environment of the early 1880s are considered. This is followed by a study of what for many members was the distinguishing feature of their politics: their understanding of economic theory. The next two chapters will be concerned with the broad area of historical materialism; the first premise of a materialist position being a rejection of religion, the SDF's ambiguity in this area is the theme of the first of these chapters, the second is a study of SDF accounts of historical development and the nature of historical causation. Theories of imperialism and responses to the imperial policies of the British Government form the subject matter of the fifth chapter. There is an assessment of the importance of the 'class war' to SDF politics, and finally its understanding of the nature of the British state and theories of the transition from capitalism to socialism, along with the strategies developed to help the process along.

Anyone studying the SDF cannot help but be swamped by the enormous quantity of source materials: biographies, correspondence, memoirs, pamphlets, newspapers, journals and other journalistic work produced by members, as well as the historical accounts of those who lived through the period and modern historical works. As a result of this richness and diversity of sources there is a tendency to become complacent about one's knowledge of SDF affairs. In view of this it is good for the historian to recall the words of H.W. Lee after an

evening of reminiscence with H.M. Hyndman:

we spent a great part of the evening in talking over the past of the SDF - it is quite a history now - men and women we had known, 'splits' we had seen together, difficulties and dangers we had faced, troubles we had outlived. Some day, I suppose, when we are all dead and gone somebody who knows nothing about the matter will write it all down. 10

It is to the echo of these words that I will write an account of the Social Democratic Federation and the development of socialist politics in Britain.

FOOTNOTES

1. H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy in Britain (London, 1935); C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism (London, 1961). Studies of British socialism include Stanley Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (London, 1973); idem, British Socialists (London, 1979); Walter Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21 (London, 1969); M. Beer, A History of British Socialism 2 Vols. (London, 1929); G.D.H. Cole, A History of Socialist Thought Volume III, Part I: The Second International 1889-1914 (London, 1956), Chapters III and IV; Joseph Clayton, The Rise and Decline of Socialism, 1884-1924 (London, 1926). Throughout this work the organisation will be referred to as the Social Democratic Federation. It began life in 1881 as the Democratic Federation, became the Social Democratic Federation in 1884, changing its name again in 1907 to the Social Democratic Party. In spite of the latter name change contemporaries still talked of the SDF, and they often spoke of themselves as 'The Social Democratic Party (SDF)'.
2. Henry Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', Asa Briggs and John Saville, (eds.), Essays in Labour History 1886-1923 (London, 1971).
3. The two other volumes are: Asa Briggs and John Saville, (eds.), Essays in Labour History (London, 1960); idem, Essays in Labour History 1918-1939 (London, 1977).
4. Stuart Macintyre, A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917-1933 (Cambridge, 1980).
5. Henry Collins, 'The Marxism', p.53.
6. See for instance David Howell, British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906 (Manchester, 1983), p.389. The exception is Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London 1885-1914 (London, 1967), Chapters VI, IX and Conclusion.
7. Henry Pelling, The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900 (London, 1965); Philip P. Poirier, The Advent of the Labour Party (London 1958); Roger Moore, The Emergence of the Labour Party 1880-1924 (London, 1978); Paul Adelman, The Rise of the Labour Party 1880-1945 (London, 1972).
8. James Hinton, Labour and Socialism (Brighton, 1983) p.93.
9. Although this has already been done by Douglas J. Newton, British Labour, European Socialism and the Struggle for Peace 1889-1914 (Oxford, 1985).
10. How I Became a Socialist. (London, [1902]), p.1.

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## Chapter 1

### RADICALISM

'A spectre is haunting Europe', said Marx in 1848, 'the spectre of Communism'.<sup>1</sup> In the following decades Britain was relatively free from such ghostly apparitions. To the extent that the working classes were organised as a class, it was on the whole as members of moderate, respectable trade unions. Where they were militant it was over demands that could easily be conceded without threatening the status quo.<sup>2</sup> The middle classes could sleep peacefully in their beds at night, and the ageing militant Chartist could look cynically at his fellow working men:

In our old Chartist times, it is true, Lancashire working men were in rags in thousands and many of them lacked food. But their intelligence was demonstrated wherever they went. You would see them in groups discussing the great doctrine of political justice ... or they were in earnest dispute respecting the teachings of Socialism. Now you will see no such groups in Lancashire. But you will hear well-dressed working men talking of co-operative stores and their shares in them, or in building societies. And you will see, others, like idiots, leading small greyhound dogs, covered with cloth, on a string! They are about to race, and they are betting money as they go! ... Working men had ceased to think, and wanted to hear no thoughtful talk. 3

However, from the early eighties, new morbid images began to haunt the dreams of the middle classes. 'A ripple of Socialism' was seen to be passing over England.<sup>4</sup> Herbert Spencer the arch-theorist of individualism, found it necessary to warn against a new



group which threatened 'the compulsory construction of healthy artisans' and agricultural labourers' dwellings,' and called for 'State-appropriation of railways, with or without compensation.' Worst of all they proposed that production should be carried out by 'agricultural and industrial armies under State control.'<sup>5</sup>

A spectre indeed had entered the comfortable homes of this green and pleasant land. What was worse, it had forced its presence on the clubs of the wealthy and like all such vivid imaginings had been exaggerated out of all proportion:

Those who have watched, during the course of the last few years, certain processions that have defiled through Pall Mall and Piccadilly, on their way to this or that demonstration in Hyde Park, may perhaps have noticed the presence here and there of a banner inscribed with the proposition that 'Wealth is the creation of labour'. These banners, we have reason to believe, were the ensigns of a certain body which calls itself the 'Democratic Federation'. It is, at all events, a fact that such a body exists; that its members are so numerous as to be counted by tens of thousands; and that their main object is neither more nor less than to imbibe and disseminate the principles of advanced Continental Socialism. 6

What was the object from which these heartfelt fears sprang? What was its nature, and where did it come from?

The following analysis of the radical origins of the Democratic Federation and its socialism will be divided into three sections. Firstly there will be a consideration of the general intellectual climate and the nature of radicalism, in particular the advanced radicalism of those attracted to the Federation. The position of the Federation in this milieu will be

examined with reference to the two key issues in radical politics at this time: Ireland and land reform. Secondly the more extreme of the working class radical clubs and their role in the development of the Federation's politics will be studied. Finally there will be an examination of the Federation's attitudes towards radicalism, once it had adopted a socialist stance.

The late seventies and early eighties mark a period when many of the old intellectual certainties of mid-Victorian Britain were being questioned. Declining rates of profit, the growth of foreign competition, the ostensible depression in agriculture, these issues among others mark the atmosphere of the 'Great Depression'. The earlier period had seen an uncritical belief in the limitless possibilities of the British economy developing and growing in the fertile soil of laissez faire. Self help was seen as bound to bring benefits not only to the selfish, but to society in general and progress was the order of the day.

If we may rely on individuals promoting the public welfare, when they are successful as merchants, bankers, manufacturers, and farmers, why not rely on the same principle in all their family concerns, and in most of the relations of man to man.

The more we give or allow scope to the free exercise of self-love, the more complete will be the social order. 7

Such an all embracing philosophy of life, which had hardened into dogma by the seventies, did not collapse easily when contradicted by events.

The feeling of uncertainty and fear is well captured by Cliffe Leslie writing in the Fortnightly

Review of 1879.

The most characteristic feature ... of the commercial situation for more than a year past has not been so much the depth of the depression, for there have been worse times in that respect ... as the sense of being in the dark, and surrounded as it were by the unknown. Yet it is the consciousness only of not seeing their way on the part of the people that is new. 8

Most individuals tended to see any criticisms of economic orthodoxy in the simplified form of a battle between 'collectivism' and 'individualism', but the genuine intellectual roots of the criticism of laissez faire were much more subtle. These are to be found in the works of T.H. Green, Arnold Toynbee and others, and were to form the basis of the 'New Liberalism' at the end of the century.<sup>9</sup> Here, it is sufficient to note the impact of these ideas on the general intellectual climate. The stressing of the negative and restrictive aspects of 'free competition' and the need for what they called 'positive freedom', helped in the formation of an atmosphere conducive to the criticism of current orthodoxy particularly among the educated middle classes.<sup>10</sup>

On the question of economic liberalism it is notable that some of the later essays of John Stuart Mill, the highly respected political economist, were published posthumously with the help of his step-daughter Helen Taylor in 1879 in the Fortnightly Review. In these essays he had considered some of the socialistic philosophies he was aware of. He talked of the increase in importance of the working classes, noted their improved organisation, the development of 'systems and

creeds which lay claim to a place on the platform of political philosophy', and suggested that 'reflecting persons' should give these popular political creeds their serious consideration.<sup>11</sup> In considering them himself he gave qualified support to some of the co-operative community builders particularly Fourier, but dismissed most of what he called 'revolutionary socialists' who wanted to put the management of the economy into the hands of a central authority.<sup>12</sup> A crucial point was his argument that the concept of private property was not fixed but varied between different civilisations and over time. Society he said, 'is fully entitled to abrogate or alter any particular right of property which on sufficient consideration it judges to stand in the way of public good.'<sup>13</sup> Such a statement coming from the pen of so esteemed an economist helped to stir doubts in many a receptive mind.<sup>14</sup>

The intellectual atmosphere was showing signs of fragmentation at the periphery, the stale dogmas of the mid-Victorian period were coming in for criticism from influential figures, and the foundations were being laid for new heresies. Mill had suggested 'reflecting persons' study socialism and had advised them to reject 'revolutionary socialism'. Some were to follow his first piece of advice but on reflection, to reject the second.

The Democratic Federation had its origins in the more extreme fringes of British radicalism. The general radical movement was very eclectic and diverse, but for the most part was, by the late seventies, allied to the Liberal Party. G.J. Holyoake expressed the sentiment of many radicals, including those of a more advanced hue,

when he wrote of the Liberal victory of 1880:

The dead days of Tory rule are over. Progress has been dead now for six years. Political life has been suspended. The enterprise of industry has been arrested. The savings of the people are wasted. Public debt was increasing. All is changed now. The Liberal benches of Parliament are crowded with new members bent on prosecuting the interests of justice and progress. The political atmosphere is fresh and sweet once more. England is like a new country. Men greet each other in the street as though a great calamity had been arrested or a great plague swept away. This is the meaning of the recent revolution. 15

But in the eyes of the more advanced radicals, within a year the Liberals had reneged on the principles of justice, progress and sweetness. Coercion in Ireland, imperial adventures in Egypt, and the prosecution of refugees from foreign tyranny at home, caused many an erstwhile ally to despair. As Hyndman put it,

The Liberal Government came into office pledged to undo the wrongs of centuries and to make Ireland as contented as Scotland. But instead of carrying out its pledge, this Liberal Government has launched into a career of brutal tyranny such as not even a Tory Government could have successfully attempted. And when the Liberal party thus took upon itself the carrying out of Tory policy, there was no English organisation in or out of Parliament which could offer or organise resistance. 16

Justin McCarthy said of this period,

It would have been better for Ireland, and for England also, [and we can add, better for the radicals] if at the time the Tory Government had been in office, although the Tory Government had done everything that the Liberal Government was doing. Irishmen would have suffered and groaned, indeed, but they would have said to themselves that there was nothing else to be expected from the Tories. 17

Already the opinion was being voiced that working class people required working class representatives in Parliament. As the misdeeds of the Liberal government multiplied, more and more radicals despaired of the major political parties, and the view of the working classes as duped and blinded by the leaders of these parties gained credence.<sup>18</sup> There was a spreading cynicism in advanced circles about the nature of party politics generally. To those who had put their faith in the Liberal Party, 'it seemed that the whole of the influential classes of England had gone right over to the Tories.' Thus spoke Helen Taylor, addressing a Democratic Federation meeting in Liverpool. She continued,

There was not one among them who was not in principle a Tory ... there was not one of the leading men that did not acknowledge that which was going on in Ireland today was wrong so far as they could say, but that Mr. Gladstone -(hisses and groans)- said it must be done. Now this was just the fundamental position of Toryism. 19

One of the speakers at the large Anti-Coercion meeting in Hyde Park called by the Democratic Federation, expressed it differently, 'As long as the working men of England were hoodwinked by the Liberal and Tory agents, so long would they be kept down, and so long would their noses be kept to the grindstone.'<sup>20</sup>

In this respect the farmyard fable told by William Morris in the first issue of Justice, in which the poultry debated 'with what sauce shall we be eaten', will have brought a wry smile to the lips of many. On being informed by a battered looking middle aged barn-door cock that he had no wish to be eaten at all, 'a storm of disapproving cries broke out, amongst which could be

heard loudest the words 'practical politics!' 'county franchise', 'great liberal party', municipal government for - Coxstead!'<sup>21</sup>

The major source for adherents to the Democratic Federation, and later for converts to socialism, was the advanced fringe of the radical movement; and it was to working class radicals in particular that they looked for early supporters.<sup>22</sup> In the early eighties, as disillusionment with the Liberal Party spread, there were criticisms voiced among certain groups of radicals about the nature of radicalism in general and its eclectic nature. An editorial in The Radical entitled 'Who and What are the Radicals?' began,

Some people are teetotallers, and think for that reason they are Radicals. A still larger number are regarded and regard themselves as Radicals, because they are dissenters. Others consider Radicalism in some necessary way associated with stinginess and vulgarity - motions for reducing the supply of corn that is provided for the pigeons in the Palace Yard, the eating of peas with one's knife, and other peculiarities of that kind. Not a few admit, in confident whispers, that they are 'awful Radicals - regular out-and-outers'; and then explain the term away to such an extent as to show that from their point of view, Radicalism is perfectly harmless. 23

In view of these feelings about the vagueness of Radicalism in general, it was felt necessary in such circles to qualify one's radicalism with an adjective. One became an 'advanced', a 'pure', an 'extreme', or a 'zetetic' radical, and the issues and concerns of radicalism began to be more clearly articulated and set forth.

This is not to suggest that advanced radicalism was not itself eclectic. Like its more general counterpart,

it was not a case of united action behind a coherent theoretical system. It was rather an acceptance of certain priorities, the major ones being land nationalisation and an opposition to Irish coercion; but the priorities of these advanced radicals also contained a variety of crotchets and fads, so that The Radical, the most assertive mouthpiece of these individuals, could at various times declare itself in favour of vegetarianism, the anti-vivisection movement, dress reform, and other concerns on the periphery of Victorian politics.

The land reform movement in Britain was part of a continuing tradition going back in its modern form to the works of Thomas Spence.<sup>24</sup> The heightened concern with land nationalisation in the 1880s was sparked off by the publication in the Contemporary Review of an article by A.R. Wallace entitled 'How to Nationalise the Land: A Radical Solution to the Irish Problem', in November 1880.<sup>25</sup> But, as the title of this article suggests, it was the resurgence of Ireland to the forefront of British politics that was the real premise to a concern with land.

Agricultural depression continued to bring unabated distress to the Irish peasantry in the late seventies and early eighties. Three bad harvests in succession had meant that rents could not be paid, and there was a steady and continuing stream of evictions. The coercive response of the Conservative Government had led to much resentment, and the return of a Liberal Government believed to be sympathetic to Irish tenants, gave rise to a degree of optimism. In the summer of 1880 a Bill was introduced to give compensation to certain classes of



evicted tenants, and was passed through the Commons successfully. Its rejection by the Lords led to an increased sense of outrage. The Irish Land League (which had felt the Bill to be inadequate anyway), increased its agitational activity, and its membership grew rapidly. It set up special land courts to settle disputes, overriding the formal legal structure; tenants' resistance to eviction was encouraged, and incidences of agrarian outrage increased. 2,590 outrages were recorded for 1880, and almost 1,700 of these were committed in the final quarter of the year.<sup>26</sup> In these circumstances the Government felt compelled to respond in the by now established fashion, and introduced the first of its Coercion Bills in January 1881.<sup>27</sup>

The mere threat of coercion was sufficient to throw together a collection of London's most advanced radicals into an Anti-Coercion League towards the end of 1880.<sup>28</sup> One of the direct results of its formation was the publication of The Radical newspaper in December 1880. This was to be the most outspoken voice of advanced radicalism for the next year and a half, and despite its initial suspicion was to be the most consistent supporter of the Democratic Federation before the more explicitly socialist Christian Socialist appeared in 1883.

Irish coercion then, was the issue at the centre of radical politics at the time the Democratic Federation was called into existence. As Hyndman was to put it early in 1882: 'What gave an impetus to the formation of the Federation, and is at present the principal<sup>a</sup> cause of its existence, was the action of the Government in relation to Ireland.'<sup>29</sup> It was this issue which was to

induce advanced radicals working within the Liberal Party to make the break, and it was amongst working class radicals that opposition to coercion was at its fiercest.<sup>30</sup>

The Democratic Federation was soon after its formation to declare itself unequivocally behind the Irish Land League.<sup>31</sup> Its leading figures would defend the League both on platforms and in writing, particularly against suggestions that it encouraged violence and lawlessness. To hold the Land League responsible for the 'spirit of unbridled murder' prevailing in Ireland, said Herbert Burrows in response to an attack on it by Charles Bradlaugh,

is to fly in the face of the facts - not the 'facts' which are gleaned from the columns of our English papers, but those which are known to the men who have really studied the Irish Question. The Land League influence has been a restraining influence, and this cannot be too often or too strongly asserted. 32

On the 11 June 1882, the Democratic Federation called a meeting in Hyde Park to protest against coercion. According to The Radical it was 'one of the largest that has been held for political purposes in London for a long time.'<sup>33</sup> A number of platforms were set up and the motion put,

That this meeting of freedom loving Englishmen strongly condemns the tyrannical policy of the Liberal Government towards Ireland, and protests against the new Coercion Bill, now being forced through the House of Commons by a mechanical majority, as tending to strengthen the secret societies, foster outrage, and to embitter still further the feeling between the two peoples. 34

The central stand was occupied by Joseph Cowen, the

Radical M.P. for Newcastle, who gave an impassioned speech calling upon the Liberal majority in Parliament 'to remember the principles under which they profess to be elected and to stand by them.'<sup>35</sup> Platform number five was occupied by H.M. Hyndman in his capacity as chairman of the Democratic Federation. He condemned the Liberal Government, and in particular, Gladstone, John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain 'who were turning their backs on their principles and doing everything that was wrong to hold office.'<sup>36</sup> After two hours of such speeches a procession marched to Westminster, and by the end of the day the Democratic Federation could be said to have arrived as a new and viable force in British politics, capable of rallying behind its banner most of Britain's advanced radicals, even if only for the day.

This heightened concern with Irish politics and the iniquities of Irish landowners gave rise to a new phase in the land reform movement, and the name of Henry George was soon to come into prominence. 'Without the terrible object lesson of Ireland writhing in the remorseless grasp of landlordism', said one participant in the movement, 'it is ... doubtful if George's doctrines would have made much headway in the domain of "practical politics"; but as it fell out, both the hour and the man had arrived. The two were like hand in glove.'<sup>37</sup>

Once it has been noted that land reform agitation was not something new to Britain, that George and his works arrived at the most opportune moment, and that 'No better reception could have been arranged'<sup>38</sup> for his Progress and Poverty, it is difficult to overemphasise George's influence.<sup>39</sup> W.H. Mallock of the Liberty and

Property Defence League writing a response to the book,  
said of George,

One of the chiefs of the Irish Land League has become his enthusiastic disciple [i.e. Michael Davitt]; and what was yesterday the mere aspiration of the thinker, will probably tomorrow be the actual demand of the agitator ... Mr. George's ... book ... is at this moment selling by thousands in the alleys and back-streets of England ... it is fast forming a new public opinion ...

It is not the poor, it is not the seditious only, who have been affected by Mr. George's doctrines. They have received a welcome, which is even more singular amongst certain sections of the really instructed classes ... Finally certain trained economic thinkers ... are reported to have said that they see no means of refuting them, and that they probably mark the beginning of a new political epoch. 40

Basically George's book was an attack on a system that could allow, as the title suggests, progress and poverty, to exist side by side. In particular it was a fierce attack on orthodox political economy, especially Malthusianism. He proceeded by considering the remedies on offer to alleviate poverty: improvements in education; improved habits of thrift and industry; trade unions winning higher wages; co-operation; a more general distribution of land; and he dismissed each in turn. None of these could work he suggested, unless the monopoly on land was destroyed, this being the basic cause of low wages. George's solution was a single tax on land values which would make all other taxation unnecessary.<sup>41</sup>

The relevance of George's work however does not lie in his solutions, but in his attack on political economy, and most significantly in putting this attack in a readable, popular (but by no means over-simple) style.

'It is not unlikely' said William Morris,

that a more logical and correct thinker, a more rigid economist would have failed where he has so far succeeded ... and as with his writing so with his speaking. That winning frankness and genuine sincerity which ring through his every utterance have gone straight to the hearts of his English audiences. 42

Progress and Poverty was for many individuals later prominent in the socialist movement, a stepping stone in the direction of socialist politics. It impressed Tom Mann 'as by far the most valuable book I had so far read.'<sup>43</sup> George's activities brought J.L. Joynes into active politics, and a speech of George's claimed George Bernard Shaw, 'sent me to political economy, with which I had never concerned myself, as fundamental in any social criticism.'<sup>44</sup> As the Liberal economist Hobson put it,

The real importance of Henry George is derived from the fact that he was able to drive an abstract notion, that of economic rent, into the minds of a large number of 'practical' men, and to generate therefrom a social movement. It must be understood that the minds into which George dropped his seed were, for the most part, 'virgin soil'; the teachings of economists ... had never reached the ear of most of them or had passed unheeded. 45

The land reform movement revived in Britain at exactly the same time as attempts were being made to gather advanced radicals into the Democratic Federation. In the week that the Federation was established, a Land Nationalisation Society was called into being which had among its early members, Dr. G.B. Clark, Herbert Burrows, H.H. Champion and R.P.B. Frost, all soon to be prominent members of the Federation. Over the next few years the Land Nationalisation Society and its spin-offs, the Land

Reform Union and the English Land Restoration League, were to provide a useful recruiting ground for Federation members.<sup>46</sup>

During these years the connections between these various land nationalisation societies, Henry George and the Democratic Federation, were very ambiguous. The Federation, at its inception had proclaimed land nationalisation as one of the platforms of its programme, but it was on this subject that George was at his most ambivalent. As we have seen, George's solution to poverty was to tax land values, and this was not the same thing as land nationalisation.<sup>47</sup> George however spoke at both Land Reform Union and Democratic Federation meetings which called for nationalisation. One of his biographers noting this ambiguity, points to George's statement that 'Taxation supplies the form for the virtual nationalisation of the land.'<sup>48</sup> There is little doubt however that those who organised his meetings, those who spoke on platforms with him, and those who attended the meetings, considered him an unequivocal land nationaliser, and The Radical reports him as stating at a meeting in Glasgow that, 'He believed, in short, in the whole seven points laid down in the programme of the Federation.'<sup>49</sup> The relationship between George and the Federation was from the first a close one, but they were wholly behind him only at the beginning of his first British tour early in 1882, when he was making pronouncements at Glasgow in favour of their programme, at a time when the organisation was committed to nothing stronger than this set of radical demands.

From 15 April 1882, when Hyndman wrote on the issue

in The Radical, virtually every statement mentioning George or land nationalisation was qualified. From this date it was considered that 'Mere nationalisation of the land by itself would benefit the workers of a country very little.'<sup>50</sup> Henceforth statements about land nationalisation were increasingly tempered with statements of commitment to socialism and attacks on capitalists. 'Nationalisation of the land' said Robert Banner a few weeks before attempting to set up a branch of the Federation in Glasgow, 'will take off our shoulders one thief, the landlord, but the rent he drew will have gone into the pocket of his brother the capitalist, in the form of interest, the most grinding and crushing of all.'<sup>51</sup>

Despite these qualifications, George and the Federation remained friendly well into the eighties, each it seems having notions of converting the other. Justice, reviewing George's Social Problems said,

For the present, our duty is to secure a full hearing for all who work in our direction, even though their views may be, in some respects, unsound, assured that the logic of events, as well as the logic of thought, will sooner or later, force them, if candid and intelligent, into acceptance of our whole programme. 52

The attitude towards land nationalisation and Henry George eventually arrived at, is neatly summarised by Hyndman in the debate between him and George published in The Nineteenth Century. In this they debated the question of 'rent appropriation' and Hyndman argued that capitalists would be the beneficiaries of such a policy:

Nationalise the land as much as you please therefore, without giving the producers the

collective control of the social machinery, the means of production and distribution as well as of exchange, and no good will really have been done. The land is only one of the means of production, and under existing conditions is useless without the others. Production for profit, and competition for wages under the control of capital, will in my opinion go on equally when the land is nationalised; wages will equally tend to a minimum; and there will be as now the same phenomena, the cause of which we Socialists alone explain - over-production, crisis, and glut, followed by periods of boom and prosperity. 53

The Democratic Federation was, as its title suggests, a federation. In the first instance this meant a federation of radical clubs. Quite a range of Metropolitan radical clubs affiliated to the Federation soon after it was formed. Virtually all of these were to leave within a few months in protest at support given by the Executive Committee to an Irish Land League candidate in a by-election against a Liberal in County Tyrone.<sup>54</sup> An election committee was set up by the Federation with Hyndman as the chairman and they issued a manifesto which attacked 'the hollowness and hypocrisy of capitalist Radicalism.'<sup>55</sup> Talking of the position adopted at this juncture, Hyndman wrote, 'The only hope for the workers is to nail the "no compromise" flag to the mast.'<sup>56</sup> At the time, the Government's new Land Act was beginning to break down the opposition of those radical workmen less sanguine about the break with Liberalism, and they proceeded to disown the Federation, leaving a hardened militant rump to continue the propaganda.<sup>57</sup> A series of angry letters from affiliated clubs damning the Federation's policy and its election manifesto, were published in the Weekly Dispatch.<sup>58</sup> The president of the Commonwealth Club, claiming a membership of '500 working



men', said they would 'at once withdraw from this bogus society of crotchet mongers.' The Borough of Hackney Workmen's Club claiming 'over a Thousand Members', and the Tower Hamlets Radical Club, expressed similar sentiments. Soon these were followed by the Eleusis Club of Chelsea, the Westminster Democratic Club and the Cobden Working Man's Club.

Given that the moderate element was to leave, what was the major source of those individuals who were to remain? Where did adherents to this organisation, which was steadily moving towards the adoption of a socialist position, come from? To answer these questions, we need to descend into the semi-underworld of militant, radical, predominantly working class, clubland.<sup>59</sup> There were in London, three major centres for this militant ultra-radicalism, Soho, the East End, and Marylebone; each of these will be considered in turn.

The two major centres of activity in Soho were the Rose Street Club and the Manhood Suffrage League. The Rose Street Club was the culmination of a line of refugee clubs which had been in existence since the 1840s, and had in the following years gone under a variety of names.<sup>60</sup> By the late seventies, this had organised itself into distinct English, French and German sections. The club had developed through a series of splits, and was dominated at this time by a collection of Lassallean socialists and anarchist exiles, who had influenced the relatively small English section.

The sense of international fraternity at the club is captured by Frank Kitz. Commenting in his memoirs on the aftermath of the German Anti-Socialist Law of 1878,

he said, 'our hall at the time resembled a railway station, with groups of men, women and children sitting disconsolately amidst piles of luggage.'<sup>61</sup> The St. James Gazette found them in a more relaxed mood at the 'Sunday pic-nic of the Working Men's Social Democratic Club':

it has been the pleasant custom of its members to go for an outing in Epping Forest about this time every year ... Now the 'Marseillaise' was played for the second time; and away we went along the quiet Sunday streets to Whitechapel and Hackney ... Most of the Soho section were North Germans; but there were Bavarians, many Russians, Swiss, French, Poles, and Italians. La France had a van to herself; another was filled with Austrian Jews. Indeed, all the foreign Social Democrats made a good appearance ... Two or three hundred settled by some fine trees, hoisting their red flags among the smooth grey forks, of the pollard beeches, which was done with much cheering and more playing of the 'Marseillaise' ... The tables were formed in a square; and in the middle of the square were many barrels of beer and wine. Dancing began before long; and, once begun, it did not stop for four or five hours ... though there were no addresses at this outing, groups discussed the subject of capital ... Any one of the vanloads would have been quite a haul for the Russian or German police; but they looked innocent enough and happy enough. On the way back they halted many times, and sang revolutionary songs, and waved the red flags.

62

The English section of the Rose Street Club was largely made up of uncompromising young men of revolutionary views, often leaning strongly in the direction of anarchism. These young enthusiasts held open air meetings on Mile End Waste,<sup>63</sup> and under innocuous sounding titles got themselves invited to the more respectable clubs to lecture on revolutionary subjects.<sup>64</sup> They set up their own 'printery' in a Shoreditch slum, using a paving stone for an ink slab and printing equipment provided involuntarily by print firms

which employed its members.<sup>65</sup> When the German anarchist, Johann Most was imprisoned in the spring of 1881 for welcoming the assassination of the Russian Czar in his newspaper Freiheit, it was the 'English section' headed by Kitz who set up a 'Defence Committee'. Under this heading they appealed for funds, called demonstrations, and produced an English edition of Freiheit.<sup>66</sup> It was the 'English section' which began agitation around the question of emigration, soon to become an important early campaigning issue for the Democratic Federation.<sup>67</sup> 'By our persistent distribution of literature and championing of Socialism in lecture halls and schoolrooms,' said Kitz with some truth, 'we could fairly claim a large share in bringing about the awakened interest and enthusiasm for Socialism which prevailed at this time especially in East London.'<sup>68</sup>

The other group of ultra-radicals centred in Soho were those going by the name of the Manhood Suffrage League. This was the home of those individuals epitomised as the 'old Guard', for the most part radical artisans, who had managed to keep alive some of the traditions of the Chartist movement, and considered themselves the heirs of Bronterre O'Brien's National Reform League. Although never a numerically large group, the Manhood Suffrage League formed an important link between the last flicker of Chartism and the early glow of modern socialism, participating in most of the advanced agitations of the intervening period, some of them sitting on the General Council of the International Working Men's Association.<sup>69</sup>

For these individuals, the adoption of a socialist

programme based on the work of Marx, was not as bold a step as it was to be for many other radicals. They had for years adhered closely to the principles set forth by O'Brien, condemning landlords and capitalists, analysing the nature of exploitation in terms of 'surplus value', stressing the way the class struggle was at the centre of politics, and calling for working class political independence. True, when analysed their views are well short of a mature socialist position, they put much faith in the efficacy of currency reform,<sup>70</sup> and were essentially anti-monopolists. They divided society into productive and non-productive classes, and by their definition such archetypal capitalists of the industrial revolution as Arkwright and Wedgwood would have been firmly placed among the productive. Capitalists, in their analysis, consisted of a 'moneylord' class of 'Bankers, Brokers, Financiers, Fundholders, Stock Jobbers, Railway Speculators and Profitmongers.'<sup>71</sup>

A study of the lectures given by and addressed to the Manhood Suffrage League, suggests that socialism of various types, Owenite, Lassalleian, and that based on the Communist Manifesto, was a popular subject of debate in the period immediately before and after the formation of the Democratic Federation, and well before its adoption of a socialist position.<sup>72</sup> Soon after its inception the League debated: 'The Programme of the Democratic Federation: is it worthy of support?' The speaker reported favourably on its birth, and concluded 'that the programme of the Democratic Federation was capable of great results if honestly carried out by the promoters and leaders.' This met with 'loud applause', after which

an 'excellent discussion followed in general approval of the programme.'<sup>73</sup> Such people were to be among the earliest affiliates to the Federation, pushing it tentatively in a socialist direction well before the membership as a whole were sure it was the path they wished to tread.

Moving to the East End of London we find further important groups of ultra-radicals. They often worked in conjunction with the Soho activists, becoming an important centre of socialism in their own right, and only committing themselves formally to the Federation after it had adopted a socialist platform.

We first hear of the Homerton Social Democratic Club in May 1881.<sup>74</sup> They met at the 'Lamb and Flag' in Homerton and were addressed regularly by noted agitators such as Joseph Lane, Edwin Dunn, Andreas Sheu and Frank Kitz, on a variety of socialist and revolutionary topics, until an alleged police threat to the publican deprived them of a meeting place in February 1882.<sup>75</sup> Although the club continued in existence and is reported as having attended public demonstrations<sup>76</sup> and international congresses,<sup>77</sup> it seems fair to suggest that the membership went on to form a component part of the Labour Emancipation League, as its leading member Joseph Lane was largely preoccupied in organising East End workmen around the new organisation.

A further predecessor of the Labour Emancipation League was the Stratford Dialectical and Radical Club. This developed out of a split in the Stratford Branch of the National Secular Society led by Tom Lemon and Ambrose Barker in November 1880.<sup>78</sup> The origins of this club

exemplify a transition from secularism to militant political action over social issues which was to become more common as the decade progressed and the positive appeal of socialism won adherents from the essentially negative creed of secularism. Its secretary Ambrose Barker considered himself a revolutionary socialist from the time of the club's inception, and he proceeded to obtain the most revolutionary speakers he could find: Peter Kropotkin, Marie Le Compte, James and Charles Murray of the Manhood Suffrage League, Frank Kitz and Joseph Lane.<sup>79</sup> In the course of 1881 the club began holding open air meetings on Mile End Waste, and out of these meetings the Labour Emancipation League was formed.<sup>80</sup>

Much of the agitational and organisational work behind the League was the work of Joseph Lane.

He was a tireless propagandist and organiser in those days. He carried the Labour Emancipation League into other districts of East London. When Lane got a group of sympathisers together, he would secure a cheap meeting place for them, and put down a quarter's rent for it in advance, so that the new group might have a secure run for three months. He did this out of his wages as an ordinary carman, which at that time would probably be nearer 20s. than 30s. a week.<sup>81</sup>

The League soon adopted a nine point programme. The first six points were radical and democratic, very much in line with radical and Chartist traditions. The seventh point called for nationalisation of the land, mines and means of transit. But most significantly, points eight and nine declared:

8. As Labour is the foundation of all Wealth  
... the Regulation of Production must belong  
to Society, and the Wealth produced be

equitably shared by All.

9. As at present the Instruments of Labour and the Means of Employment are monopolised by the Capitalist Classes, which Monopoly is the cause of the misery and servitude of the Working People; the Emancipation of Labour requires the transformation of the said Instrument of Production and the Means of Employment into Collective Public Property, for the benefit of All Members of Society. 82

Thus, by the end of 1881 the Labour Emancipation League had established itself as a growing and influential socialist society, spreading from the East End of London.

For the next few years the League and the Democratic Federation were to work very closely together, agitating jointly on a variety of issues, with a number of members holding membership of both organisations. When the Federation produced its own newspaper in 1884, it would follow the reports of its own meetings with those of the League (which as often as not were addressed by Democratic Federation speakers). From at least June 1884, individual branches of the League began to affiliate themselves to the Federation,<sup>83</sup> and at the fourth annual conference of the Democratic Federation in August 1884, the motion was moved 'that the Labour Emancipation League should combine with the Democratic Federation under the title "Democratic Federation and Labour Emancipation League".' The title was disapproved of on account of its length, and the organisations combined under the title of the Social Democratic Federation.<sup>84</sup>

In Marylebone, the development of an ultra-radical and quasi-socialist presence was very similar to that in the East End and in Soho, and involved many of the same leading figures, notably Lane and Edwin Dunn. In fact

the overlap and interconnection between these various radical organisations is a point worth stressing.<sup>85</sup> The first of the Marylebone organisations was born of the same dissensions and divisions out of which the Rose Street Club developed. It consisted of those Marxists who had seceded from the club and established themselves in Tottenham Street, Marylebone; leaving Rose Street dominated by Lassalleans and anarchists.

At roughly the same time as this division was occurring early in 1880, Lane and Dunn set up a new branch of the Marylebone Radical Reform Association: Branch No. 3. This branch soon came into conflict with the parent body over the issue of land nationalisation, and seceded forming the Marylebone Radical Association. This group seems to have been the forerunner of the Marylebone Central Democratic Association which was an amalgamation of local radicals and some of the Marxists from Tottenham Street. The Association was formed before the Democratic Federation in the same year, and according to James Macdonald had a 'more advanced' programme than the Federation at this time.<sup>86</sup> However, as with the Labour Emancipation League, the bodies worked closely together in the following years, and once the Federation declared itself socialist, the Marylebone Association joined. By the autumn of 1883, said H.W. Lee, 'The strongest branch in London was the Marylebone Branch, formed by the Marylebone Central Democratic Association coming over in a body, and bringing with it a number of active workers, some of whom were used to speaking at public meetings.'<sup>87</sup>

Out of this metropolitan-ultra-radical milieu came



the most firmly committed adherents to the Democratic Federation. From these organisations came the type of radical who was unlikely to leave over the issue of the Tyrone Manifesto, if a member at this early juncture. Out of these organisations came the individuals most likely to move in a socialist direction. Perhaps more correctly, these were the people who were likely to move the Federation in a socialist direction, or as with the Labour Emancipation League and the Marylebone Central Democratic Association, to join the Democratic Federation as organisations, once it had formally committed itself to a socialist position. An important transitional manifesto, connecting these radical organisations with the Democratic Federation in a united socialist pronouncement, was issued in July 1883, one month after the Federation had adopted a socialist programme. This document, entitled, 'A Manifesto to the Working Men of the World, issued by the Social Democratic Associations in London', called for 'a new order of society in which everyone should produce according to his ability and consume according to his necessities'. It concluded:

In order to conquer this struggle of Labour against Capital we have to unite ourselves, we have to strengthen the bands of fraternal solidarity which bind us together. We have to continue the work of the International Association of Working Men. Therefore comrades we appeal to you once more in the famous call 'Working Men of all Countries Unite' to overthrow the present competitive state of society and establish a new one upon Equality, Liberty and Justice. 88

The manifesto was endorsed by the Federation, the 'German Club', an 'International Club' with a variety of sections (probably the Rose Street Club), the Labour Emancipation

League, the Stratford club, the Homerton Club and the Manhood Suffrage League; as well as the Patriotic Club and Chelsea Labour Association.

The above appraisal of working class ultra-radicalism and its tendencies in a socialist direction, lead us to question the common assertions about the Democratic Federation's adoption of socialism. Henry Collins for instance, tells us that, 'The Democratic Federation, out of which it [i.e. the SDF] developed included radical working men and intellectuals and it was the latter who, in the next two or three years gravitated towards socialism.'<sup>89</sup> The role of militant working class individuals, members of say the Labour Emancipation League or the Marylebone Central Democratic Association lead us to qualify such statements. These working class radicals brought with them a knowledge of practical political agitation, and an inherited tradition of varieties of socialist and quasi-socialist thought from Owen and O'Brien through to Fourier and Lassalle. The ensuing dialectic and the hammering out of a distinctly Marxist position, goes some way towards explaining the idiosyncratic brand of Marxism eventually adopted by the Federation.

It only remains to outline the dominant approach of the Federation towards radicalism and radical issues once it had firmly adopted a socialist stance. Two of the most important concerns central to radicalism in the 1870s had been secularism and republicanism. Secularism will be considered in detail in chapter three. As a socialist organisation we would expect the Federation to declare itself in favour of republicanism. The problem

arose with the nature of republican sentiment as it had developed in Britain in the seventies. For many republicans, the abolition of the monarchy and its assorted hangers-on, would lead to an end to many of the ills afflicting British society and a more equitable distribution of wealth. Socialists in the Federation were at pains to distance themselves from such a view. For them, the ills of society were more deep rooted and would continue under republic or monarchy. Socialists they declared 'care nothing for the forms of Government', and a regular theme of their propaganda was the poverty of republican France and unemployment in republican America.

The worn-out seamstresses of London, Vienna or Berlin, the ground-down factory hands of Stockport or Chemnitz, have little reason to envy their brethren and sisters in New York, Fall River or Chicago. The iron law of competition wages, the relentless working of economic oppression, is as bitter for the workers in the Republics of the United States, France and Switzerland as in any Monarchical country. Middle-class Republics simply cajole the workers out of their personal freedom, under pretence of full political liberty. Socialists can have no wish to establish such a republic in England.

90

That it was necessary for some individuals to make a break with their republican ideals before they could move over to socialism was made clear by H.W. Lee, the Federation's historian.

The outcome of a few months' enquiry and study convinced me that Socialism provided the outlet to the mental impasse in which I had found myself when convinced, against my will, that the most advanced form of political Radicalism, as Republicanism was supposed to be, had really no bearing on the social and economic condition of the people.

91

The politics of radicalism in general were criticised by Federation members from a variety of angles. Radicalism, it was felt, gave too much time to practical political concerns, and this prevented radicals from viewing problems in a broader perspective: 'The chief difficulty is due to the craving of Englishmen for something immediately "practical". This is really the least practical frame of mind possible: for it assumes that we mean to keep, and tinker with our present social system.'<sup>92</sup> Even when the Federation itself adopted a programme of practical measures, the well known 'stepping stones' or palliatives, it had to be made clear that these were only transitional and in no way constituted a giving way to radical demands for 'practical' measures.

Universal suffrage, annual parliaments, payment of members, equal electoral districts, and proportional representation, are useful only in so far they may help to put an end to the present daily confiscation of labour. For this object only shall we urge such political reforms. But social changes need social action, and for this also we shall never cease to agitate. 93

Radicalism was attacked frequently by Federation members, so much so, that certain individuals began to feel that it was being overdone, and expressed doubts over the value of such a policy. William Morris on leaving the SDF complained of 'the perpetual sneers at, and abuse of the radicals who, deluded as we must think them, are after all the men from whom our recruits must come.'<sup>94</sup> Morris himself, as a Federation member, had divided radicals into two distinct types, those he termed the 'mere Parliamentary Radical' who was 'really but a new Whig', and those he called 'the conscientious

social-reform Radical', or 'Genuine Radical'.<sup>95</sup> The latter he suggested, if he really required change and kept to his radical principles, would eventually 'have to undergo the shame of being called a Socialist.'<sup>96</sup> The radicals were seen as duped by their leaders, and once these had been 'unmasked', 'the Radical party, what of it was worth anything will be merged into the Party of the People, those whom we now call SOCIALISTS.'<sup>97</sup>

This belief that 'genuine radicals' would metamorphose into socialists was a strong one in the Federation's propaganda, but no holds were barred when attacking 'middle class Radicalism'. Even when some clubs adopted the Federation's programme they were condemned: 'Those Radicals who are ready to help this programme are already Socialists and should join the Democratic Federation.'<sup>98</sup> Socialists it was claimed could not possibly work with 'mere middle class Radicals' as they were 'just as much in favour of robbery of labour as any of the others.'<sup>99</sup> Ultimately, said Hyndman, radicals like Tories and Liberals, would give only as much as they were forced to give by 'pressure from without',

not one jot or one tittle more. Is a Radical landlord any more inclined to reduce his rents than a politician of another party? does a Radical capitalist grind less unpaid labour out of his wage slaves than his competitors who are not so politically 'advanced'? Industrial crises and starvation afflict the workers alike whichever party is in office. Economical anarchy is quite independent of mere politics. 100

The relationship between the Democratic Federation and radicals is complex and often contradictory, and this is especially the case once the Federation had adopted a

firm socialist stance. The reasons for this ambiguity are to be found both in the nature of radicalism, and in differences of opinion among the leading members of the Federation. We have seen how radical opinion could cover a wide variety of views, from keen support for the Liberal Government, through to firm opposition to it and sympathy with socialistic opinions. The problem for the Federation was one of attacking radicalism without alienating the potential radical convert to socialism.

This dilemma is captured in a letter sent to Justice in May 1884. This letter was from 'a skilled man', and 'a member of a Trade Union ... employed by one of the largest firms in the tricycle trade' in Coventry. He expected 'to get through this bad time without being discharged or having to work short hours', and considered himself fortunate, being 'pretty well off for a working man'. He felt, having read reports in Justice,

that we skilled men ought to pay more attention to what happens to our unskilled fellows. And I can't read about all those railway men being turned out by the Railway Company, and those miners discharged, and the chance of a reduction in wages or another strike at Blackburn, and the state of things in Glasgow, and all down the Clyde, without seeing that there is something wrong somewhere. 101

He was told in Justice, 'every week' that the capitalists were to blame, and did not deny it: 'But though I'm a worker myself, I think we are more to blame than the capitalists or the landlords either for that matter.' He had been through 'three of these bad times' and considered that 'though some of us learn to save a bit here and there and give up beer - though I'm no teetotaller myself - we never get together all the

workers in a town and talk the whole thing over as a class when times are good.' When times were bad, he suggested, employers would have the upper hand. 'What I mean is that you are right when you say that the workers ought to combine together as a class and try hard to see whether they can't get hold of the factories and the railways for themselves.'<sup>102</sup>

Here then was a working man moving towards a definite socialist position, but finding that old habits died hard. The conviction that things would always be the same, and the uncertainty and wavering at the threshold of socialism, unsure what to do next, come through clearly as he continued:

I've always voted for the Radicals myself, and I suppose I always shall, but it don't seem to me to make much difference to us workers which party is in. I'd as lief have an empty belly under Beaconsfield as under Gladstone. That's how I've got to look at it. We want a party of the people, it strikes me, that will just send these other parties out for a bit to try how they can get along on eight or ten shillings a week wages.  
103

The need to attract such class conscious working men into the socialist movement, and to replace the fatalism suggested by the phrase 'I've always voted for the Radicals myself, and I suppose I always shall' with an optimism for the future, and a commitment to do something himself rather than depend on radical leaders, was at the core of socialist propoganda in these years.

By 1884, the SDF had established itself as Britain's first marxist organisation. It had developed out of the British radical tradition and carried radical characteristics over into its new socialist phase,

agitating over issues which had been radical concerns in previous years. A careful consideration of the way the Federation analysed issues central to radical politics suggests that the most important point was not the continuity with the radical past, but the way socialists distinguished and separated themselves from anything tainted by radicalism.<sup>104</sup> This was the case with all of the concerns at the centre of radical politics in these years, Ireland, Land Reform, Republicanism, and Secularism. The more socialist the organisation became, the more critical it was of radicalism; radical panaceas were shown to be limited, and radical leaders condemned as frauds.

In the first issue of Justice an article by an American socialist was quoted with approval, and the central metaphor used was to be taken up by Hyndman in a later issue to criticise the habit English radicals had of demanding practical measures. 'All those who seek to improve existing social conditions', said the American,

under the name of Trade Unionists, knights of labour, self-styled individualists, Henry George burden shifters, free-soilers, Anti-monopolists, etc., etc., are in the same dilemma as the committee who were appointed in one of our Western States to devise ways and means to erect a new jail. After careful deliberation they passed these resolves:- 1st, That we erect a new jail. 2nd, That the new jail be built out of the material of the old one. 3rd, That the old jail stand until the new one is built. Finding upon reflection that this was impossible to accomplish they passed a fourth - Resolved, That we unanimously recommend that the old jail be whitewashed. Now that is exactly what we find these improvers engaged in doing; they desire a new jail or system built on the site of the old, with the old material, and while the old one stands; finding this impossible to do they all agree to whitewash it. We as Socialists propose to pull down, raze it from its lowest stone to



its highest pinnacle, scatter every vestige of the reeking filth that held together the rotten structure before the purifying winds of a clearer atmosphere. 105

Socialism was, above all, to be distinguished from radical schemes of improvement.

Samuel Bennett had been one of the editors of The Radical, the journal which had been at the centre of advanced radical politics in 1881-2. In 1884 he was to write an article for Justice entitled 'Radicalism is Dead or Damned: Long Live Social Democracy'. 'Hitherto', he said, 'we have been a disjointed army of Advanced Liberals, Radicals, Land Nationalisers, Republicans. Now for the first time, there seems a chance of a small united phalanx being formed under the banner of Socialism.'<sup>106</sup> The rest of this work will be concerned with the nature of that socialism.

FOOTNOTES

1. K. Marx and F. Engels, The Communist Manifesto (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.78.
2. E.P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', The Poverty of Theory (London, 1978), p.71.
3. Thomas Cooper, cited in H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy in Britain (London, 1935), p.38. For similar sentiments, see Engels' claim that '... for nearly a quarter of a century the working class of England has contented itself with forming, as it were, the tail of the "Great Liberal Party" and his talk in 1890 of 'the English Proletariat, rousing itself from forty years of slumber'. K. Marx and F. Engels, On Britain (Moscow, 1962), pp.517, 521. For interpretations emphasising the working class political activity of these years, see Royden Harrison, Before the Socialists (London, 1965), and John Saville, 'The Background to the Revival of Socialism in the England', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, No.11, (Autumn 1965).
4. John Rae, 'Social Philosophy', The Contemporary Review, Vol.45, (February 1884), p.295.
5. Herbert Spencer, 'The Coming Slavery', The Contemporary Review, Vol.XLV, (April 1884), pp.476, 478, 480.
6. 'Socialism in England', Quarterly Review, Vol.156 (1883), No.312, p.359. The banner in all probability belonged to the Labour Emancipation League, whose programme contained this pronouncement. Although the League worked closely with the Democratic Federation, they did not affiliate technically until July 1884; see below, and Justice, 26 July 1984, p.6.
7. Economist, (22 April 1848), quoted by John Saville, 'The Background to the Industrial Remuneration Conference of 1885', Introduction to Industrial Remuneration Conference (1885) (New York, 1968), p.9.
8. Quoted by John Saville, *ibid.* p.13.
9. For a summary of these ideas, see Melvin Richter, The Politics of Conscience: T.H. Green and His Age (London, 1968); Helen Lynd, England in the Eighteen-Eighties (London, 1968).
10. Helen Lynd, England, chapter XI.
11. John Stuart Mill, 'Chapters on Socialism', Fortnightly Review, Vol.XXV, New Series, (1 February 1879), p.219.
12. The most important of these 'Chapters on Socialism'

for Mill's own views is the third instalment, *ibid.*, (1 April 1879).

13. *ibid.*, (1 April 1879), p.530.
14. The memory of the impact of these articles remained strong in the mind of William Morris, who claimed many years later that they 'put the finishing touches to my conversion to Socialism' (somewhat oddly given the mild nature of the articles - though Morris seemed aware of this). William Morris in How I Became a Socialist (London, [1902]), p.18.
15. Secular Review, (8 May 1880), quoted by Edward Royle, Radicals, Secularists and Republicans (Manchester, 1980), p.218.
16. The Radical, 1 April 1882, pp.5-6.
17. Quoted by Helen Lynd, England, p.141.
18. The Radical, 4 December 1880, p.1
19. *ibid.*, 21 January 1882, p.2.
20. *ibid.*, 17 June 1882, p.2.
21. Justice, 19 January 1884, p.2.
22. They were to continue to see this as a major source of support. 'We have ... to convince and convert the thinking men and women,' said Edward Aveling in the 1890s. 'Of these the great majority are at present Radicals. It is, therefore, to the Radical men and women that we have especially to appeal ... The hope, I say, of Socialism in this country is in the winning over to it of the advanced Radicals.' Edward Aveling, Socialism and Radicalism (London, [1897]), p.1.
23. The Radical, 13 August 1881, p.4.
24. John Saville, 'Henry George and the British Labour Movement', Science and Society, Vol.XXIV, No.4, (Fall 1960), *passim*. It is notable that Hyndman reprinted Spence's pamphlet on land nationalisation in 1882, adding his own introduction.
25. W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism and the Beginnings of the New Socialist Movement in Britain 1870-1885' (PhD., London, 1977), p.115.
26. F.S.L. Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine (London, 1973), p.170.
27. T.W. Heyck, The Dimensions of British Radicalism (Urbana, 1974), p.53ff.
28. The most comprehensive history of The Radical, its outlook, politics and personnel, is to be found in W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', pp.126-50. See also F.W. Soutter, Recollections of a Labour Pioneer

- (London, 1923), p.99ff; J. Morrison Davidson, The Annals of Toil (London, 1899), p.393.
29. The Radical, 1 April 1882, pp.5-6; John E. Williams and the Early History of the Social-Democratic Federation (London, 1886).
  30. T.W. Heyck, Dimensions, p.66.
  31. The newly formed Liverpool branch of the Democratic Federation invited the imprisoned Parnell to Liverpool, and was in favour of asking him to contest the next election there. The Radical, 1 April 1882, p.6.
  32. The Radical, 1 April, 1882, p.5.
  33. *ibid.*, 17 June 1882, p.2; the far from wholly sympathetic Weekly Dispatch estimated 50,000 present. W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', p.263.
  34. The Radical, 17 June 1882, p.2.
  35. *ibid.*
  36. *ibid.*
  37. J. Morrison Davidson, Annals, p.395-6.
  38. John Saville, 'Henry George', p.331.
  39. See Helen Lynd, England, p.142, where prominent and influential readers are listed and Chamberlain quoted saying that it was being 'eagerly read by the working classes'.
  40. Quoted *ibid.*, p.143.
  41. Henry George, Progress and Poverty (London, 1883).
  42. Justice, 5 April 1884, p.4.
  43. Tom Mann, Memoirs (London, 1923), p.27.
  44. Quoted by E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (London, 1955), p.339.
  45. J.A. Hobson, 'The Influence of Henry George in England', Fortnightly Review, Vol.LXII, New Series, (1 December 1897), pp.836-7.
  46. E.Eldon Barry, Nationalisation in British Politics (London, 1965), p.58.
  47. He specifically rejects nationalisation in his book. Henry George, Progress and Poverty, pp.287-8.
  48. Elwood P. Lawrence, Henry George in the British Isles (Michigan, 1957), p.78.
  49. The Radical, 25 March 1882. He was also reported as saying this in the Glasgow Herald, 21 March 1882,

- see Elwood P. Lawrence, Henry George, p.78.
50. The Radical, 15 April 1882, p.5.
  51. The Radical, 29 April 1882, p.3.
  52. Justice, 9 February 1884, p.3; H.M. Hyndman, The Record of an Adventurous Life (London, 1911), p.291; Hyndman to George, 14 March [1883] Henry George Correspondence.
  53. 'Socialism and Rent-Appropriation. A dialogue', The Nineteenth Century, Vol.XVII, (1885), p.374.
  54. Justice, 9 August 1884, p.6.
  55. C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism (London, 1961), pp.46-7.
  56. Hyndman to Helen Taylor, 2 October 1881, Mill-Taylor Correspondence, Vol.XVIII, Item 28.
  57. W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', pp.257-8.
  58. The following quotations from the Weekly Dispatch of September and October 1881 are from W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', pp.258-9, as is the list of clubs seceding.
  59. The most comprehensive account of this milieu is to be found in W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism' to whose account I am heavily indebted. See also Stan Shipley, Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London (London, 1983).
  60. Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement (London, 1965), pp.6-18.
  61. F. Kitz, 'Recollections and Reflections', Freedom, (March 1912), p.18.
  62. Quoted in The Radical, 9 July 1881.
  63. F. Kitz, Freedom, February 1912.
  64. ibid, April 1912. 'We became for a time the Local Rights Association for Rental and Sanitary Reform', and had their early meetings reported in the Daily Chronicle, ibid., April 1912.
  65. ibid., April 1912.
  66. ibid., March 1912; letter from Freiheit Defence Committee to Helen Taylor, Mill-Taylor Correspondence, Vol.XVIII, Item 110. For an account of the Freiheit prosecution see Bernard Porter, 'The Freiheit Prosecutions, 1881-1882', The Historical Journal, 23, 4, (1980).
  67. W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', pp.206-10.
  68. Freedom, April 1912.

69. Marx considered them a bulwark against the moderate trade unionists. Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, Karl Marx, pp.249-50.
70. Marx dismissed this as 'currency quackery'. Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, Karl Marx, p.249.
71. Quoted by W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', p.46. For analyses of O'Brienism and its similarities, differences and connections with Marxist socialism, see ibid., Ch.II; Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, Karl Marx, especially pp.249-55, 270, and Alfred Plummer, Bronterre (London, 1971), pp.249-53.
72. W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', pp.193-8.
73. The Radical, 25 June 1881, p.6.
74. ibid., 14 May 1881.
75. ibid., 4 February 1882. The Radical continued to advertise the club in its lecture diary after this date, but in place of the proposed lecture stated: 'Shut by order of the police.' Lane tried to get Joseph Cowen the Newcastle Radical M.P. to take up the issue, but it would seem was unable to produce concrete evidence. Cowen to Lane, 24 February 1882, John Burns Papers, B.M.Add.MSS.46,345.
76. The Radical, 13 May 1882.
77. W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', p.218.
78. ibid., p.221.
79. ibid., p.223.
80. H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy, p.50.
81. ibid.
82. Quoted in E.P. Thompson, William Morris, pp.331-2.
83. See Justice, 28 June 1884, p.6, where the Bethnal Green Branch decided to affiliate. The Tottenham Branch affiliated a month later, Justice, 26 July 1884, p.6.
84. Justice, 9 August 1884, p.7.
85. See W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', pp.186-7 where he lists the lectures exchanged between these various bodies.
86. James Macdonald in How I became a Socialist, p.61.
87. H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy, p.55.
88. The manifesto is reprinted in the Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, No.14, (Spring 1967); H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy, p.53.

89. Henry Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', Asa Briggs and John Saville, (eds.), Essays in Labour History 1886-1923 (London, 1971), pp.47-8.
90. H.M. Hyndman, 'Our Republic', Justice, 14 June 1884, p.4.
91. H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy, p.31.
92. H.M. Hyndman, 'Socialism and Politics', Justice, 15 March 1884, p.4.
93. Justice, 19 January 1884, p.4.
94. Morris to Robert Thompson, 1 January 1885, Philip Henderson, The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends (London, 1950), p.228.
95. Justice, 1 March 1884, p.4.
96. *ibid.*
97. *ibid.*, 12 July 1884, pp.4-5.
98. *ibid.*, 31 May 1884, p.5.
99. *ibid.*
100. *ibid.*, 28 June 1884, p.4.
101. *ibid.*, 24 May 1884, p.3.
102. *ibid.*
103. *ibid.*
104. For an analysis suggesting that continuity was the most significant feature, see W.E. Lincoln, 'Popular Radicalism', especially Chapter VIII.
105. Justice, 19 January 1884, p.6. Hyndman talks of whitewashing the gaol in Justice, 15 March 1884, p.4.
106. *ibid.*, 14 June 1884, p.2.

## Chapter 2

### ECONOMICS

Outside the labour movement the publication of Marx's economic works had not generated much excitement in Britain in the years preceding the foundation of the Democratic Federation. Marx did not prove influential with British economists in the way he had done among continental intellectuals. Economic theory in England had been experiencing important changes in its nature since the 1870s. Political economy was being abandoned for a new style economics; Jevons, Cairnes, Sidgwick, Marshall and others were busily refining a new orthodoxy in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Only after Marx's work was perceived to have influenced events on the continent did the British intelligentsia begin to consider Marx's work in a serious light.<sup>1</sup>

The British labour movement was not renowned for its emphasis on economic theory. Socialists like Keir Hardie would often cite Marx, and hold to a theory of exploitation of sorts as the basis of their politics.<sup>2</sup> ILP writers and propagandists would elaborate upon this giving graphic descriptions of the conditions of workers under capitalism, but there was often a keenness to stress that their socialism involved more than just economic theory: 'no doubt not every ILP member would pass an examination in "Das Capital" [sic], but at least they knew that "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" were the true laws of life.'<sup>3</sup> A firm foundation in economic theory was uncommon outside the SDF and the Fabian



Society, and this lack of emphasis was felt to be somehow correct. British workers were believed to be unresponsive to appeals based on elaborate formulations, it was much better to appeal to an instinctive sense of unfairness and gut reactions to their everyday experiences. 'The great bulk of unconscious Socialism of the English voter and statesman has been based merely upon empirical observation and has certainly not been affected by any notion of "surplus value".'<sup>4</sup> Pragmatic results were what counted not airy speculations about the nature of the economy and society: 'the Trade Union official who did something towards adding a shilling to the wage and to put more food upon the table of the worker', said Ben Tillet, 'was doing a greater work than sentimental men talking about theories.'<sup>5</sup>

On questions of economic theory the SDF is usually regarded by historians, as it was by many contemporaries, as narrow and dogmatic, and particular prominence is given to the fact that they clung to Ferdinand Lassalle's concept of the iron law of wages. They are also said to have subscribed to a *theory of immiseration* which involved the inevitable collapse of capitalism. The limitations in its understanding of socialist theory are said to have led to a lack of sympathy with the main developments in the British labour movement. In particular they are deemed to have remained critical of trade unions and strikes, as well as being unable to relate to working class demands and embryonic attempts at working class organisation.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter the validity of this view of the SDF will be considered in the course of a detailed analysis of their economic

theory, and the practical implications will be studied in later chapters. The importance of value and surplus value will be analysed in the light of the SDF's pronouncements, the relevance of the 'iron law of wages', and finally their understanding of the process of capitalist production as it developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At first, before they had established a sense of their own identity, there were problems within the SDF with those individuals who carried over conceptions from their radical past. Old Chartists like Charles and James Murray were unlikely to drop the ideas they had taken from Bronterre O'Brien and had defended for a quarter of a century. They too had a theory of exploitation based on surplus value, and although it was *not derived from Marx*, this did not prove problematic.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty arose over their ideas on currency. In a letter to Helen Taylor in 1881 Hyndman said that 'Charles Murray and all the old '48 men are heartily with us', but he continued, 'They have queer ideas on the currency and are fanatical on one or two points.'<sup>8</sup> Likewise W.S. Sanders speaking of his time in the SDF told of the old Chartist who brought currency into every discussion; it was he said, his King Charles' head.<sup>9</sup> This dilemma however proved to be short-lived, the old Chartists were not as active or as thick on the ground as they had been.

From early in the organisation's existence, economic theory was a crucial aspect of their politics. They were eager to stress the scientific nature of their socialism and its superiority over political economy. In one of the first issues of Justice, Edward Aveling spoke

of the 'school of Karl Marx' and said that 'All the leading members of the Democratic Federation are of his school, i.e., the school of scientific Socialism'.<sup>10</sup> Despite this it should be noted that throughout their existence there was a healthy lack of respect for Marx the man, while they protected his ideas from all attackers. A phrase that occurs again and again in SDF literature is that Marx was not a socialist Pope. He should not it was stressed, be placed on a pedestal.<sup>11</sup> But this lack of reverence rarely extended to Marx's work, and this is an important feature distinguishing the SDF from its major rival the ILP, and from the Fabian Society. One member, John E. Ellam said in 1902 that,

If the analysis by Marx of capitalist production be not scientifically correct, if his diagnosis and prognosis can be proved unsound, ... then Socialism has no justification in social fact. It becomes merely a nebulous and impractical theory, a sentimental dream, a beautiful but utterly extra-mundane and unattainable ideal. With too many people, I believe, Socialism is merely a psychic reaction from the sordidness of modern life, a simple matter of sentiment, an enthusiasm unsupported by knowledge or reasoned conviction. <sup>12</sup>

He was defending the SDF from ILP critics who had declared that they 'worry themselves with the mechanical formulae of economics'.<sup>13</sup> The study of Marx was for Ellam essential, 'Karl Marx, I am afraid, is only known to many of our Socialists as a German person who wrote a ponderous work called "Capital", which has since been superseded by "Merrie England" and "Britain For the British"'.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein another member, W.G. Veals asked in 1907,

What is it that every young member of the

Social-Democratic Federation is urged to study if possible more than anything else? More's 'Utopia,' Bellamy's 'Looking Backward' or Morris's 'News from Nowhere'? Nothing of the sort! He is advised to get a knowledge of political economy, the economic laws which govern the present system; and up and down this country at the present time scores of economic and industrial history classes, under Socialist tuition, are quietly ... striving and studying to be well informed on what has been falsely termed the 'dismal science.' 15

The 1895 annual conference discussed a proposal that any SDF member wishing to stand for public office should have to pass an examination in Socialist economics. This was objected to as being impractical, but the executive incorporated the idea into that year's revised rules.<sup>16</sup> The rule was later dropped, suggesting the critics were correct, but the fact that it was tried indicates the centrality of economic knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Basing their socialism on economic theory, it was never easy to get across to working class audiences, and some members were not keen on popularising such an important aspect of their socialism. Henry Lee, the Secretary of the SDF recalled a series of lectures by Edward Aveling on 'Economics' given to the Westminster branch. These took place in a working class district and on the first night the hall was packed.

Instead of giving a popular address on political economy from a Socialist point of view, Aveling treated the audience like scholars at school. He called upon them to take notes of his lecture that he might go over points of it the following week ... People began stealthily to creep out of the hall, and less than half those who came in remained till the end of the lecture. I forget if we were able to go through all of the four lectures, but I know that it took us weeks of ordinary Socialist addresses to get back even moderate audiences. 18

It is possible, despite Lee's strictures to understand Aveling's plight; it was a difficult area both to popularise and treat adequately.

A theory of value was central to the SDF's socialism. Initially this took the form of the statement in Socialism Made Plain in 1883 that 'All wealth is due to labour; therefore to the labourers all wealth is due.'<sup>19</sup> But this was soon replaced by more elaborate formulations of a labour theory of value, and in later years members spent much of their time attacking this popular conception of their value theory and the idea that it was upon this expression that their theory rested.<sup>20</sup> As with Marx, their analysis began with a commodity. The distinction was made between use value or utility, and exchange value. All commodities had use value but it was not a suitable measure of exchange. Exchange value was then analysed and the conclusion reached that 'exchange value - means nothing more than the differential amount of labour that they severally embody.'<sup>21</sup>

In the course of 1884, George Bernard Shaw, although not a member, became close to the SDF and at one point was very near to joining.<sup>22</sup> At this time he had become very interested in economic questions and became something of a spokesman on economic affairs, defending Marx at socialist meetings and addressing SDF branches on economic questions. His own views in this area at the time were put into the mouth of Sidney Trefusis, the wealthy 'unsocial socialist' in his novel of that name, who in the midst of a chase and whilst expounding on the nature of his undying love to his young wife, outlined at

some length the origins of his wealth in the sweat of others.<sup>23</sup>

The theory of value, and through it the whole basis of the SDF's socialism in Marx's work, was soon to come in for severe criticism. Two leading members J.L. Joynes and E. Belfort Bax were editors of the journal To-Day, and in October 1884 they published an article by the Reverend Philip H. Wicksteed entitled 'Das Kapital. A Criticism'.<sup>24</sup> This began a dispute that was to divide the British socialist movement along theoretical lines. Wicksteed followed Marx in his analysis of the nature of commodities, and accepted the importance of exchange value. He agreed with Marx that 'things which are exchangeable must be dissimilar in quality, but yet they must have some common measure, by reduction to which the equivalent portions of each will be seen to be identical in quantity.'<sup>25</sup> To arrive at this common something Marx had set aside the physical properties of the product. All that was then left was that products had the property of being products of labour, but it had to be labour with no specific character or direction 'abstract and indifferent human labour.' Wicksteed accepted Marx's analysis this far and then noticed the statement that 'the labour does not count unless it is useful.' In making this statement, Wicksteed claimed that Marx had surrendered the whole of his previous analysis. If the commodity remained useful he argued, it could not be supposed to have been stripped of abstract utility. Therefore he said, 'it is not true that "nothing remains to them but the one attribute of being products of labour ... ["], for the attribute of being useful also remains

to them.<sup>26</sup> He went on to elaborate in detail the usefulness of abstract utility as the 'common something' for which commodities exchange. Whilst accepting that there was a relationship between exchange value and the amount of labour embodied in commodities, he argued that this was merely a coincidence, which he accounted for by recourse to Jevons' 'law of indifference' and the 'law of the variation of utility'. With regard to manufactured articles his conclusion was that 'it is the force of demand at the margin of supply which determines the exchange value of the whole.'<sup>27</sup> He went on to praise the later part of Capital, but said that the labour theory of value which he had rejected was the keystone to Marx's theory of surplus value and rendered it invalid.

The publication of this article marked the beginning of a controversy among British socialists. Initially it would seem that no-one in the SDF felt competent to reply to Wicksteed's attack. The reply when it came a few months later was from Shaw. Shaw quibbled over various points in Wicksteed's analysis, but he did not attempt to defend Marx. He wrote, he said, 'partly to draw further attention to a controversy which seems to me of great interest because it is one on which Socialists, without at all ceasing to be Socialists, are sure to divide very soon'<sup>28</sup> Wicksteed replied to Shaw's criticisms in a later issue of To-Day, and Shaw in line with his own prediction of ensuing division accepted Wicksteed's arguments and parted from his erstwhile SDF allies.<sup>29</sup> The Fabians following Shaw were to accept the Jevonian analysis and develop their own theory of rent to account for exploitation and fill out the gap left in

their analysis.<sup>30</sup>

For London socialists interested in this question, the issues were hammered out at the meetings of the Hampstead Historic Club, which Shaw described as a 'Marxist reading party', held at the house of the Fabian, Arthur Wilson. Initially when sides were taken, Shaw had lined up with Bax in defence of the 'Marxian value theory'. In changing sides, Shaw left Bax isolated and the controversy 'raged ... until Bax shook the dust of the heath off his boots.'<sup>31</sup> Having no one left to defend the 'untenable position' adopted by Bax, the Historic Club could get on with its study of Capital in peace; and it,

having had enough of impassioned disputes as to whether the value of Mrs. Wilson's vases was fixed by the labour socially necessary to produce them, by their cost of production on the margin of cultivation, or by the 'final utility' of the existing stock of vases, insisted on passing to the later chapters and dropping the subject. 32

The debate continued over the next few years in the pages of To-day, but the journal having passed into Fabian hands, most contributors were either marginalists or those trying to find a common ground between Marxists and their critics. Shaw summed up the contents of the debate succinctly in characteristic style in the course of a dispute with Hyndman (although his belief that he defended Marx is exaggerated).

It began by Wicksteed saying that Marx was wrong and Jevons right, whereupon I contended that Marx was right and Wicksteed wrong, to which Wicksteed replied that I was wrong and Jevons right, Wallas coming in after a long interval with the suggestion that Marx and Jevons were equally right, and provoking Hyndman to declare that not only Wicksteed,



myself and Wallas, but the whole of the English race save himself and two others are wrong. 33

This division and the loss of a spokesman on economic questions in the person of Shaw forced the SDF to fall back on its own resources. By 1889 Hyndman was writing to Shaw suggesting that he should speak to the Bermondsey branch as the workers there had become 'quite capable of dealing with your arguments'. On the envelope Shaw wrote '1889 H M Hyndman 2 Sept Thinks Bermondsey will be able to deal with me on the value theory.'<sup>34</sup>

Hyndman clashed with Shaw in the pages of To-Day during 1889 and in doing so improved his own understanding of Marx's value theory. Hyndman believed Marx's theory to be the same as that of earlier political economists; Shaw however directed him to the second volume of Capital, in particular Engels' preface where he had asserted the uniqueness of Marx's theory and pointed to the limitations of its elaboration in volume one. Two months later Hyndman too was emphasising the originality of Marx's theory of value, stressing how it was an improvement on those of Smith and Ricardo.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of 1889 Hyndman had begun to sort out his position with regard to value. He stressed the role of socially necessary labour and had dismissed Jevons' views as an 'elaborate juggle', '"final utility" is nothing but supply and demand under a new name'.<sup>36</sup> He quoted in his support a section from the first volume of Capital, and reached the conclusion that

The law of the equivalence of the quantity of socially necessary labour embodied in two commodities when they exchange explains the complicated phenomena of our modern

Capitalist Society. The so-called theory of 'final utility' simply makes confusion worse confounded for those who attempt to follow it out. 37

Belfort Bax too, argued the case for labour embodied in commodities, but he took the arguments of the final utility theorists a little more seriously. He pointed out that many of the examples cited by these individuals were 'extra-economic' in that they took place outside of the realms of exchange. Further, he suggested that the oft cited examples of such things as rare paintings rested upon 'the physiological peculiarities of the buyer' and caprice, fashion and accidents placed these 'outside economics'.<sup>38</sup>

Hyndman's resting point in the elaboration of these themes came in two separate lectures he delivered in 1893 and 1894 - one to SDF members as a part of a series of lectures on the economics of socialism, and the other a lecture delivered to the Political Economy Circle of the National Liberal Club. The latter was an explicit attack on marginalism entitled 'The Final Futility of Final Utility'; both were reprinted in his book The Economics of Socialism.

In his lecture on value, Hyndman gave a detailed exposition of the labour theory of value, tracing its historical development and outlining the characteristics of labour, of labour power, different types of labour embodied in commodities, and the various properties of commodities. He analysed the nature of gold and silver as commodities and the relationship between money and other commodities. On price he came to the conclusion that 'The fluctuations of price due to accidental

conditions of the market average themselves over long periods, and the truth of the social labour theory of value manifests itself even through these very perturbations.<sup>39</sup> Value, he said, was

measured by the quantity of simple, abstract, necessary social human labour embodied in the commodities exchanged: this social human labour comes behind the individual producers, whatever their natural advantages or disadvantages, their skill or lack of skill, and estimates the value of their respective products in terms of other commodities. 40

This concept of simple, abstract, necessary social human labour was to be a key one in SDF works of the following years.<sup>41</sup>

The lecture to the National Liberal Club originated in a request from J.H. Levy, the Secretary of the Political Economy Circle. Levy sent invitations to leading professors of political economy along with proofs of the lecture. Hyndman was not too pleased by this action, but was able to take heart from the fact that none of them turned up: 'neither Professor Foxwell nor Professor Wicksteed, neither Professor Marshall nor Professor Sidney Webb would put in an appearance'<sup>42</sup>, the implication<sup>being</sup> that they were afraid to do so. In this lecture he repeated his previous criticisms of the Jevonian case, but stressed a statement of Jevons' that 'value is proportional to cost of production'. He suggested that if Jevons had read German and had seen Marx's exposition of this problem he would have realised the inadequacy of his argument. He accused him of not understanding the nature of labour and the distinction between labour and labour power. Jevons he concluded was confused on the question of value and this led him to

other confusions. In particular Hyndman latched onto the sun-spot theory he used to explain crises, and concluded

The Final Futility of Final Utility is conclusively proved by the utter incapacity of any thorough-going Jevonian to give a reasoning explanation of the daily working of the capitalist system of production and exchange. 43

He elaborated further on his belief that political economists had difficulties in understanding Marx's concepts in a letter he sent to the American socialist Algie M. Simons in 1902.

A man can be a very clever fellow and yet fail in those qualities of mind which are needed to get a full meaning of Marx. I honestly think many of our Professors of political economy, such men as Ely and Marshall for example, have never been able, if ever they have tried, to follow his abstract reasoning and refined distinctions. I have, indeed, been greatly surprised at discovering, not now and then but frequently, that men whom I should have set down as of considerable calibre have floundered absolutely in dealing with his theories. The whole Jevonian school is not actually dishonest nor entirely foolish. Yet look at the nonsense they all write when attempting to crush Marx. 44

Hyndman's views formed the foundation for SDF analyses on the question of value in the following years. It mainly arose where critics raised the issue of final utility, or questioned in some other way labour as a source of value, replacing it with the inventor, machinery, and the capitalist director as the creators of value.

The most important aspect of the SDF's socialism was the theory of surplus value which for them rested upon this theory of value. One of the earliest and simplest expositions of it was contained in J.L. Joynes' The Socialist Catechism which first appeared as articles

in Justice:

What do you mean by the word 'exploit'?

To exploit is to get more than one gives in a bargain.

To what extent is the exploitation of the labourers commonly carried?

The employers give them a bare subsistence, and take from them all the rest of the fruits of their labour.

What is the difference between the two called?

Surplus-value.

What proportion expresses its amount?

The proportion between the two or three hours of necessary labour, and the ordinary ten, twelve, or more hours' work.

What do you mean by necessary labour?

That which would feed and clothe and keep in comfort the nation if all took their part in performing it.

Is any individual employer responsible for the exploitation of the labourers?

No, the blame applies to the whole class. Individual employers may be ruined, but the employing class continue to appropriate surplus-value.

How do you account for this?

Because competition is as keen among the capitalists as among the labourers.

How does it act with them?

It determines the division of the spoil, different sets of people struggling to get a share in the surplus-value.

How does this competition above affect the labourers below?

It does not affect them at all. It is assumed that the plunder is to be shared among the 'upper classes,' and the only question is in what proportion this shall be done.

How do the upper classes label this plunder?

By many names, such as rent, brokerage, fees, profits, wages of superintendence, reward of abstinence, insurance against risk, but above all, interest on capital.

Are all these deducted from the labourers' earnings?

There is no other fund from which they could possibly come.

Is surplus-value paid for at all?

By no means. It is the produce of unpaid labour, and is simply taken for nothing, just as a thief accumulates his stolen goods. 45

In the hands of other theorists, and in less popularly conceived works, the theory was more elaborate. After pointing to abstract labour as the source of value,

it usually began with commodity exchange and the development of money. Then the circulation of commodities was described in the formula Capital-Money-Capital and out of this the development of the process represented by Money-Capital-Money. The only purpose of such a transaction it was argued, was to increase the quantity of money, and the increment produced was surplus value. As there was nothing in the realm of exchange to explain where this surplus value came from they moved into the realm of production. The solution to the problem was discovered to be that labour, otherwise known as variable capital, produced value in the course of production unlike any other element in the productive process. But this variable capital was bought on the market as 'labour force' (from the nineties this is referred to as labour power) the productive potential of human beings paid for with wages, and reproduced its own value in the first few hours of production. This 'labour force' however was purchased for a whole day in which it continued to produce value for the capitalist - hence surplus value. Explanations of this process were of course heavily dependent on the first volume of Capital and large chunks of this were usually quoted. The different types of surplus value were often elaborated and the role of machinery outlined in producing relative rather than absolute surplus value.<sup>46</sup>

It is necessary here, to say something about the 'iron law of wages' as this has been represented by historians as a key component of the SDF's economic theory and an important limitation. What was the 'iron law of wages'? It was expressed by Lassalle as follows:

The iron economic law which determines the reward for labour is that the average wage will always remain at the level of basic living standards just essential for mere existence and reproduction. It can fall neither below this nor rise above it because if it did so, it would cause either an increase in the working population and over-supply of hands, or a fall in reproduction and emigration. 47

This law was adopted by Lassalle's followers in Germany and when they united with the Social Democrats at the Gotha Congress it was incorporated into the programme of the united party. The inclusion of this law was attacked strongly by Marx in his Critique of the Gotha Programme. Marx disapproved of it because it rested upon Malthus' theory of population, and as such governed not only the system of wage labour, but every social system - socialists could not abolish poverty given this law, as it had its basis in nature. More significantly, he objected to it because it was incompatible with his own theory of wages. Wages were what he called 'a masked form' for the value of labour power. Through the system of wage labour the worker was given permission to work for his subsistence only so long as he worked a certain period free for the capitalist.<sup>48</sup>

But what has all this to do with the SDF? Henry Collins, in an article in the second volume of Briggs and Saville's Essays in Labour History, entitled 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', highlighted the iron law as an important component of the SDF's socialism. He found it in Joynes' Socialist Catechism in 1884, and noted that when the Catechism was revised and updated by Bax and Harry Quelch in 1901 it was restated, with 'even more emphasis', and he quoted them: 'the "Iron

Law of Wages" ... stands as firmly today as when stated by Lassalle.' He continued

It was not as though the leaders of the S.D.F. were exercising their right to disagree with Marx's views; they were simply unaware of them, and F.C. Watts, writing in the theoretical journal of the S.D.F. as late as September 1903, drew members' attention to Marx's theory, which was that, while market forces tended to pull wages down to subsistence, ideas of what constituted subsistence depended on custom and expectation and could be modified, at least up to a point, by trade-union pressure. This story seems to suggest a rather low level of theoretical alertness, all the more unfortunate in a party which laid such stress on theory. 49

This idea was linked to what he saw as the SDF's views on the general uselessness of trade unions and strikes.

The iron law was present in some of the SDF's earliest socialist works. It was referred to in the first popular summary of socialist principles, Joynes' Socialist Catechism and was mentioned in Hyndman's The Historical Basis of Socialism in 1883. It is notable though, that in the latter work mention of the concept was accompanied by a footnote about labourers in different areas and in other countries receiving disparate amounts.<sup>50</sup> In March 1884, there was an article in Justice by Hyndman entitled 'The Iron Law of Wages'. Here he pointed to the role of custom and expectation: 'An English labourer for instance even when paid his worst gets a much higher money wage than the Indian labourer or even than an Italian or Russian labourer.'<sup>51</sup> He pointed out how certain circumstances could raise the labourer's standard of life and others lower it, particularly competition from other workers. The skilled he said, would be able to combine against this, but they



would have little chance against employers during bad times. His main point was that there was little chance for trade unionists and their fellow labourers until the payment of wages was put to an end altogether and they got the full share of the product of their labour. As in the works of Marx it was the system of wage labour which was at fault, but despite this Hyndman clung to the concept of an iron law of wages.

From this it can be suggested that despite the use of this term iron law of wages, the SDF accepted Marx's theory, which to repeat the words of Henry Collins was 'that, while market forces tended to pull wages down to subsistence, ideas of what constituted subsistence depended on custom and expectation and could be modified, at least up to a point, by trade-union pressure.'<sup>52</sup> SDFers called this pull of market forces the iron law of wages, but they always modified it in some way. As Harry Quelch put it in his lecture 'Economics of Labour' published in 1893, 'The British workman is doubtless the finest fellow on the face of the earth, as his pastors and masters tell him when they want to keep him contented; but he cannot do twelve times as much work as the Chinaman. Yet the latter will work for fourpence a day, while the former wants four shillings.'<sup>53</sup> The British worker he said would only get fourpence a day if he too could be taught to live on as little. However, 'There is, of course, a constant effort on the part of workmen to force wages above this subsistence level, and frequently they do rise above it; but at the same time, as with all other commodities, competition is constantly operating to force down the price of labour - wages - to

its normal level.<sup>54</sup> He went on to talk of 'the working of this economic law,' which he called 'this "iron law of wages,"'<sup>55</sup> Note then, that the level of wages was affected by custom and expectation; it could be forced up by workers, but competition was forcing it down. This process was described as the iron law of wages. Again, in the mid-nineties there was a pamphlet produced by J.R. Widdup entitled What Political Economy Teaches. In dealing with the work of Ricardo, he brought in the iron law. It was perfectly true he said, 'that the iron law of wages operates to keep wages at a subsistence level; but it is not the increase or decrease in population which is responsible for this'.<sup>56</sup> In saying this he was rejecting a Malthusian basis for the iron law and he went on to point to two limits between which wages always fluctuated, 'that at which it becomes unprofitable to an employer to go on producing on account of the high wages paid; the other, that at which an employee will cease to produce because the lowness of the wages received will not sufficiently keep him.'<sup>57</sup> So when Henry Collins noticed the concept to be still around in the early twentieth century, it was not quite what he imagined it to be. However, he did quote Bax and Quelch as saying that 'the Iron Law of Wages' ... stand as firmly today as when stated by Lassalle<sup>58</sup> in 1901, affirming it would seem a Lassallean iron law.

Let us look a little more closely at what they actually said. Once again it was in catechetic form. They had just outlined how surplus value was extracted from the labourer and the way in which he was only paid the market price for his labour power. This price they

said was based on the cost of subsistence, though it could rise above it and fall below it, particularly in response to fluctuations in the market.

This principle, that the return to labour is determined by the cost of subsistence of the labourer, is generally known as the 'Iron Law of Wages.'

But has not this law been discarded, even by some Socialists?

There have been attempts in some quarters to demonstrate that this law does not actually operate with the rigidity at first claimed for it; but, in truth, it stands as firmly to-day as when stated by Lassalle. The variations or modifications in its operation no more destroy its validity as a general economic law, than the fact that no bodies ever proceed in a direct line, owing to disturbances due to friction, disproves the first law of motion, or the law of gravitation. 59

This is a little more ambiguous, but they are aware of the criticisms, they are conscious that it had been abandoned by some, and although the law was iron, wages could rise and fall around subsistence level, and variations and modifications were again accepted as part and parcel of the law.

Two years prior to this A.P. Hazell asked why some workers received more wages than others. He spoke of some reaching certain social standards of comfort in the fulness of economic evolution. Their social status, he said, though it appeared to be sanctioned by custom 'has come to them through years of conflict, and were it not for the combination with which the workers confront the capitalists, they would come down to one common level.'<sup>60</sup>

By 1900, SDFers were aware that the notion of the iron law had been attacked and abandoned by German Social Democrats. J.B. Askew a member with German connections, pointed out in an article in the February 1900 edition of

Social-Democrat how Bebel had publicly abandoned the iron law.<sup>61</sup> They knew of these attacks and criticisms, but the attacks did not really hit home and affect their views because they had already modified them to such a degree that the criticisms did not apply to their 'iron law'. Hyndman, talking of the controversy around Bernstein's revisionism in the German party, said that it was absurd to say that the Social Democratic Party had changed its position 'It has not changed. Nor has the "iron law of wages," except in so far as it was based by La Salle [sic] on the silly Malthusian balderdash, been given up.'<sup>62</sup>

As Collins points out F.C. Watts drew the attention of SDF members to the limitations of an iron law of wages in 1903.<sup>63</sup> Watts noted how Marx had rejected the concept and considered all the various ways in which wages and conditions could be enhanced; he made the case for improved conditions which would create better individuals, who would be better prepared to fight capitalism.<sup>64</sup> However this was not the last word on the matter. This article arose out of a discussion with C. Terry who returned to the subject in a later issue of Social-Democrat, in an essay on the historical development of value theories. His discussion with Watts said Terry, convinced them both that there was some 'elasticity' in the iron law after all. After talking of the historical precedents of the law he said

I have ... modified my rendering of the 'iron law' thus: 'Wages tend to fall to that point that will just cover the cost of necessaries, and provide for replacement, but that this point varies with the general progress of society.'<sup>65</sup>

This was indeed an interesting argument: he still felt the need to refer to the iron law even though he has modified it and given it a degree of elasticity!

The term seems to fall out of use as the century progresses, but it occasionally appeared in the form already noted, with all the qualifications.<sup>66</sup> The iron law was a concept that cropped up again and again in the works of SDFers; however, although Lassalle was often mentioned in conjunction with the term, it was not used strictly in his sense. More often than not it was qualified and in fact came to mean the action of competition in driving wages down to subsistence, something that could be modified by custom, tradition, and the action of trade unionism. It came to be used in such a way as to be compatible with Marx's analysis of the system of wage labour. They adopted a notion incompatible with Marx's work and adapted it to fit in with it. Having done so, when the concept was renounced by continental socialists, the urgency to get rid of it was not quite the same within the SDF as it meant something quite different.

The question of wage determination and the standard of living of workers was considered by E.C. Fairchild in 1909. It is worth quoting at length because it encapsulates well their understanding of the process at work

The standard of comfort held by the workers is the result of prolonged conflict with the capitalist class. It has not been fixed by the arbitrary decision of property holders, though the owners of the instruments of production have by far the greater power in the battle. Into determination of the amount of socially necessary labour expended on the production of the average subsistence of the

worker, elements enter which partly affect the value of all other commodities. In the production of material goods, custom and tradition affect the degree to which science and invention are brought into co-operation with manual labour. The total human labour devoted to the production of an article, its value in the present, is influenced by the habit of the past. But history performs a greater part in determination of the wages of labour than in deciding the value of other commodities. The persistence of a higher standard of comfort for the workers in some parts of this country than in others, is due to this fact, despite the enormous powers for wage reduction which the capitalists of England possessed in the time of their monopoly of the world's markets. The form of subsistence has changed with its quality.' 67

It was in the sphere of more general analyses of capitalist production that SDFers felt they towered above contemporary economists. Hyndman for instance never tired of citing Jevons' sun-spot theory. In his book Commercial Crises of the Nineteenth Century he wrote

To such a pitch of despair have economists been driven in their anxiety to avoid the true solution propounded for them already by a greater thinker than themselves, that Mr. Stanley Jevons traced crises to periods of bad harvests, and then, triumphantly connecting bad harvests with spots on the sun, referred the whole of our social troubles in this particular to these strange changes in that great body. 68

The theory was accepted suggested Hyndman, until one of the worst crises coincided with one of the finest harvests 'and also when the sun's disc was exceptionally afflicted with spots'. Then, he said, 'it became apparent to the most credulous that the spots on the sun had as much influence on industrial crises as the spots on the leopard in the Zoological Gardens' 69

On the question of crises, when asked by a critic 'And do you Socialists know any more about it than the

rest?' Hyndman replied in an early issue of Justice, 'We do' and he continued, in another question and answer session: 'Why is there a crisis? Because there is a glut of commodities. Why is there a glut of commodities? Because more has been produced than people will buy. What produces commodities? Labour'<sup>70</sup> And so on. The analysis of crises was central and it occurs in most of their accounts of the iniquities of capitalism. It is an important component of the debates, pamphlets, articles, and other attacks on the popular panaceas of free trade and protectionism, as well as what is probably the best known series of campaigns undertaken by the SDF, those on the question of unemployment; it also forms the basis of the theories of imperialism.<sup>71</sup>

At the heart of their analysis was the antagonism between the *social form of production and the individual form of appropriation and exchange*. They meant by this that as the division of labour and mechanisation spread, more and more workers became involved in a collective process of production, while appropriation and exchange remained in the hands of private individuals. This antagonism said Hyndman 'gives the key to all the industrial, commercial, and financial difficulties which arise in our society at the present time.'<sup>72</sup> The nature of crises, how they came about, and how they were resolved was outlined in numerous SDF accounts, but was at its most detailed in Hyndman's writings. He gave much space to this in The Economics of Socialism, but his most important work in this regard was Commercial Crises of the Nineteenth Century, in which he traced the historical development of crises over the previous century. This

book was reprinted in the 1930s with a preface by the economist J.A. Hobson, who called it 'his most solid contribution to economic history and interpretation.'<sup>73</sup> In this work he pointed to the increasingly international nature of crises and the worsening nature of each one.

What was stressed in particular was the way small firms went under during crises, and the way centralisation and the concentration of capital were becoming the norm. 'Each successive crisis' said Hyndman in The Economics of Socialism 'tends to the still further establishment of industrial monopoly. The smaller organisms in every department of trade are being relentlessly crushed out. Trusts, "combines," "corners," now pervade every department of production'.<sup>74</sup> Hyndman believed that despite the international nature of crises, it was in Britain that the transition to socialism would occur. 'England, which took the lead in the development of the capitalist system, seems destined to take the lead also in its transformation.'<sup>75</sup> The concentration and centralisation of capital was detailed in a number of accounts, and from the 1890s particular attention was paid to the way this process was developing in America. A pamphlet by Joseph Chatterton the political secretary of the SDF, in 1896 gave an account of American trustification, and pointed to numerous examples of the same process at work in England.<sup>76</sup> Later, in another pamphlet, The Triumph of the Trust Under Free Trade, Henry Lee produced a much more detailed picture of these developments, itemising in particular, textiles, engineering, shipbuilding, tobacco, soap and chemicals, the retail trade, and pointing to other areas where he



saw similar forces at work.<sup>77</sup>

But this process was not just analysed and itemised, it was positively welcomed. For Hyndman, 'From this point to state control, and production and distribution by organised Co-operative Commonwealth, are no long steps.' Joseph Chatterton, having outlined the growth of trusts as 'economic evolution' said

Without this economic evolution Socialism would have been very difficult if not impossible to achieve; but now this centralisation, organisation and concentration is really the simplification of industry and makes it quite easy and practicable for us to transfer the means of production from the hands of private individuals into the hands of the people. 78

The trust concluded Lee, 'clears the way for Socialism'.<sup>79</sup> And A.P. Hazell in The Social-Democrat during 1903 said that 'The high development of the trusts is a very important matter for the peaceful organisation of Social Democracy'.<sup>80</sup> The only note of concern was that sounded by John E. Ellam in the same year who pointed to the severe nature of the class conflict engendered by the trusts in America, and drew a parallel with the campaign against trade unionism, municipal enterprise, and co-operation in Britain.<sup>81</sup>

The general belief was that capitalism had 'reached its fullest development'. Individual capitalists were increasingly less important to the productive process, and 'all the economic forms, all the conditions under which wealth is produced and distributed, are ripe for socialisation, and for transformation from private property to public property'.<sup>82</sup> In these circumstances socialism was 'not a

question of long years of weary working and waiting, of getting Socialism a little bit at a time'. Instead,

Social-Democracy could be realised at once so far as its rudimentary, fundamental, economic basis is concerned. There are no insuperable obstacles in the way, no further economic development to await. For the realisation of Social-Democracy here and now only one thing is necessary - that is the will of the people expressed in the organised conscious effort of the working class. 83

Before the later part of the nineteenth century it was believed that Britain as the most advanced capitalist country would be the first to witness the transformation.<sup>84</sup> The view was expressed in a number of places that the over-ripeness for change could well lead to economic collapse before sufficient preparation had been made for the transition.<sup>85</sup> The interesting thing is that in most accounts this possibility was not welcomed as a harbinger of revolutionary change, but observed pessimistically as a factor inhibiting the progressive potential inherent in economic development. As Hyndman observed in the conclusion to his Economics of Socialism, 'reorganisation on progressive Socialist lines may but too probably be interrupted by the economic and social collapse and cataclysm which some of us fear will overtake the peoples uninstructed as to the real meaning, and unprepared to deal capably with its results.'<sup>86</sup>

By the end of the century, it was conceded that other capitalist countries, notably America and Germany were beginning to catch up and overtake Britain in terms of economic advance. Hyndman expressed the view in 1900 that 'as England is now behind the rest of the world in the application of electricity, hydraulic power, oil gas,

automatic machinery and automobiles, so I suppose we must be behindhand in Socialism.<sup>87</sup> Two factors, he said, were needed to achieve socialism, 'the economic development and educated consciousness of that development. In the first we are now far behind America; in the second we are far behind Germany.'<sup>88</sup> Despite these developments it was still believed that Britain was, in economic terms, ready for socialism.<sup>89</sup>

On the whole, SDF analyses were based on volume one of Capital, but elements of the other volumes, notably volume three, were apparent in some works particularly those of Hyndman. It is clear from his Economics of Socialism of 1896 that he had consulted the third volume. A.P.Hazell's pamphlet Summary of Marx's 'Capital' which was published around 1907, is instructive on how informed and how limited SDF theory in general was with regard to Marx's economics. Various of Marx's ideas and concepts were summarised including some from the third volume. The main thrust was limited to the argument that capitalism was an exploitative system. When he introduced new concepts and elaborated themes from volume three it was merely to make more sophisticated this theory of exploitation. He spoke of the "composition" of capital, and the relationship between constant and variable capital, but only to point to variations in prices and in surplus value between different producers.<sup>90</sup> He wrote of the 'law of the rate of profit' but did not say what it was, simply that it 'explains the process of differences in the price of production'. There was no mention of Marx's law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which was of such importance to

later marxists, in his discussion of the general rate of profit. Although the end of capitalism was deemed inevitable by the processes they outlined, theirs was not a theory which embodied inherent contradictions and in which the capitalist system tended towards collapse. Instead, he took heart, along with most of his compeers in the SDF, in the process of centralisation and concentration of capital, and suggested that as a result of this process capitalism was being transformed into its opposite.

As capital increases , it continues to bring under one roof a greater number of workers who, instead of competing for the market under various capitalists, now co-operate under one capital, and with further accumulation of capital, there correspondingly grow collectivism and co-operation, which are the antithesis of competition and capitalism. 91

It must be said that Hyndman in the Economics of Socialism did talk of the 'law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall' and quoted Marx at length on this,<sup>92</sup> suggesting perhaps that he was insufficiently clear in his understanding to outline it himself. Hyndman realised that a move to Socialism would involve a 'period of disturbance'<sup>93</sup> and suggested that the downfall of capitalism was coming, but the process was not described or analysed in detail and was seen as a fairly straightforward process involving moves towards nationalisation and municipalisation. It was accepted that the conversion of factory industry 'presents greater difficulty' but the

moment ... men's minds become capable of understanding the real problem to be solved around them that problem is virtually on the

high road to solution in so far as all these large organisations are concerned.' (i.e. 'cotton, wool, iron, leather, liquors, &c.')

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Analyses of the general process of capitalist production then, did not lead SDF members to adopt a theory of the approaching collapse of the capitalist system. Capitalism was being transformed into socialism, but the change was not to be accompanied by catastrophic economic collapse. The economic forms were in advance of the political forms. The economy was ripe for the transformation to socialism, but the workers were unready for the attainment of power. If collapse came it was because of this unpreparedness and was not a herald of the coming of socialism but observed pessimistically as a factor possibly holding back progress.

The SDF developed their understanding of economic theory over time. They placed particular stress on this aspect of their socialism along with their debt to the works of Marx, differentiating and distinguishing them from their major rivals in the labour movement. Out of the conflicts of the 1880's they emerged as the defenders of the labour theory of value. From this was elaborated a theory of exploitation based on the notion of surplus value which formed the nucleus of their socialism. Their use of the concept of the 'iron law of wages' was not the limitation it has often been made out to be by historians. Despite its metallic qualities, it turned out to be malleable enough to be incorporated into a theory of wages derived from Marx. On more general questions an understanding of crises was developed along with a theory of the way finance capital was becoming increasingly

influential and the centralisation and concentration of capital were leading to a trustification of industry. Their understanding of the workings of capitalism led them to believe that it was transforming itself into socialism and the economic developments meant that the transition in this sphere would merely be a question of administration. The theory of surplus value gave them an insight into capitalism as a class system which will be considered in more detail in the chapter on the class war. In the realms of economic theories of transition, the SDF's exposition was less developed than that of their continental counterparts, but partly as a result of this it was less constrained by a belief in the coming inevitable collapse of capitalism. This in conjunction with developing views on the nature of historical materialism would enable them to develop a less restrictive theory of socialist transition and a less 'economistic' and more 'voluntaristic' conception of the needs for socialistic activity.

FOOTNOTES

1. Kirk Willis, 'The Introduction and Critical Reception of Marxist Thought in Britain, 1850-1900', The Historical Journal, 20, 2, (1977); E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Dr. Marx and the Victorian Critics', Labouring Men (London, 1964).
2. K.O. Morgan, Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist (London, 1975), Chapter X.
3. Labour Leader, 22 September 1894, cited by David Howell, British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906 (Manchester, 1983), p.354.
4. S. Webb, Socialism in England, cited by John W. Mason, 'Political Economy and the Response to Socialism in Britain, 1870-1914', The Historical Journal, 23, 3, (1980), p.567.
5. Cited by Asa Briggs, 'Introduction' in Asa Briggs and John Saville, (eds.), Essays in Labour History 1886-1923 (London, 1971), p.9.
6. Henry Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', in Asa Briggs and John Saville, (eds.), Essays 1886-1923; Dona Torr, Tom Mann and His Times, vol.1, 1856-1890 (London, 1956), pp.212-14.
7. See previous chapter on Radicalism, p 20.
8. Letter from Hyndman to Helen Taylor, 2 October 1881, from Mill-Taylor Correspondence, Vol.XVIII, Item 28.
9. William Stephen Sanders, Early Socialist Days (London, 1927), p.21.
10. Justice, 9 February 1884, p.6.
11. One of the first manifestations of this was at the time of the first anniversary of Marx's death. Of the commemorative ceremony Justice said 'Any renewal of the old pagan Catholic forms of canonisation of individuals is contrary to the principles of Socialism as we understand it [sic]'. Justice, 15 March 1884. For a later example see H.M. Hyndman, The Economics of Socialism (London, 1909, first published 1896), Preface to New Edition, p.iii, 'Marx ... has suffered ... from the tendency of his worshippers to erect him into a sort of Socialist Pope.'
12. John E. Ellam, 'Lack of Economic Knowledge', The Social-Democrat, VI, No.11, (November 1902), p.329.
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*, p.330.
15. W.G. Veals, 'The Case for Socialism v. Individualism', The Social-Democrat, XI, No.1,

- (January 1907), p.36; see also J.R. Widdup, What Political Economy Teaches (London, [1895]), p.24.
16. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1895 (London, 1895), pp.13, 29.
  17. Social Democratic Party, Annual Conference Report, 1908 (London, 1908), p.8.
  18. H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy in Britain (London, 1935), pp.67-8.
  19. Democratic Federation, Socialism Made Plain (London, 1883), p.4.
  20. H.M. Hyndman, 'The Theories of Karl Marx', The Social-Democrat, XI, No.11, (November 1907), p.677; this was a reprint of a letter from Hyndman to the editor of The Economist, (12 October 1907), p.1729; H.W. Hobart, 'Mallock v. Marx', The Social-Democrat, XIV, No.8, (August 1910), pp.356-361; and continued in No.9, (September 1910), pp.402-409; No.10, (October 1910), pp.448-456; and No.11, (November 1910), pp.497-505.
  21. E. Belfort Bax, 'The Modern Revolution', To-day, II, No.7, (July 1884), p.59.
  22. Stanley Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (London, 1973), pp.114-5.
  23. George Bernard Shaw, An Unsocial Socialist (London, 1980); for labour as the source of value see especially pp.68-9. This novel was first published in instalments in To-day during 1884.
  24. Philip H. Wicksteed, 'Das Kapital. A Criticism', To-day, II, No.10, (October 1884); for other critics of the theory of value see Kirk Willis, 'Marxist Thought', pp.443-448.
  25. Philip H. Wicksteed, 'Das Kapital', p.394.
  26. *ibid.*, p.396.
  27. *ibid.*, p.403.
  28. George Bernard Shaw, 'The Jevonian Criticism of Marx', To-day, III, No.13, (January 1885), p.23.
  29. Philip H. Wicksteed, 'The Jevonian Criticism of Marx. A Rejoinder', To-day, III, No.16, (April 1885); Shaw had expressed earlier doubts about Marx's value theory in a facetious letter to Justice, G.B.S. Larking, 'Who is the Thief', 15 March 1884, p.6; Shaw's articles from To-day are reprinted along with Wicksteed's - but not Hyndman's! - in R.W. Ellis, (ed.), Bernard Shaw and Karl Marx: A Symposium 1884-1889 (New York, 1930).
  30. For Fabian economic theory see A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics 1884-1918 (Cambridge,



1962), Chapter II; there is an account of the Hampstead group and the development of their ideas in Pierson, Origins, pp.119-130. For Shaw's views see William Irvine, 'George Bernard Shaw and Karl Marx', Journal of Economic History, VI, No.1, (May 1946); Maurice Dobb, 'Bernard Shaw and Economics', On Economic Theory and Socialism (London, 1955); George Bernard Shaw, 'Economic', in George Bernard Shaw, (ed.), Fabian Essays in Socialism, (London, 1908); George Bernard Shaw, 'Bluffing the Value Theory', To-day, 11, No.66, (May 1889); George Bernard Shaw, 'Karl Marx and "Das Kapital"', National Reformer, Vol.L, No.7, New Series, (14 August 1887).

31. George Bernard Shaw, 'Bluffing the Value Theory', p.129.
32. *ibid.*
33. *ibid.*, p.128; Edward Carpenter intervened in the following month, also declaring everyone wrong by rejecting both the concept of abstract labour and that of abstract utility. 'There is no theory in these matters which will permanently hold water.' Edward Carpenter, 'Value of the Value Theory', To-day, 11, No.67, (June 1889), p.182.
34. Letter from Hyndman to Shaw, 1 September 1889, Shaw Papers B.M.Add.MSS.50538.
35. *ibid.*; George Bernard Shaw, 'Bluffing the Value Theory' p.132; H.M. Hyndman, 'Marx's Theory of Value', International Review, No.1, (July 1889), pp.16-19. On the Ricardian nature of Hyndman's theory of value, see also C. Tsuzuki's Introduction to the reprint of H.M. Hyndman, England For All (Brighton, 1973), pp. x-xi.
36. H.M. Hyndman, 'Marx's Theory of Value', The International Review, pp.18-20.
37. *ibid.*, pp.22-3.
38. E. Belfort Bax, in J.H. Levy, (ed.), A Symposium on Value (London, n.d.), pp.10-11; this was reprinted as 'The Economic Conception of Value', in E. Belfort Bax, Essays in Socialism (London, 1907).
39. H.M. Hyndman, Economics of Socialism, p.67.
40. *ibid.*, p.69.
41. Although as with other concepts it was adapted to fit in with common usage and became 'Socially necessary abstract human labour', H.W. Hobart, 'Mallock v. Marx', p.505; see also C. Terry, 'The Theory of Value', The Social-Democrat, VIII, No.2, (February 1904), pp.113-5; E. Belfort Bax and H. Quelch, A New Catechism of Socialism (London, 1902), pp.8-9.

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## Chapter 3

### RELIGION

Modern socialist and communist movements have tended to develop a secular and at times militantly anti-religious ideology.<sup>1</sup> Freedom from religion and independence from any church were conditions of membership of the Communist League, even before Marx joined it.<sup>2</sup> Marx himself found it necessary to reject religion, his own views having developed via engagement with the atheism of Feuerbach. Consequently any socialist position derived from Marx is expected to be materialistic and this view is encouraged by the fact that European social democracy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed in a spirit of anti-clericalism and atheism. The Social Democratic Federation is well known for its emergence out of a radical tradition steeped in secularism and freethought.<sup>3</sup> In most historical accounts it is offered up as hard headed and atheistic in contrast with the moralistic and religious Independent Labour Party with its tradition of methodism<sup>4</sup>, although there has been some suggestion in recent years that as the SDF aged and lost the edge of its earlier revolutionary purity, its older atheistic stance became compromised by a vague religiosity.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of what follows is to assess the nature of the SDF's position on and understanding of religious questions, and to consider the value of this picture of the SDF as staunchly atheistic but declining into

religiosity with old age. The role and importance of secularism will be studied; the connections between organised secularism and the socialist movement, and the importance the rejection of religion had in the conversion of individuals to socialism. There will follow an assessment of the atheism of a number of prominent SDF members. Having considered the connections between socialism and freethought, the SDF's relationship towards and understanding of Christianity can be studied along with responses to other religions and religious movements.

In the 1880s organised atheism was represented in Britain by the National Secular Society led by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh which had risen to prominence and national notoriety in the 1870s as a result of its dissemination of birth control literature. Despite the willingness to adopt non-religious issues, secularism was essentially a negative creed; the National Reformer, the weekly secularist newspaper described itself as 'Atheist, Republican and Malthusian' which one witty bishop is said to have paraphrased as 'No God, no king and as few people as possible!'<sup>6</sup> Its central tenet was the rejection of religion. Given this negativity, the positive appeal of socialism among individuals who had already gone so far along the road of distancing themselves from conventionality was bound to make itself felt; already in January 1884 one of the leading writers and propagandists of the NSS Edward Aveling had declared himself for socialism and had joined the Democratic Federation.<sup>7</sup> Lesser members too began to take an interest in the new movement, and the leadership

particularly Bradlaugh, felt the need to respond. It is significant that socialism should have been seen as a threat in this way. On the surface there was no reason why organised socialism and organised secularism should not have been entirely compatible. Breaking with other facets of radicalism, particularly those associated with the Liberal Party, had been an important part of the identification of individuals with the socialist movement. This was not necessarily the case with secularism; the positive espousal of socialism need not have conflicted with the negative rejections associated with the NSS. One SDFer argued in Justice that freethought and socialism should not be antagonistic. Freethought he said, had cleared away space by breaking images and smashing down metaphorical temples. He suggested that they make use of this space and 'replace the old broken idols with ideas' but added the warning in an obvious reference to Bradlaugh, that leaders could hold people back and disappoint them on 'the shifting sands of political Radicalism.'<sup>8</sup> To discover the reasons for the conflict it is necessary to say something about the character and politics of organised secularism, and in particular those of Charles Bradlaugh.

In the years before 1880, there was little to distinguish the secularists politically from those radicals attached to the Liberal Party. The years following the Liberal victory of 1880 saw a loss of support among freethinkers, more so as Liberalism became increasingly identified with nonconformity. However, because of the nature of its outlook secularism had always attracted to it those with strong individualist

inclinations.<sup>9</sup> A newly formed socialist movement appealing to the same political constituency was bound to have strong differences with elements within this secularist tradition. The problems and conflicts between the two movements received their first airing in the public debate between Bradlaugh and Hyndman 'Will Socialism Benefit the English People?', held at St. James' Hall on 17 April 1884,<sup>10</sup> but we can see a presage of future developments in the experience of the Stratford branch of the National Secular Society. A split occurred here in 1880 between those who, in the words of Ambrose Barker, advocated 'this worldism' rather than 'anti-theological propaganda'.<sup>11</sup> Those 'looking for a more political outlet' for their energies suggests Stan Shipley in his booklet on London's radical clubland, formed the Stratford Dialectical and Radical Club which became one of the founding organisations of the Democratic Federation.<sup>12</sup>

The public debate arose out of a discussion in the freethought press on the nature and benefits of socialism, occasioned by a series of Sunday morning lectures delivered by Bradlaugh in the Hall of Science, entitled 'Will Socialism help the English People?' These led to a public challenge from the Federation, which Bradlaugh accepted. In the debate Hyndman spoke first, outlining the case for socialism, Bradlaugh then took issue with most of his arguments. Bradlaugh clung firmly to the traditions of liberal individualism, jumping to the defence of the private ownership of property. He disapproved of the nationalisation of the land, suggesting that this would in the main affect those



working people who were purchasing their own homes through building societies. He was opposed in general to state control, expressed fear of state power, and strongly objected to revolution and class war preferring social reform and respect for the law. 'All those who preach class war do not know life. Class war is murder; class war is fratricide; class war is suicide'; socialists of necessity would have to use force and this he disapproved of.<sup>13</sup>

Bradlaugh like many of his colleagues in the NSS was a Radical of the old school and for all his iconoclasm he remained firmly attached to the principles of laissez faire individualism; as J.C. Foulger a radical who had recently gone over to socialism put it in Justice two days later 'he is a Radical of that advanced type which is as radical as it is possible to be without being - radical.'<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most interesting thing about the debate is that nowhere was the subject of religion mentioned. The champion of secularism met the champion of socialism and the first premise was that the the debate would take place on on the firm foundation of practical politics. Most of those who attended were agreed that Bradlaugh's performance was superior to that of Hyndman; but Hyndman himself lacking Bradlaugh's confidence and experience as a public speaker conceded that this was likely to be the case at the beginning of his contribution. Many who went to the length of reading the verbatim report came to the conclusion that the logic of Hyndman's arguments was superior, as one old Owenite who had been present suggested, Bradlaugh won 'more by the art of talking than the art of reasoning'.<sup>15</sup> The

debate itself, its publication in Justice and later as a pamphlet, led to widespread discussion within the National Secular Society of the principles of socialism, the majority of secularists being able only to read the debate in its pamphlet form detached from Bradlaugh's oratorical flourishes.

Through the branches of the NSS, the debate rapidly spread across the country, and socialist speakers were invited to many branches in order to ensure a fair hearing of the socialist case.<sup>16</sup> In the following months and years many secularists declared themselves socialists, and for most this declaration was to mark their break with organised secularism. As the secretary of the NSS reported to their 1888 conference,

many political clubs had been founded in London in the last seven years, and many members had gone to these, remaining Freethinkers but giving their activity to politics. They had further lost a number by Socialism, some leaving because Socialism was advocated on the Freethought platform, some because the President refused to become a Socialist. 17

A number of well known individuals arrived in the Federation in this first wave of conversions in the mid-eighties and their cases are well known, such people as John Burns, Edward Aveling, Annie Besant; a host of less prominent members followed suit.<sup>18</sup> The transition from the NSS to the SDF was not something peculiar to the 1880s however, the secular society was to remain a common recruiting ground for socialists throughout the nineties and well into the 1900s, despite the declining size and influence of organised secularism.<sup>19</sup> One correspondent in Justice went even further, making socialism directly

responsible in a different way for the demise of organised secularism. 'Instead of Secularism making no headway,' he suggested, 'the very opposite is true - the doctrine is making rapid progress in all countries ... but it is known by the name of Socialism.'<sup>20</sup>

Although religion pervaded middle class life and was an important aspect of official culture, its influence among working people is hard to gauge. The religious census of 1851 highlighted the lack of working class religiosity at mid-century and there is nothing to suggest that overall the popularity of religion had improved in ensuing decades.<sup>21</sup> The eighties saw a resurgence of middle class concern over plebeian infidelity and it was the absence from organised worship of the denizens of the slums that drove concerned social investigators like Andrew Mearns on their fact finding missions. Given this belief in the absence of working class piety, it is interesting how many of the converts to socialism came from deeply religious backgrounds, and the number of roads to socialism that led through religious organisations. Susan Budd in her study of atheists and secularists notes that converts came mainly from among those who had been actively and sincerely religious, and she cites the opinion of a secularist preacher that 'It is the hardest thing in the world to convert a "Nothingarian" to Freethought. A much easier task is to convert a sincere believer in Christianity, or for a matter of that, a sincere believer in anything.'<sup>22</sup> A similar point could be made with regard to socialist converts with the additional qualification that a sincere freethinker was good material for socialist

proselytisers. The ways in which religion and secularism influenced the conversions of individuals to socialism were complex and can be illustrated with examples from the lives of individuals who took this road. It needs to be stressed though that there were many roads to socialism in which religion played no part at all.

A religious upbringing or religious activity could have an important educative role in the period before state education was compulsory and free, as well as being a good preparation for socialist activity. Tom Mann stressed the role of a Bible class he attended in this respect. His Quaker instructor taught him much, he

helped me in the matter of correct pronunciation, clear articulation, and insistence upon knowing the root origin of words, with a proper care in the use of the right words to convey ideas. He encouraged the class systematically to use a good dictionary, and ever to have the same handy. Following his valuable advice I have always been grateful that I was privileged to attend his class. 23

Church connections could also give training in other skills of value to future agitators. George Lansbury, confirmed in the Church of England had his first experience of speaking 'in dead earnest' at the Whitechapel Church Young Men's Association, and it was for the Christian Social Mission that the intense young Guy Aldred became a boy preacher.<sup>24</sup>

Susan Budd, analysing the conversion experiences of a hundred and fifty secularists outlined the main reasons people gave for becoming secularists. All were individualistic and moral, none of them rested on reasoning derived from the mid-nineteenth century developments in scientific thought usually emphasised by

historians. She suggested that there were far more working class atheists and agnostics in the nineteenth century than middle class, and that unlike the intellectuals and scientists upon whose work discussions of freethought are usually based, their loss of faith had more to do with 'extreme individualism' and 'an anomic social situation' than with developments in scientific thought: 'the revolution in scientific and theological thinking seems largely irrelevant. The loss of faith was not an intellectual but a moral matter.'<sup>25</sup>

The role of scientific thought cannot be denied in the progression to socialism. For most converts from secularism it was the NSS's emphasis on science that was their introduction to modern ideas. Although this may have played little role in their initial conversion, the reading of what became popular scientific classics was widespread and encouraged among freethinkers. Some socialists found their way to a materialist conception of the world before they arrived at secularism, but their experiences are exceptional. For that archetypal autodidact Tommy Jackson, the study of science and philosophy formed a part of his eclectic search for truth at the turn of the century before he discovered organised freethought.<sup>26</sup> Three decades earlier H. Musgrave Reade followed a similar path on his road to enlightenment; he became a republican in the seventies, and being a Christian had felt the need for a Christian republican association, however his 'descent into infidelity was very rapid'.<sup>27</sup> He read critiques of the Bible, moved on to German metaphysicians; thence to positivism followed by 'Rousseau, Voltaire, Volney, Paine and others'.<sup>28</sup>

I became what is termed a freethinker, ... The transition from this phase was greatly facilitated by a course of study in the realms of science, in which I was introduced to the works of Buchner, Haeckel, Darwin, Tyndall, Huxley, Clifford, and others, and thus imbibed the theories of evolution which completed the work and left me a materialist atheist. 29

Having come thus far he came across Bradlaugh, Besant and Aveling and became secretary of the Salford branch of the NSS in 1882. The constraints and limitations of organised secularism were soon to prove restrictive. 'This incessant iconoclasm with its continuous attack upon Christianity soon palled upon my mental appetite ... Surely there was something better to live for than a mere negation'.<sup>30</sup> He eventually found his way, via land nationalisation and an extant branch of the International Working Men's Association to the Democratic Federation after convincing himself that it was sufficiently socialistic.<sup>31</sup> Here then, we have two examples of individuals whose study of scientific and other literature led them to the NSS and thence to socialism.

The route via secularism to socialism however usually took different forms. Tom Bell, Jackson's contemporary in Scotland first took up an atheist stance whilst arguing with 'three Salvation Army lassies' who worked in the same bottling store.<sup>32</sup> To counter their arguments he read the Bible, Ingersoll's Mistakes of Moses and quoted G.W. Foote's Brimstone Ballads. It was labour politics that really interested him and his friends, 'But as often happens with young workers who begin thinking about political questions, we saw religion and the Church as the big enemy.'<sup>33</sup> For Bell labour politics led to secularism, and his unequivocal atheism

gave rise to conflict with labour politicians who were willing to compromise with local religious figures. Bell's doubts about the sincerity of ILP leaders along with the scientific education he received at the hands of the secularists led him directly to the SDF with its scientific socialism and its emphasis on Marx.<sup>34</sup>

In the eighties Harry Snell had read widely in scientific literature before joining the SDF, he recalled reading Spencer, Mill, Darwin and Huxley and he was also interested in anthropology.<sup>35</sup> However it was the Rationalist Press Association's later reprints of scientific classics in sixpenny editions which introduced large numbers to the scientific debates of the mid-nineteenth century for the first time. Tom Bell recalled that included among them were 'Haeckel's Riddle of the Universe and Wonders of Life; Huxley's Man's Place in Nature; Clodd's Story of Creation; Grant Allen's Evolution of the Idea of God; Laing's Modern Science and Modern Thought, etc., etc., I read and studied all these as they appeared.'<sup>36</sup> Bell himself supplemented them with Darwin's The Descent of Man and Origin of Species as did many others; Jackson considered the absence of cheap editions of these works until such a late date as part of a ruling class conspiracy to keep people in the dark.<sup>37</sup> Coinciding with the reproduction of this literature and providing a further source of inspiration and debate, Blatchford reviewed Haeckel's Riddle in the Clarion and began a long running controversy in that paper, extending the argument with the publication of God and My Neighbour.<sup>38</sup>

The path from religious worship to socialism via

atheism could be long and drawn out, involve attempts to come to terms with Christianity and could include much experimentation among different denominations and sects. Although he had initially rejected God when he was a boy, as a young shop assistant Percy Redfern was forced by his employer to attend the Anglican church and this started him on a search for a religious niche into which he could fit. Older assistants were allowed to be nonconformists, so after a year he joined them, only to be disappointed; even the Salvation Army could not hold his attention. 'Only the Primitive Methodist chapel was better. The collier deacons were hearty, and student-preachers from the college in Nottingham evidently were interested in the actual world and the affairs of the day.'<sup>39</sup> Still unsatisfied, he attended the Unitarian church and discovered 'how fixed, sedate and orthodox in manner heresy could be!'<sup>40</sup> Eventually he resorted to truancy only later finding that Nottingham had a branch of the NSS. Sharing his secret with a fellow worker he attended the Secular Hall: 'Together we stood one Sunday in a Nottingham east-end street of shops, at the foot of a flight of gas-light stone steps. On the wall, a poster in yellow and black was headed, "We seek for truth." Did I not seek it too!'<sup>41</sup> Moving to another town, his secularism seemed less important, but he retained a 'positive secularist faith in mutual help', which eventually led him into a trade union, an interest in industrial history and the utopias of Bellamy and Morris, and via the economic debate between Bax and Shaw, into the SDF.<sup>42</sup>

The precocious young Guy Aldred felt constricted



within the Anglican church and wrote to an evangelical who helped him set up a Christian Social Mission in which Aldred became a 'Boy Preacher'.<sup>43</sup> Later, reading of Theism, he wrote to the Reverend Charles Voysey the founder of the Theistic Church; converted personally by Voysey he became a voluntary Theistic Missioner denying Christ in order to elevate God. In the course of one of his platform meetings in which he lectured on freethought, he had his platform rushed by Christians. Arriving home, his grandfather, who had been present 'went to his secret book cupboard and brought out a mysterious collection of Atheist pamphlets.' A month later 'my mission became an atheist one.'<sup>44</sup> As a Theist he had become more politically radical; later, having rejected Theism he read Huxley's Evolution and Ethics which paved the way for his adoption of socialism by enabling him to reject the 'neo-Darwinian fears' that capitalism and the struggle for existence were 'the last words in social evolution'; he was then free to join the SDF.<sup>45</sup>

A variety of often tortuous routes led from Christian worship, through secularism with its emphasis on science, to the socialism of the SDF. As a result, atheism was bound to form an important aspect of the socialism of a number of prominent SDF members, and it is the outspoken nature of their religious opinions that provide the most credible foundation for the SDF being regarded as an atheist organisation. The best known and most vociferous of these individuals are Edward Aveling and Ernest Belfort Bax, and it is worthwhile considering the nature of their outlooks which were by no means the

same, Aveling's being the more straightforward. Aveling as one would expect given his immediate past as a leading secularist speaker and writer, was vitriolic in his attacks on Christianity. His scientific background led him to place a great emphasis on science as the foundation of life and experience. When he became a socialist it was the scientific aspects of socialism that impressed him most and he retained a profound respect for Darwin, whom he compared to Marx.<sup>46</sup> Christianity was to him one of the 'two curses of our country and time',<sup>47</sup> the other being capitalism. Socialism, he argued in an article in the socialist journal To-Day, should not be limited by a rejection of Christianity: 'To label Socialism with such a limiting adjective as Christian is fatal. It would be quite as fatal to label it with the adjective Atheistic ... Socialism has nothing to do with religion or irreligion.'<sup>48</sup> However he went on to say that religion could only hamper the development of socialism, and it would be 'quietly but swiftly and firmly rejected,' leaving 'the great idea' to 'pursue its majestic way humanising people, unhampered by dreams of the supernatural'.<sup>49</sup> Despite his rejection of atheistic as a limiting adjective, socialism was in his view to be necessarily non-religious.

Bax too was concerned with such labels; unlike Aveling he had little time for those who rejected the term atheist. In his consideration of 'Some Forms of Modern Cant' the first he mentioned was 'the religious cant', and the form this took in 'cultured' circles was the repudiation of atheism.<sup>50</sup> This denial, claimed Bax, had little to do with God or no-God, but rested on the

connection in 'the popular mind' of atheism with the rejection of bourgeois morality.

It is bourgeois sentiment which is the well-spring of objection to the word atheism, and not suddenly evoked scruples on refined points of metaphysic. If we abstract from the latter and take the words in their popular sense, ... we have a right to say that the man cannot be quite sincere who accepts the doctrine of development as opposed to supernatural interposition in human affairs, and who 'kicks' at the word 'atheism'. 51

He also had little truck with those who declared themselves agnostics; agnosticism was a fallacy, 'You cannot', he said 'formulate a problem as unknowable.'<sup>52</sup>

For Bax the question of religion went much deeper than one of labels and adjectives, and his background in philosophy and history rather than natural science led him to express it in a different manner to Aveling. A rejection of the 'God-idea' was central to the way he defined his socialism. One of the main pillars of his socialist philosophy was 'in Religion a human ideal to take the place of theological cults.'<sup>53</sup> He came to see socialism as a force re-affirming 'the unity of human life, abolishing the dualism which has lain at the foundation of all the great ethical religions'.<sup>54</sup> Socialism in his schema would come to replace religion, without the need to maintain the forms of religion in the manner of the Positivists; 'and what current religion can offer a higher or a nobler ideal or a nobler incentive than this essentially human one?'<sup>55</sup>

Bax analysed religions historically and related the levels of religious development and awareness to different levels of social development. In the 'infancy'

of societies man was at one with the world and nature and this was vaguely expressed in religious worship. 'The mythological and magical theory of Nature universal with primitive man, is the expression of this vague half-consciousness ... He feels the substance of himself and things to be one and the same, hence fetishism and totemism.'<sup>56</sup> Once man was able to reflect upon his position he acquired 'the power of abstract thought' and this consciousness brought the collapse of the earlier world view.

Every department of experience splits into two mutually opposing sides. Man is now as mind opposed to matter[.] Later on precision is given to this view and he becomes subject (in the psychological sense) as opposed to object. His soul is opposed to his body, just as God is opposed to the world. 57

This division was then accentuated by science with its 'one-sided materialism'. Bax overcame the problems of this dualism inherent in religious thought by recourse to the dialectical method. The antithesis between materialistic science on the one hand and a theology and philosophy based on 'impossible spiritualism or an abstract idealism', could only be resolved by 'a dualism which unites the absurdities of both standpoints'. The process of reasoning through cause and effect for him lay at the heart of the problem. Continued reflection said Bax, brought recognition of the inadequacies of this standpoint and a return to 'Monism' but a monism conceived of dialectically:

not the unreflective Monism of primitive man, but a consciously reasoned recognition of the metaphysical unity in difference, in reciprocity, of all things, inasmuch as all that is real is the object, the thought-feeling,

the determination, of the basal element, 'I', the subject for which all things mental and material are objects; the Universal one and indivisible, which includes all particulars that were, or that are, or that can be.' 58

To Bax then, religion and socialism were not just antagonistic but related to different levels of social and intellectual development. As in the early works of Marx, socialism involved the overcoming of man's alienation and the recovery of a lost humanity. Bax's views on religion were the most elaborately formulated emanating from the SDF. Although differing in important details they had much in common with the writings of Marx and Engels on these questions, and with the outlook of Kautsky.<sup>59</sup>

Atheism and philosophical materialism, variously conceived, formed an important component of the outlook of many members of the SDF and it is easy to see why it has been so often characterised as anti-religious and antagonistic to religion. But to concentrate on the atheism of SDFers is to concentrate on one aspect of their experience. The strongly atheistic views we have considered could and did coexist with opposing views on religion and with strongly held religious views on the part of some. In some respects the range of opinions within the SDF reflected the range of religious options open to the generations living through these decades, although as we would expect there was often more emphasis on the unorthodox and the new. For some members, the SDF was not atheistic enough. Guy Aldred entered the SDF in March 1905 after a spell of atheist preaching. He soon came to blows with people in Justice over the religious question. Harry Quelch wrote editorially of Aldred's

'atheistic bigotry' forcing Bax to jump to Aldred's defence. 'During the whole period of my membership,' said Aldred 'and rising out of side approaches only, I was in conflict with the SDF on the religious question.'<sup>60</sup> Socialism, however mystical or spiritual the socialist, he said 'fundamentally involved Atheism.'<sup>61</sup> Criticism of his atheistic views he regarded as political opportunism: 'Here was Socialism - a clear-cut philosophy of materialism - representing the revolt of mother earth against the sky - the social and economic maturity of man as a social animal - being negated for votes'.<sup>62</sup> Such tactics were too much for him and were to drive him from the organisation. He eventually threw in his lot with the anarchists, but before he did he toyed with the idea of joining the Socialist Party of Great Britain and wrote to the Socialist Standard of his experiences in the SDF:

recently, I initiated a correspondence in 'Justice' on why Socialists could not philosophically believe in the capricious effects of prayers nor be Christians. 'Justice' indulges in the old cant about 'private religious belief.' This betrays a desire to negate Marxian economics and philosophic Socialism in order to secure the support of 'class-conscious Socialists' - save the mark! - like the Rev. Conrad Noel. No! Socialism is not to be established, the workers are not to be emancipated by the revisionist and respectable tactics of official SDFers. 63

The SDF's association with secularists and the atheistic pronouncements of leaders, gave rise to doubts in the minds of some supporters; 'we have had many inquiries from friends of the cause', said Justice in May 1884, 'asking us whether Socialism commits its supporters to dogmatic atheism'. This was obviously a touchy point

and one which could alienate potential supporters; instead of damning Christianity, it was pointed out that the SDF programme asked

for the help of men and women 'of all creeds and nationalities'. We have nothing to do with the religious opinions of anyone who is willing to work honestly with us in an endeavour to overthrow the present system of landlordism and capitalism ... Those therefore who are content to sink their theological or anti-theological opinions in the great object of attaining full physical, mental and moral development for mankind will ever be sure of support in Justice. 64

They were willing to overlook the religious opinions of individuals as long as they were committed to socialism. This was not to say that the views of Christians or other religionists would necessarily be respected, merely that they could be ignored. When a Christian speaker expressed sympathy with socialists, Justice reported,

he boldly declared in favour of Socialism, and to us it makes little difference that at the same time he declared himself a Christian. We are not of those who foam at the mouth because people who are helping on the cause believe in an ancient Asiatic religion. Far from it: we should be glad if Mohammedians (sic) or Buddhists would join in. 65

When Bax wrote his article in Justice on 'Religion and Socialism' during 1884, a correspondence began on the relative merits of Christianity and its socialistic rather than individualistic nature. Eventually the editor felt it necessary to intervene to stop the debate, Justice was 'not started nor is it kept going' he said, 'to encourage polemical disputation but to help on the economical and social enfranchisement of the workers.'<sup>66</sup> The debate it would seem was felt to be fruitless and

more likely to discourage people than win potential converts to socialism; however this did not prevent the regular recurrence of this type of debate in the pages of Justice and elsewhere in ensuing years.

The problems and ambiguities of the SDF's position on religion came across most clearly in their relationship to Christianity as a religion, as a series of organised churches, and in their understanding of the work and teachings of Christ. Christianity was defended as well as attacked within the ranks of the SDF. Individuals who were not necessarily practising Christians could find things to admire about Christianity, could draw parallels between early Christians and socialists and could show sympathy and understanding for the beliefs of others. Others like 'Robert Tressell',<sup>67</sup> although they attacked organised Christianity were careful not to offend 'sincere religion'.<sup>68</sup> In reprints of the popular pamphlet A Socialist Ritual which reproduced satirical articles and rhymes with a religious theme from Justice, it was noted that 'Christian friends' had taken offence since its first publication; it was pointed out that they had no wish to offend 'religious prejudices', were neither Christian nor anti-Christian and would not publish anything profane or blasphemous.<sup>69</sup> At the 1908 annual conference a motion was passed repudiating a pamphlet which had been distributed in Manchester entitled 'Socialism: Christ, the Enemy of the Human Race'; the distributors were called upon to withdraw it. There was also a resolution carried noting how enemies of the cause had used sectarianism to divide workers and reaffirming



the position of the Socialist International that the socialist movement was 'concerned solely with secular affairs and regards religion as a private matter.'<sup>70</sup> There was a strong tendency on the part of certain SDF leaders to play down atheism, and this was particularly noteworthy of Quelch, who had considerable influence as the editor of Justice.

The problem of professing Christians who also wanted to declare themselves socialists emerged early in the life of the SDF, and the relationship between Christianity and socialism was a question that busied members throughout the organisation's existence. Among the early supporters of the Democratic Federation after it had declared itself socialist was the journal the Christian Socialist founded by H.H. Champion, J.L. Joynes and R.P.B. Frost, and although the Christianity of this publication was implicit, it is worth noting that the editors who found it necessary to qualify their socialism as Christian soon found their way into the SDF. Frost appealed to members to recruit lay churchmen who had been under the 'evil influence of the leaders of the Church', saying that socialism was 'Catholic enough to embrace alike Christian and Atheist.'<sup>71</sup>

At various times there were practising Christians within the organisation, although inconsistencies could become apparent with lengthy socialist involvement. Fred Knee continued to attend his Congregational church for some time after he became a member; one Sunday entry in his diary reads:

In the afternoon went to St.Pauls and heard part of the service - very beautiful - Then to St.Nicholas Cole-Abbey to hear Professor

Shuttleworth's lecture 'Is Ritual a legitimate method of expressing spiritual truth'. Answer, yes, but there may be a diversity of ritual. Splendid lecture and well delivered ... Then went to SD Central Hall where Herbert Burrows lectured on 'Socialism and the New Political Economy' ...  
72

At this point Knee could thus be inspired by a religious service, fascinated by a lecture on spiritual subjects and cap the day with a socialist lecture on political economy. After six months of membership he listed the organisations he belonged to in his diary including the SDF and the Markham Square Congregational Church as well as two branches of the YMCA; but in a footnote he expressed his intention of retiring from the church along with one of the YMCA branches.<sup>73</sup> Being an active socialist was a great consumer of time and this could come into conflict with religious worship; Sunday mornings increasingly found Knee at open air SDF meetings rather than in church. The profession of socialism could also lead to problems for those who held positions of trust and authority in organisations with religious links. As a result of his SDF membership the Reverend Dennis Hird was dismissed from his post as secretary of the London Diocesan Board of the Church of England Temperance Society, and on announcing his socialist convictions, a Croyden SDFer lost the support of his fellow members of the Croyden Free Christian Church for which he had been a minister.<sup>74</sup>

In 1910 the Reading branch conducted a debate with an opponent on the question Is Socialism Anti-Christian?<sup>75</sup> the SDP speaker was the Reverend E.G. Maxstead who argued that it was not. Although Maxstead's

socialism was not characteristic of SDP platform speakers, he nonetheless stood as a representative and argued his case. Socialism for him involved 'sharing out' and would lead to 'a great human brotherhood'.<sup>76</sup> He suggested that the Bible contained much of a socialistic nature, it said that 'The Earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof' and that 'The earth hath the Lord given to the children of men'. Capital he conceded was not mentioned in the Bible, but there were many cases of usury and it was stated that the righteous man would not lend money out at an interest; further, the Bible writers, to the extent that they could, 'tried to stop men living on the results of the labour of others.'<sup>77</sup> The Bible taught public responsibility and St. Paul referring to this spoke of Christ's 'blood red banner', 'So you see' said Maxstead 'The banner of Christ is one with banner of Socialism.'<sup>78</sup> Co-operation and mutual aid were socialist principles found throughout both the Old and New Testaments, and 'at the heart of Christianity, we get this idea of sharing which we found in Socialism.'<sup>79</sup> Christians and socialists shared the same aspirations: 'Thy kingdom come, thy Will be done on earth'; socialism he said, 'will give to all of us a chance to put Christian principles into practice and of living a real Christian life'.<sup>80</sup> For these reasons he concluded that socialism was not antagonistic to Christianity.

Sympathy and understanding of the principles of Christianity, praise of aspects of the Christian tradition, a concern not to offend sincere believers, the playing down of atheism and the espousal of Christian principles and morals from socialist platforms; these

are not things we would expect to find within the SDF, but all of them existed and not just in the 1900s during a period of weakness. These factors show up the equivocal nature of the organisation's relationship with Christianity, but they do not constitute the dominant attitude nor the major responses of SDF members to Christian practices. These will now be considered in more detail.

Despite Christian members and favourable attitudes, Christianity on the whole, was attacked, criticised, and occasionally considered in a sympathetic light before being rejected. We have seen how Bax and Aveling rejected Christianity as a part of the way they conceived socialism, and how many came to the SDF after a spell of anti-Christian propaganda in the NSS, and we would expect to find widespread lack of sympathy within the ranks. Among these elements the feeling was, as one writer put it in the Social-Democrat, that 'To Christianise the Socialist movement is to water down Socialism'.<sup>81</sup> Beyond this type of attack the commonest form was that on organised religion. In a conciliatory letter Hyndman wrote to Cardinal Manning in 1886, he expressed the opinion that 'the fight of the future will be between Catholics and ourselves'.<sup>82</sup> A strong anti-Catholic sentiment certainly existed within the SDF, this was only to be expected in a protestant country, and it was also influenced by the strong anti-Catholicism of continental socialists. In an article on Ireland, Quelch commenting on Gambetta's idea that clericalism was the enemy, said that he was not far wrong:

The Social-Democrat would say that not

clericalism but capitalism is the enemy; but clericalism is a mental poison; it paralyses all movement towards emancipation from despotism ... Capitalism exploits the body, but clericalism chloroforms the soul and leaves the body a passive prey in the hands of its plunderers. 83

The Church of Rome he continued, sold Ireland to an English king and from then on 'the Church of Rome has been the persistent, unrelenting enemy of Ireland and the Irish people.'<sup>84</sup> Although he saw religion as a 'private matter', 'it is not too much to say that the Church of Rome is a curse to any country over which it has sway' and in Ireland the injury was barely less than that inflicted by landlordism and alien rule.<sup>85</sup> Further, for those who partook in politics in England there was 'the demoralising and reactionary influence of the Catholic priesthood on the Irish electorate.'<sup>86</sup>

Religious sectarianism however, was not a characteristic of their opposition, they were ecumenical in their anti-clericalism. In the introduction to A Socialist Ritual, while being careful not to offend religious principles, 'our pastors and masters' were considered fair game for satire, these individuals chloroformed the people, worshipped both God and Mammon, and as respectable ministers would have had Christ sent to prison as a rogue. Here there was less concern to limit Gambetta's opinion. 'Whatever there may be to be said in favour of Christianity the Christian Church of to-day is the bitter enemy of the people. Clericalism is the enemy.'<sup>87</sup> The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists contains a damning picture of the nonconformist 'Shining Light Chapel' where the 'sweaters and slave-drivers' went to have their characters bolstered by over-paid and

over-weight ministers of religion.<sup>88</sup> Worthy employers: 'There was Mr. Didlum, Mr. Sweater. Mr. Rushton and Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Starvem' took the children of the working class for edifying lessons during Sunday Schools.<sup>89</sup> The Christian church in this view was seen as an organised hypocrisy; when dividing society into its component parts for his fellow workmen, the hero of the novel Frank Owen placed Bishops and 'those persons humorously called "Ministers" of religion' into the division of 'those who do work of a kind - "mental" work if you like to call it so - work that benefits themselves and harms other people', a category they shared with employers, thieves, swindlers, pickpockets, shareholders, burglars and financiers.<sup>90</sup>

Another form in which Christianity was attacked was as a form of ideology; religion was seen as a means whereby the workers were duped and made content with their lot. Tressell considered workers to have little genuine knowledge of Christianity despite being brought up as Christians and having attended Christian schools and Sunday Schools.

The impostors who obtain a comfortable living by pretending to be the ministers and disciples of the Workman of Nazareth are too cunning to encourage their dupes to acquire anything approaching an intelligent understanding of the subject. They do not want people to know or understand anything: they want them to have Faith - to believe without knowledge, understanding, or evidence. 91

The alleged hypocrisy of Christian speakers led to the early demand for education to be secular.<sup>92</sup> This conspiracy theory of religious teaching, was for Theodore Rothstein at the heart of what was known as the

'religious difficulty in the schools'. Religion was taught in the schools he said because 'masters' correctly regarded religion as 'a good instrument of class domination'.

Religion in the school is necessary to make the working men 'patient, humble, and moral,' and to reconcile him (sic) to his hard lot by promises of a heavenly paradise on the other side of the grave ... the children of the working class must be taught religion in the school in order that they may grow up patient and submissive wage slaves! 93

From a different angle Christianity was analysed as a body of intellectual thought appropriate to an earlier economic and social system, but which was anachronistic in the modern scientific age. Socialists, said James Leatham, may in some measure be doing the work Christ would have done had his times been different and had social evolution been more advanced, but because it was not, 'we may be pardoned for pointing out his ... defects and the defects of his teaching.'<sup>94</sup> Bax, whose knowledge of Christianity was such that the chairman of one meeting nominated him for the position of Archbishop of Canterbury in the Cooperative Commonwealth,<sup>95</sup> considered the historical roots of Christianity and its development over time. Christianity was inherently individualistic, Jesus representing an individualistic strain within Judaism, a Judaism which rested at the time on a compromise between individualism and the 'older national cultus'.<sup>96</sup> Jesus brought things to a head 'by taking his stand on inwardness, personal holiness, purity of heart, etc.,' and with his contempt for the old 'cultus' he aroused the resentment of the citizens of Jerusalem.<sup>97</sup> Bax saw Christ as the embodiment of a particular type of

political and religious philosophy which emerged out of the contradictions of the ideas which predominated at the time he was living. Moving on chronologically, Bax suggested that the Catholic system of dogma developed during the middle ages, it 'formed a coherent whole in itself, and with its industrial and political systems.'<sup>98</sup> History since the middle ages had consisted of the breaking of the bonds which held this civilisation together; this worked itself out economically, politically, and 'In Religion it is expressed in the accentuation of the Protestant doctrine'.<sup>99</sup> This breaking down began during the Reformation and the old Catholicism was increasingly replaced by 'the doctrine of the modern bourgeois'.<sup>100</sup> The connections between the trading classes and 'dogmatic Protestantism' was traced historically and in the modern era these connections were continued:

The religious creed of the capitalist bourgeoisie is dogma, minus sacerdotalism. The religious creed of the land owning aristocracy is sacerdotalism, with nominal adherence to dogma. The watchword of one is an infallible Church; the standard of the other, an infallible Bible. The Romish or High Anglican squire represents incarnate land, on its religious side; the Baptist haberdasher, incarnate capital. 101

The divisions in protestantism could also reflect the status of the particular bourgeois: 'The manufacturer or merchant has his evangelical church, the retail linen-draper or grocer his chapel, the butcher or greengrocer his mission-hall, the converted costermonger his open-air service.'<sup>102</sup> Bax came to the conclusion that 'at least two thirds of Christianity is simply "capitalism" masquerading in a religious guise', and even



where this was not the case 'Christianity is none the less an integral part of the status quo.'<sup>103</sup> Considered historically Christianity had become an important component of capitalist civilisation and further, had become a hindrance to future progress.

So long as human aspiration can be kept along the old lines, so long as the further gaze of men can be kept directed heavenward to the cloud-shapes of god, Christ, and immortality or inward on their own hearts and consciences, and averted from the earthly horizon of social regeneration, all will go well. John Bull's auxiliary, the minister of the gospel, or possibly the wife or daughter of John Bull, must be able to say to him or her who is not blessed with J.B.'s share of the good things of this life, 'What does it matter, dear brother or sister? Why repine? 'Tis but for a season god has placed us in different stations in this life; in the life to come, where we shall hope to meet by-and-bye, all will be well.'<sup>104</sup>

The idea that Christianity was individualistic as Bax maintained, or was in some other important aspect antagonistic to the principles of socialism, was another way in which it was countered. Aveling's views on this score have already been noted, and it comes across in the way he and others reject the notion of Christian Socialism as a contradictory combination. To fall back upon Christianity to aid and confirm the socialist case, said James Leatham, would be like turning to poets for confirmation of mathematical science. 'Socialism in its positive aspects is grand enough and strong enough to stand without any Christian props: and it is as reasonable to speak of Christian Socialism as it would be to speak of Christian Arithmetic or Christian Geometry.'<sup>105</sup> Attacks on Christian Socialism generally took the form of highlighting the incompatibility of the

two concepts, although occasionally the politics of its supporters were commented on so that they could be ridiculed and dismissed. Bax considered it to be one of the four categories of 'unscientific socialism' he studied in an essay on that subject.<sup>106</sup> He pointed to its vagueness and the lack of unanimity on the part of its adherents. Considering a series of meetings held by the Guild of St. Matthew he arrived at the view that Christian Socialism was 'trade co-operation or industrial partnership', and not only were schemes of this type compatible with 'the current bourgeois system of ideas, habits, and aspirations', but 'they reflect that system in some of its worst aspects.'<sup>107</sup> Exploitation would continue under systems of co-operative production and there was a danger that people would believe changes of a socialistic nature could come about

through the instrumentality of a clarified Christianity, - a Christianity which shall consist apparently of the skins of dead dogmas stuffed with an adulterated socialist ethics, and formulas which, though to the simple mind they seem plain enough, the brotherhood of the Guild of St. Matthew will show us mean something quite different from what they seem. 108

After outlining the contradictions between the two doctrines he suggested that 'The brotherhood of the Guild of St. Matthew merely represents a phase common to ages of transition in which the reactionary ideal and morality endeavours to steal a march on the progressive ideal and morality.'<sup>109</sup>

A milder type of attack on Christianity took the form of the argument that Christ was a good man who may have led an exemplary life, but was not a socialist, or

alternatively that his life and works embodied socialistic tendencies but they were not reflected in the activities of his contemporary followers. Robert Tressell's views fell into the latter category; the Christian working man of his book was a thoroughly unpleasant character called Slyme, and his grasping and thrifty nature gave Tressell the opportunity to elaborate on the two-faced hypocrisy he observed in the actions of practising Christians.

He [Slyme] thought it wise to lay up for himself as much treasure upon earth as possible. The fact that Jesus said that His disciples were not to do these things made no more difference to Slyme's conduct than it does to the conduct of any other 'Christian'. They are all agreed that when Jesus said this He meant something else; and all the other inconvenient things that Jesus said are disposed of in the same way. For instance, these 'disciples' assure us that when Jesus said, 'Resist not evil', 'If a man smite thee upon the right cheek turn unto him also the left', He really meant 'Turn on to him a Maxim gun; disembowel him with a bayonet or batter in his skull with the butt end of a rifle!' When He said, 'If one take thy coat, give him thy cloak also', the 'Christians' say that what He really meant was: 'If one take thy coat, give him six months' hard labour.' A few of the followers of Jesus admit that He really did mean just what He said, but they say that the world would never be able to go on if they followed out his teachings! That is true. It is probably the effect that Jesus intended His teachings to produce. It is altogether improbable that He wished the world to continue along its present lines. 110

The question inevitably posed by both Christians and non-Christians within the SDF was that asked by James Leatham in the title of one of his pamphlets: Was Jesus Christ a Socialist?(1891); Leatham's answer was careful and considered and judging by the number of times the pamphlet was reprinted it was one which carried much

weight in the ranks of the SDF. At the heart of the problem was the definition of socialism; if it consisted of preaching discontent, denunciations of social abuse and assertions of the brotherhood of man, then Jesus had some claim to the title socialist. Socialism suggested Leatham had been defined far too vaguely and he proceeded to suggest the essentials for an adequate definition; it involved the socialising of the means of production and distribution, it needed to be based on an economic theory which stressed that wealth was due to labour and that the capitalist was not a labourer. Socialism, he said, regarded the capitalist as a parasite and called for his elimination; it considered the phases of social development as inevitable stages in an evolutionary progression, and it attacked systems rather than individuals.<sup>111</sup>

If these be the basic truths and methods of Socialism then it has to be said that Jesus was no Socialist. To be discontented with the things that are, to rail at the rich, to flatter the poor, to declare the brotherhood of man, and to prophecy that it will one day be realised - these things do not constitute a man a Socialist. 112

It was the positive affirmation of socialism that made someone a socialist and Jesus gave no indication that he was aware of this.<sup>113</sup> Jesus was not recorded as having recognised that wealth was created by labour; where socialists regarded poverty as a curse, Jesus had said 'Blessed are ye poor'; he preached and practised a spartan simplicity whereas socialists recognised the benefits that could accrue from wealth if evenly distributed; socialists believed in the benefits and necessity of work, whereas Jesus abandoned his work and

told his disciples to do likewise. Socialists incited the proletariat of all countries to unite to carry on the class war, Jesus preached obedience, contentment and humility; in short his prescriptions were superficial, impractical and 'left the sources of inequality and poverty untouched'.<sup>114</sup> Although he may have said things that were favourable to socialism 'of the grand truth of associated effort, of organisation and combination for the attainment of a given end, he has said nothing.'<sup>115</sup> Ultimately it was not fair to call Jesus a socialist, for if he had been one he could not be forgiven for neglecting its fundamental truths.<sup>116</sup> There was much about Christ to be admired and socialists, said Leatham, could not help loving the man,<sup>117</sup> but he concluded that he had to attack Christianity as he would any other 'harmful delusion'.

I do not believe in the theology of Christ any more than I do in his sociology. It is no use pretending that socialism will not profoundly revolutionise religion. The change in the economic basis of society is the more important thing to strive for; but if the triumph of the Socialist ideal does not crush supernatural religion, then we shall still have a gigantic fabric of falsity and convention upon which to wage war. 118

For all of these reasons SDF socialists found it necessary to attack and reject Christianity. Bax always keen to emphasise internationalism suggested a further important justification for doing so. If they did not reject Christianity, how could they expect socialism to be taken seriously by potential converts from other religions?

Only those who can tell the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Confucion, we care not for

Jesus of Nazareth any more than for Mohammed, for Gautama, or for Kon-fu-tze ... only those who can say we know of greater men than these ... who come in the form ... of the humanity whose religion is human welfare ... whose doctrine is ... Socialism; only those ... will ever obtain the ear of the Orient, and never they who come in the hated and blood-stained name of Christianity ... 119

The question of these other religions was one that also exercised the minds of SDF members. For many, even those coming from a secularist tradition, the rejection of Christianity left a gap which was inadequately filled by socialism. It is worth noting that in the trajectory from religion via atheism to socialism, socialism need not be the end point, and often was not. The religiosity of an individual was not always suppressed, instead it took on new forms. For some it could be a return to a modified Christianity; in extreme cases like that of Musgrave Reade it eventually led to a rejection of socialism altogether and the adoption of a militant anti-socialist position. More often it led to a mild return to god without involving a desertion of the labour movement. George Lansbury was to return to the church and Harry Snell to a modified and unorthodox form of Christianity. Percy Redfern found his way to a compromise with Christianity via a Tolstoyian anarchist communitarianism. In all these cases the move towards religion came after a break with the SDF but this was not necessarily the case.

Annie Besant's conversion to Theosophy is well known and is associated with the replacement on her part of intensive activity for the socialist movement and work within the SDF for emphasis on the theosophical movement and eventually the leading position in that cause.<sup>120</sup>

Less well known is the conversion of Herbert Burrows, the executive member of the SDF who went with her but remained an active and hard working SDF member until 1911.<sup>121</sup> Burrows was noted among his socialist comrades for his general unorthodoxy and his continued connections with his old radical friends and their causes over the years,<sup>122</sup> but this was more than just a hangover from his radical past, and is an unusual belief to find among the leadership of the SDF. How is it to be accounted for? Theosophy was a mystical religion deriving inspiration from the East; it had the advantage over western religions of being new and posing new questions. It relied heavily on a critical study of other religions and appealed to the same inquisitive temperaments that drove people to question the conventional values of Victorian society and move to socialism. Percy Redfern spoke of the appeal it had for him and other socialists as a part of their search for truth and meaning in life.

To Theosophy I gave [my] attention. Many socialists, in those days, were attracted by the 'divine wisdom.' It taught universal brotherhood; it was unconventional; and its claims for present day occult powers intrigued the materialists. And to be born and reborn, the fruit of each embodiment becoming the seed of the next, so that every past hurt to every person had been, or would be, redeemed in the process of teaching and perfecting every soul - in this sublime programme were not all my problems solved?

I was strongly attracted, yet in the end repelled. 123

Others were not repelled, or if they were they were still left fascinated and curious, helping to provide doubts about the adoption of too strict a materialism.

Hyndman, although not attracted to Theosophy was nonetheless fascinated by eastern religions. After

reading a book on Japan by Lafcadio Hearn he became interested in Shinto Buddhism and its connections with scientific thought.<sup>124</sup> He wrote of it to his friend Gaylord Wilshire, suggesting that it would be delightful once the economic and social problems of the present had been solved by the attainment of socialism, 'to think out alone or discuss with others those problems of humanity'. 'Absolute materialism' he declared to be inadequate: 'It only pushes the solution further back and compels us to acknowledge our own incapacity to deal with the problem of existence in any satisfactory way.'<sup>125</sup> Buddhist Shinto was to him 'a fine material yet idealist conception', and he could 'almost accept it as a religion in conjunction with Socialism' if he had not had problems over the existence of consciousness after death.<sup>126</sup> Despite his rejection of 'absolute materialism' however, he was careful to keep his feet firmly on the ground. 'Nowadays, as I tell Burrows who wastes his time on these matters, we have more than enough to do to work out material solution for the race in our own time.'<sup>127</sup>

Other religious fads of the time also had a degree of popularity among members. One Wandsworth member who was also a spiritualist found 'the seeds of spiritualism ... fast taking root'<sup>128</sup> in the London SDF. 'Spiritualism and Socialism' was the subject of an article in the Social-Democrat during 1898 when A.S. Headingley reported on an international spiritualist congress held in London at which 'a good deal was said about Socialism, and there were a good many Socialists present, including several members of the Social-Democratic Federation.'<sup>129</sup> Spiritualism, being



novel, unorthodox and on the fringes not only of religion but of 'science' appealed to a certain type of curiosity; 'as being one of the scientific subjects of the day,' said Headingley 'I have studied psychic phenomena, have followed some clinics on hypnotism, and made several experiments.'<sup>130</sup> A willingness to stretch one's credulity regarding the possibility of new forms of social organisation moving beyond one's present experiences of everyday life under capitalism, could be extended to cover such pseudo-religious activities which required an analogous feat of imagination. But there were dangers in spiritualist practices:

For instance, some socialists hold a seance. They have a good sensitive, who goes off into a condition of hypnosis, or trance. There is a traitor in their midst, and by sheer force of thought transference, without uttering a word aloud, the traitor makes the sensitive declare that he is controlled by a spirit, that this is the spirit of a good Socialist, who has come to inform his friends that one of their best and most trusted leaders is at heart only a self-seeker, ready to sell out at the first profitable occasion. <sup>131</sup>

This warning was given by Headingley because of reports he had heard relating to what had happened in the SDF, though only with regard to 'matters of minor importance'.<sup>132</sup> Seances, thought transference, sensitives, trances, spirits, mediums, such was the language that pervaded the discourse of the unorthodox in late Victorian Britain, and perhaps it should not elicit surprise that traces of these ideas found their way into the SDF: the pitfalls of a genuinely open mind are many.

The vague religiosity believed by some historians to be characteristic of the SDF in the 1900s was present from its inception and had nothing to do with weakness or

the absence of an earlier revolutionary purity. The SDF was very much a product of its time, and both religious and non-religious influences nestled together in an uneasy, and for much of the time unspoken, compromise. Throughout its existence the secularist movement had been an important recruiting ground for converts to socialism, and this gave rise to anti-religious sentiment. There was a strong strain of anti-clericalism, and Christianity was attacked from a variety of fronts; Christians however managed to exist within the organisation. For some, like Fred Knee, their Christianity became less central as their commitment to socialism increased; but to others, such as the Reverend E.G. Maxstead the two were inseparable, and they insisted on hoisting 'Christ's blood-red banner' aloft. The willingness on the part of some leading figures to turn a blind eye to Christian membership forced Guy Aldred to dismiss the SDF as insincere, but within it Belfort Bax could elaborate a detailed conceptualisation of the role of Christianity in the evolution of civilisation, damning it as predominantly the religious guise of capitalism, and as an inappropriate anachronism for a coming era in which the duality of an alienated humanity would be overcome in a genuinely human synthesis. The ambivalent existence of Christians, non-Christians and anti-Christians never gave rise to serious conflict within the SDF. The assumption on the part of modern historians that the organisation should have been consistently materialist because it derived its inspiration from Marx was not justified. Even those who rejected Christianity were often unwilling to adopt an

'absolute materialism', and unorthodoxy in politics often went hand in hand with unorthodoxy of religious belief. The SDF was on the whole secularist and freethinking, but for most this was not a decisive issue. Although there were those like Leatham and Bax who attacked Christianity as a 'harmful delusion', the important factor was a commitment to socialism, and a willingness to work for its realisation.

FOOTNOTES

1. E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Religion and the Rise of Socialism', Worlds of Labour (London, 1984), p.33. 'What about religion' said the chapel-goer to the socialist lecturer in Robert Tressell's The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists (St. Albans, 1965), 'I suppose there won't be no churches nor chapels; we shall all have to be atheists', p.496.
2. E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Religion', p.33.
3. E.J. Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels (Manchester, 1978, first ed. 1959), p.128; For details of this secularist tradition see Edward Royle (ed.), The Infidel Tradition (London, 1976); idem., Victorian Infidels (Manchester, 1974); idem., Radicals, Socialists and Republicans (Manchester, 1980).
4. See for instance Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief (London, 1977), p.72; Walter Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21 (London, 1969), p.8; C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism (London, 1961), pp.108-9. For the belief that the anti-religious views of E. Belfort Bax and Edward Aveling adequately represented those of the SDF, see Graham John Mayhew, 'The Ethical and Religious Foundations of Socialist Politics in Britain: The First Generation and their Ideals 1884-1931' (D.Phil, York, 1980), pp.165-72, a work which for the decades considered here, sadly failed to live up to its title.
5. Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London 1885-1914 (London, 1967), pp.209-10; Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working-Class', Languages of Class (Cambridge, 1983), p.211.
6. Percy Redfern, Journey to Understanding (London, 1946), p.25.
7. His first socialist article appeared in To-day, I, (New Series), No.1, (January 1884), pp.30-8; C. Tsuzuki, The Life of Eleanor Marx 1855-1898 (London, 1967), p.102.
8. Justice, 12 April 1884, p.6.
9. For the individualist nature of secularism see Edward Royle, Radicals, especially p.223.
10. The debate was reproduced in full in Justice, 19 April 1884, it was also reproduced as a pamphlet Will Socialism Benefit the English People? A debate (London, 1884). A later edition with an Introductory Note by Hyndman dated 1907 is reproduced in John Saville (ed.), A Selection of the

- Political Pamphlets of Charles Bradlaugh (New York, 1980).
11. Cited by Stan Shipley, Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London (London, 1983, first ed. 1971), p.40.
  12. *ibid.*
  13. Justice, 19 April 1884.
  14. *ibid.*, p.4.
  15. J. Benny, Benny on Bradlaugh and Hyndman (1884), cited by Edward Royle, Radicals, p.233.
  16. For a list of debates, lectures, and branches discussing the issues see Edward Royle, Radicals, pp.233-4.
  17. National Reformer, 27 May 1888, p.345, cited by Susan Budd, Varieties, p.68.
  18. C. Tsuzuki, Eleanor Marx, p.102; Edward Royle, Radicals, p.234; Annie Besant, An Autobiography (London, 1893), Chapter XIII.
  19. For instance Thomas Bell, Pioneering Days (London, 1941), pp.31-2.
  20. Justice, 24 July 1894, cited by Stanley Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (London, 1973), p.72.
  21. Donald Read, England 1868-1914 (London, 1979), pp.72-4, 264-6.
  22. Varieties, p.120.
  23. Tom Mann, Memoirs (London, 1923), p.16.
  24. George Lansbury, My Life (London, 1928), p.38; Guy Aldred, Dogmas Disgarded (Glasgow, 1940), this was first published in 1908 with the title From Anglican Boy-Preacher to Anarchist Socialist Impossible!; *idem.*, No Traitor's Gait!, Vol.I (Glasgow, 1955).
  25. Susan Budd, Varieties, pp.122-3, Chapter 5, *passim*.
  26. T.A. Jackson, Solo Trumpet (London, 1953), pp.24, 42.
  27. H. Musgrave Reade, Christ or Socialism? (London, [1909]), p.5.
  28. *ibid.*, pp.6-7.
  29. *ibid.*, p.7.
  30. *ibid.*, p.8.
  31. *ibid.*, pp.9-10.

32. Thomas Bell, Pioneering Days, p.26.
33. *ibid.*, p.31.
34. *ibid.*, pp.33-35.
35. Lord Snell, Men, Movements, and Myself (London, 1936), p.43.
36. Pioneering Days, p.32.
37. T.A. Jackson, Solo Trumpet, p.94.
38. For Blatchford on Christianity see Stanley Pierson, British Socialists (London, 1979), pp.71-9.
39. Percy Redfern, Journey, pp.21-2.
40. *ibid.*, p.22.
41. *ibid.*, p.23.
42. *ibid.*, pp.29-31.
43. Guy Aldred, Dogmas Disguarded; *idem.*, No Traitor's Gait!.
44. Dogmas Disguarded, p.19.
45. *ibid.*, p.38.
46. Edward Aveling, Charles Darwin and Karl Marx: A Comparison (London, 1897), this was originally published in The New Century Review in 1897.
47. Edward B. Aveling, 'Christianity and Capitalism', To-day, I, (New Series), No.1, (January 1884), p.30.
48. *ibid.*, p.32.
49. *ibid.*, p.38.
50. E. Belfort Bax, 'Some Forms of Modern Cant', The Ethics of Socialism (London, 1889), p.90.
51. *ibid.*, p.51.
52. *idem.*, 'A Free Fantasia On Things Divine and Human', *ibid.*, p.207, see also footnote p.91.
53. *idem.*, 'Modern Socialism', Modern Thought, Vol.1, No.7, (1 August 1879), p.153.
54. *idem.*, 'Socialism and Religion', Justice, 21 June 1884, p.2, reproduced in *idem.*, The Religion of Socialism (London, 1891), pp.48-53.
55. *ibid.*
56. *idem.*, 'The Practical Significance of Philosophy', Outlooks From the New Standpoint (London, 1891), p.196.

57. *ibid.*
58. *ibid.*, p.197.
59. See entry for 'Christianity' in Tom Bottomore; Laurence Harris; V.G. Kiernan, and Ralph Miliband, (eds.), A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (Oxford, 1983).
60. Guy Aldred, Dogmas Disguarded, p.44.
61. *ibid.*
62. *ibid.*, p.45; No Traitors Gait!, pp.117-8.
63. Dogmas Disguarded, p.46, see also letter to Quelch and letters from Bax reproduced in No Traitor's Gait!, p.142-3.
64. Justice, 3 May 1884, p.5.
65. 12 April 1884, p.3.
66. Justice, 2 August 1884, p.6.
67. Robert Tressell was a pseudonym for Robert Noonan, an active member of the Hastings branch of the SDF, see F.C. Ball, One of the Damned (London, 1979), especially Chapter 17.
68. Robert Tressell, The Ragged, Preface p.14.
69. A Socialist Ritual (London, 1893), p.3.
70. Social Democratic Party, Annual Conference Report, 1908, (London, 1908), pp.3, 13.
71. Justice, 2 May 1885, p.4.
72. David Englander (ed.), The Diary of Fred Knee (Manchester, 1977), p.8. Entry for Sunday, 20 September 1891.
73. *ibid.*; 31 December 1891, p.82.
74. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1894, (London, 1894), p.4; Justice, 25 April 1885.
75. Maxstead, E.G., Rev., and Murry, H.B., Rev., Is Socialism Anti-Christian? A debate (Reading, 1910).
76. *ibid.*, p.4.
77. *ibid.*, p.5.
78. *ibid.*
79. *ibid.*
80. *ibid.*, p.6.

81. The Social-Democrat, XI, No.4, (April 1907), p.195.
82. H.M. Hyndman to Cardinal Manning, 26 November 1886, cited by C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.109. See also F.J. Gould, Hyndman Prophet of Socialism (London, 1928), p.129.
83. H. Quelch, 'Home Rule and Rome Rule', The Social-Democrat, VI, No.11, (November 1902), p.327.
84. *ibid.*
85. *ibid.*
86. *ibid.*, p.328.
87. A Socialist Ritual (London, 1893), p.3.
88. Robert Tressell, The Ragged, p.172.
89. *ibid.*, pp.166-8.
90. *ibid.*, p.267.
91. *ibid.*, pp.143-4.
92. The demand that education 'be Free, Compulsory, Secular, and Industrial for all alike' was contained in the SDF programme from at least 1888: Social Democratic Federation, Programme and Rules of the Social-Democratic Federation (London, 1888), p.1.
93. Theodore Rothstein, (ed.) 'The Religious Difficulty in the Schools', The Socialist Annual for 1907, (London, 1907).
94. James Leatham, Was Jesus Christ a Socialist? (Aberdeen, 1891), p.17.
95. F.J. Gould, Hyndman, p.135.
96. E. Belfort Bax, Religion, p.174.
97. *ibid.*
98. E. Belfort Bax, Ethics, p.42.
99. Religion, pp.29-30.
100. *ibid.*, p.44.
101. *ibid.*, p.77.
102. Ethics, p.44.
103. *ibid.*, p.48.
104. *ibid.*
105. James Leatham, Was Jesus, p.17. See also John E. Ellam 'Christian Socialism', The Social-Democrat, II, No.12, (December, 1898).



106. E. Belfort Bax, 'Unscientific Socialism', Religion, pp.92-105.
107. *ibid.*, p.93.
108. *ibid.*, p.95.
109. *ibid.*, p.98.
110. Robert Tressell, The Ragged, p.220. For Tressell's own conflict with Christians see Fred Ball, One of the Damned, pp.94-5.
111. James Leatham, Was Jesus, pp.5-7.
112. *ibid.*, p.7.
113. *ibid.*, p.8.
114. *ibid.*, p.9.
115. *ibid.*, p.14.
116. *ibid.*, p.17.
117. *ibid.*
118. *ibid.*, p.19.
119. E. Belfort Bax, 'The Revolution of the 19th Century', Ethics, p.54.
120. Arthur N. Nethercot, The First Five Lives of Annie Besant (London, 1961), Part V, 'Fifth Life'.
121. Burrows was present at the first meeting between Annie Besant and H.P. Blatavsky, the Theosophist leader. Annie Besant, Autobiography, p.341.
122. Brief Sketch of the Life of Herbert Burrows (Haggerston, 1908), p.3.
123. Percy Redfern, Journey; see also George Lansbury, My Life, p.78, who said that he was proud to chair the meeting where Annie Besant made her 'first public confession of faith in positive religion and away from negative agnosticism.'
124. The book was Kokoro which was subtitled 'Hints and echoes of Japanese life'.
125. Hyndman to H.G. Wilshire, 25 April 1905.
126. Hyndman to Wilshire, 19 May 1905. Elsewhere he spoke of 'the noblest and most widespread religion on the planet - that of Buddha'. Wilshire's Magazine, VIII, No.V, (October 1905), pp.14-15.
127. Hyndman to Wilshire, 25 April 1905.
128. Two Worlds, 6, (1893), p.572, cited by Logie Barrow, 'Socialism in Eternity: Plebeian Spiritualism,

1853-1913', History Workshop, No.9, (Spring 1980), p.50.

129. A.S. Headingley, 'Spiritualism and Socialism', The Social-Democrat, II, No.8, (August 1898), p.229.

130. *ibid.*, p.231.

131. *ibid.*, pp.234-5.

132. *ibid.*, p.235.

## Chapter 4

### HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

The Social Democratic Federation claimed adherence to the materialist conception of history which provided them with a scientific understanding of the past and of the likelihood of change in the future. Like the neolithic man in the final verses of the poem by the contemporary American feminist Charlotte Perkins Stetson, they had a vision of the future:

There was once a Neolithic Man  
An enterprising wight  
Who made his chopping implements  
Unusually bright.  
Unusually clever he,  
Unusually brave,  
And he drew delightful mammoths  
On the borders of his cave.  
To his neolithic neighbours  
Who were startled and surprised  
Said he: 'My friends, in course of time  
We shall be civilised!  
We are going to live in cities!  
We are going to fight in wars!  
We are going to eat three times a day  
Without the natural cause!  
We are going to turn life upside-down  
About a thing called gold!  
We are going to claim the earth and take  
As much as we can hold!  
We are going to wear great piles of stuff  
Outside our proper skins;  
We are going to have Diseases!  
And Accomplishments!! And Sins!!!'

Then they all rose up in fury  
Against their boastful friend,  
For prehistoric patience  
Came quickly to an end.  
Said one: 'This is chimerical!  
Utopian! Absurd!'  
Said another: 'What a stupid life!  
Too dull, upon my word!'  
Cried all: 'Before such things can come,  
You idiotic child,  
YOU MUST ALTER HUMAN NATURE!'  
Then they all sat back and smiled.  
Thought they: 'An answer to the last

It will be hard to find!  
 It was a clinching argument  
 To the Neolithic mind!

The above, published in America in The Nationalist in April 1890, was a favourite of Hyndman's; it was reproduced in Justice on 16 August 1890 and later reprinted as an appendix to his Economics of Socialism.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to see the appeal of such a ditty to those who had a theory which provided them with insights into the course and direction of past and future progress, foretold of a coming Co-operative Commonwealth where poverty and suffering were at an end, and yet was to remain a minority creed. This subject can be divided into two broad areas, a theory of historical development and a theory of historical causation. In the first section what was described as the process of social evolution will be considered, the stages through which not only mankind, but the universe passed, and the extent to which these interpretations affected the study of recent English history. There will follow a consideration of the extent to which they believed in the inevitable progression to socialism and the role played by human agency in the process of change.

The SDF considered themselves the heirs of nineteenth century scientific thought, and the pivotal figure in this Victorian tradition was Charles Darwin. Marx was seen as extending Darwin's theories from the organic into the social world; he had done what Herbert Spencer had claimed to do, 'laid the foundation and built a portion of the superstructure of a science of social development.'<sup>2</sup> The centrality of Darwin meant that organic metaphors and analogies drawn from his better

known concepts abounded in their accounts of historical development, it also meant they often took as their starting point the beginning of life on earth, or occasionally the formation of the universe.

The work of Marx and 'the Marxian school' said John Ellam 'provide the knowledge which should enable us to intelligently "put ourselves in line" as it were, with social evolution, so as to avoid that suffering and inconvenience which inevitably accompany ignorance.'<sup>3</sup> The Marxist he suggested, was

essentially naturalist. He considers human society as a natural product of natural causes the sequence of which might be traced far back beyond the human stage to remote geological epochs, to their origin in the primordial nebula. The Marxist is, therefore, necessarily an evolutionist, and he is a Marxist in economics precisely for the same reasons that he is a Darwinist in biology. 4

The linking of popular science, human historical evolution and the attainment of socialism was developed most comprehensively by the SDF lecturer Henry F. Northcote in a series of five lantern lectures on 'Evolution and the Coming of the Social Democracy' delivered in 1910. The first lecture was on 'Worlds - Their Birth, Growth, and Decay', which began with an account of the solar system, concluding with 'How this World has Grown from a Nebula' and 'The World for the Workers through Social-Democracy.' The second lecture dealt with fossils, the origin of life, inhabitants of swamps, the footprints of extinct monsters of the past, finishing on the way 'the modern monsters - Trusts, Combines, & c. - will be made extinct by the Class-conscious Proletariat'. The third was an account

of 'Eggs and Their Mysteries', with illustrations from a wide variety of animals, and 'The "Ascent of Man" verified by Embryology' followed by 'How Capitalism handicaps the Worker before birth very often' and 'Physical Degeneration and the necessity of State-Maintenance of the Children.' Fourthly there was a study of 'Communism in Nature', and finally 'Man's Power Over Nature and the Doom of Capitalism' in which humanity was traced from its origins in the animal world through its various stages up to the 'Coming of the World Commonwealth of Socialism.'<sup>5</sup>

Naturally, evolution and 'the survival of the fittest' came in for widespread use among members, although there was little consistency in the way the concepts were used. Bax and Quelch suggested that the struggle for existence and survival assumed a variety of forms besides the conflicts between individuals. There were antagonisms between the forces of nature, classes, races 'and most important of all, the struggle between different systems of society.'<sup>6</sup> The best adapted would survive, and under socialism this process would take a different form: then 'the struggle will be between different methods and forms of organisation for the exploitation of natural resources in the global interest, or for the most effective maintenance of the common social life.'<sup>7</sup>

For Jim Connell the author of the socialist anthem the Red Flag, the survival of the fittest was a natural occurrence applying to plants, animals and humans. It was a progressive force in human evolution which was being hindered in its progress by the emergence of

capitalism which distorted nature. Under capitalism class and not fitness was the arbiter of survival so that the unfit children of the rich could survive and pass on their imperfections to future generations, whereas those otherwise fitted to survive among the working class could perish because of adverse social circumstances. Only when capitalism was swept away could the laws of nature reassert themselves.<sup>8</sup> For a writer on the Social-Democrat in 1910 on the other hand, the survival of the fittest was a law that applied to animals and to human beings in their earlier stages of development, but did not apply to 'the higher races of mankind'.<sup>9</sup>

Another member applied the survival of the fittest to politics suggesting that it was political power that had hindered the natural dying out of capitalists who were the weakest class numerically. Ultimately however economic evolution was working in their favour. In politics those most suited to the changing environment were those who would survive, and as capitalism increasingly gave way to socialism, among the socialist organisations it was the SDF rather than the ILP or the Labour Party that was the most adapted to the circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

The depths to which this eclectic search for truth in popular science could take them is illustrated in the production and distribution by the SDF's printing house the Twentieth Century Press of a pamphlet on Socialism and Eugenics (1911) in which the aim was for 'The evolution of a race of beings physically beautiful, morally pure, soaring to an intellectual platform hitherto unconceived, living a full, happy, human life,

with liberty to develop it to the sublimest heights that which we call soul.' 11

In fairness to the SDF, eugenics and the ideal of using selective breeding to produce a race of beings pure of defects had still be be tainted by its associations with National Socialism in the inter-war years; at this point it could seem a logical extension of a striving for perfection in human affairs: the elimination of poverty, squalor and exploitation in the social sphere, linked with the elimination of disease, degeneracy and imperfections in the realm of organic human development. With a limited knowledge of popular science, and armed with socialist pamphlets the SDF member could become a modern renaissance being, with views on the whole gamut of social, scientific and cultural affairs. Sadly this led some up paths modern thinkers would be loath to tread, but the important thing was the expansive optimism and the willingness to strive for a new understanding of the world.

More theoretically informed members tried to incorporate dialectical reasoning into their evolutionary metaphors. J.B. Askew writing in the Social-Democrat in 1905, wrote that,

out of the very processes of evolutionary growth arise processes which apparently work in an opposite direction ... Progress ... [should be depicted] as a spiral chain, or a road winding up a mountain, which might seem to be always bringing the traveller back to the point from which he set out till he sees that it is ever and ever at a higher point; so progress seems to turn on itself, to return to its starting point, but only apparently. History never goes back on itself. You have, for instance, the restoration of Monarchy in France, but that was not the restoration of the old regime. It was a Monarchy of the modern high finance.



The instances could be multiplied ... but I think that that suffices to make clear the importance of the dialectic. 12

Bax, the most sophisticated and philosophically informed SDF member produced the most successful attempt to apply the dialectic to the evolutionary process of history. He began with primitive communism, the demise of which marked the beginning of what he called 'universal history.' From that point on history consisted of the working out of two sets of dialectical antagonisms, one between the individual and society and the other between nature and the mind. The latter was resolved in the religious sphere with the replacement of the early social religious forms with the later emphasis on individual salvation. The process to date had witnessed the progressive influence and the overall success of individualism, but it would culminate in the negation of the negation, wherein the superior forms of modern communism would replace the illusory benefits of advanced individualism which had created social and co-operative means of working in the productive process, despite its individualist objectives.

Now, civilisation, we have said, is the negation of ... primitive society as implying universal division, strife, and opposition. But if the next stage in evolution implies the negation of the opposition of which civilisation consists, it must mean a return in a sense to the conditions of primitive society. Two negations make an affirmation. The negation of civilisation, which is itself the negation of early society, must, therefore, mean a return to the essential characteristic of that society - i.e., Solidarity, Communism, or Socialism ... The passage from Primitive Communism to the Communism of the future was only possible through the mediation of History otherwise expressed, of Individualism. 13

Critics of the SDF often suggested that the process of evolution at work in history implied a gradual and inevitable process that made revolution unnecessary; evolutionary change was painted as not only an alternative to revolutionary change, but its antithesis. Hyndman's response to this was that

Those who try to draw a distinction between evolution and revolution or speak of evolutionary and revolutionary Socialism and Socialists, misunderstand the entire theory of sociological development as formulated by the whole scientific Socialist school. Revolution simply means that the evolution of society has reached the point where a complete transformation, both external and internal had become immediately inevitable.  
14

The division drawn by contemporaries between different types of socialists embodied different ideas about the transition to socialism. Evolutionary socialists were those who believed that the era of violence and insurrections had passed and that future change would come slowly and peacefully, for them it was 'possible to have their omelette without breaking eggs.'<sup>15</sup> This application of evolutionary theory was considered utopian by SDFers; revolutionists, said Harry Quelch,

accept the theory of evolution in its entirety. For them there is no finality. The Social Revolution is merely the outcome of social and economic development, and sudden violent, cataclysmic changes are but natural incidents in evolution. To them there is no contradiction or antithesis between evolution and revolution. 16

SDF views of social evolution, were not the only ways in which Darwin's insights into the natural world could be applied to society. Most notably Herbert

Spencer presented them as a paeon to laissez faire individualism, but when he did so as a part of an attack on socialism in an article in The Contemporary Review, Hyndman responded with a pamphlet. 'Mr. Herbert Spencer' he said, 'has cleared his mind of the cant of theology; but the cant of the profit-monger still holds his intelligence firmly in its grip.'<sup>17</sup> 'That "the survival of the fittest" means the permanent supremacy of human animals of the type of Jay Gould or Edward Watkins is an interpretation of the Darwinian theory of Natural Selection which has, at any rate, its humorous side.'<sup>18</sup> As an alternative Hyndman defended socialism which was for him

a distinct, scientific, historical theory, based upon political economy and the evolution of society, taking account of the progress due to class struggles in the past, noting carefully the misery and the inevitable antagonism engendered by our present system of production, and following the movement into the future with a view to handling the ever-increasing power of man over nature for the benefit of the whole community, not to pile up wealth for the capitalist class and their dependents. <sup>19</sup>

At a time when archaeology and anthropology were beginning to develop as recognisably modern disciplines, SDF members were appropriating the achievements and findings of earlier and more broad ranging mid-nineteenth century scientific thought.<sup>20</sup> In particular, after the publication in 1884 of Engels', The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, which was heavily dependent on the work of the anthropologist Lewis Morgan, the latter's findings were incorporated into their accounts of human historical development.<sup>21</sup> With the discovery of what was often referred to as 'primitive

communism' among tribal peoples it became clear to SDFers that 'the evolution of human society is a progress from Socialism to Socialism - from simple, limited, tribal Socialism of early man to the complex universal Socialism already prepared in the womb of time.'<sup>22</sup>

All of this led in the first instance to fanciful eulogies about happy communist savages and the great achievements of pre-historic cultures now that the wheel and fire could be shown to be the products of communism.<sup>23</sup> Using the works of Morgan, Marx and Engels they proceeded to produce a history of human evolution from this first stage to the dawn of its coming consummation. Following Morgan's analysis primitive communist societies were seen as forming part of a process by which societies passed from savagery through stages to civilisation.

The early communism broke down as a result of new economic conditions, the introduction of agriculture on a wider scale, the taming of domestic animals, the development of property in flocks, herds, and most significantly in slaves. It was also related to the development of the city and the emergence of the state, and out of this there arose social classes.<sup>24</sup> The consolidation and federation of the cities gave rise to 'the vast oriental civilisations with which universal history begins.'<sup>25</sup> Over time, 'conflicting motives of kinship and property were in perpetual antagonism', and eventually the 'revolutionary idea as expressed in property and local habitation inevitably won. Rights based on property qualification and such local habitation became sooner or later supreme'.<sup>26</sup> Slavery continued to

form an important basis of the later Greek and Roman civilisations, the latter becoming a corrupt society divided along class lines, its demise being hastened by barbarian invasions from German tribes.<sup>27</sup> After a period of transition following the collapse of the Roman civilisation based on slavery, feudalism developed.

Feudalism broke down as a result of competition from free cultivators and free craftsmen; serfs were emancipated 'because their position became first economically unsatisfactory to the community and then ethically wrong.'<sup>28</sup> There followed a 'Golden Age' of free men working their own land, producing goods for themselves and their families, with a sense of 'real freedom and sturdy well-being' and creating an environment which nurtured beautiful art. But it was not to last, economic development led away from individual production for use to social production for profit. Capitalism emerged, itself passing through the stages outlined in Marx's Capital of simple co-operation, manufacture and machine industry.<sup>29</sup> In more popularly conceived works, the whole process was often simplified down into a progression of the 'doms': from 'slavedom, serfdom and wagedom' to freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Raphael Samuel has noted how, when writing histories of England, the first British marxists differed little from the liberal-radical historians who had preceded them, having much in common for instance with the accounts produced by Thorold Rogers and J.R. Green. Much emphasis was placed on struggles over the land, and enclosure was presented as the major example of capitalist appropriation. Peasant risings rather than

industrial strikes were given centre stage as instances in the class war; they took sides in the English Civil War producing protestant-biased views of the events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and most notably they posited a 'Golden Age' for the English yeomen and artisans in the fifteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

The point also needs to be made however, that most of the historical works emanating from SDFers were attempts to popularise and pad out the work of Marx and Engels, and not all of their supposed deviations can be laid at the door of the liberal-radical historians. The fifteenth century 'Golden Age' for instance would on the surface seem incompatible with accounts in which this period was witness to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The accounts of Hyndman and Morris, Morris and Bax, and Hyndman's own Historical Basis, suggest a period of enlightened individualism with workers free of either landlord or capitalist, owning their means of production, and with the product of their labour going substantially to themselves and their families.<sup>32</sup> However a careful reading of these histories suggests that the seminal text from which they all derived their historical analyses was Engels' Socialism: Utopian and Scientific. Their accounts were attempts to flesh out that of Engels.

Before capitalistic production, i.e., in the Middle Ages, the system of petty industry obtained generally, based upon the private property of the labourers in their means of production; in the country, the agriculture of the small peasant, freeman or serf; in the towns the handicrafts organised in guilds. The instruments of labour - land, agricultural implements, the workshop, the tool - were the instruments of labour of single individuals, adapted for the use of

one worker, and, therefore, of necessity, small, dwarfish, circumscribed. 33

Further,

In the medieval stage of evolution of the production of commodities, the question as to the owner of the product of labour could not arise. The individual producer, as a rule, had, from raw material belonging to himself, and generally his own handiwork, produced it with his own tools, by the labour of his own hands or his family. There was no need for him to appropriate the new product. It belonged wholly to him, as a matter of course. His property in the product was, therefore, based upon his own labour. 34

With the help of Charles Darwin, Lewis Morgan, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels among others, the SDF muddled their way towards an understanding of the universe and their place in it. Despite the limitations in their analyses, it was ~~a place of change~~ capable of being understood through the application of scientific concepts. Engels believed in 1893 that they had reduced the Marxist theory of development to a rigid orthodoxy and consequently had become a mere sect which had 'as Hegel says, come from nothing through nothing to nothing.'<sup>35</sup> They themselves believed, that with the help of Engels, they had come from socialism, through savagery, barbarism, civilisation, and feudalism to capitalism; and were on the road to socialism. The real test of a theory of historical development from the point of view of socialist activity was the role given to human agency in the process of change. To what extent was it possible to influence the events they had analysed? It is the answer to this question that marks out a sect from a serious political organisation and will be the concern of the rest of this chapter.

With the application of the scientific method to the study of society, the nature of this method could at first sight seem plain and uncontroversial: collectivism was the 'necessary outcome of the current position', which itself was the 'necessary outcome' of preceding conditions.<sup>36</sup> There was even a suggestion that the parts of Capital in which Marx expressed 'hatred of the misery producing system' conflicted with 'Marx's knowledge of historical necessity'.<sup>37</sup> However, even in some of the earliest statements from leading SDF members an awareness was shown of the limitations of a strictly determinist position. Hyndman in his The Historical Basis of Socialism said in the Preface that 'the manner in which wealth is produced, the power, that is, which man has over the forces of nature, is the basis of the whole social, political, and religious forms of the period at which the examination is made.' He qualified this by saying that 'Forms of social intercourse, custom, law, political institutions, and religion no doubt influence even economic methods long after their origin has been forgotten'. For him such factors constituted the conservative aspect of human society, holding back 'changes made necessary' by modifications in the system of production. 38

Bax too had shown from his earlier writings that he was neither a strict materialist nor an idealist. He outlined the basis of his outlook in the philosophical journal Modern Thought in 1881, and was to remain consistent in his views for the rest of his life. He sought to reconcile the two positions by means of the 'alogical principle'. This was a concept of his own



creation, which was essentially a space in a rational or logical interpretation of history for the element of chance. The concept was conceived of dialectically in that the end product was a result of the interaction of the logical and the alogical. It was the former which dominated in the long term, but the latter provided the time and space in which social evolution worked itself out, and therefore gave human agency scope to influence historical events. Every logical process he said must realise itself, but 'the determination of ... where and when is a matter of chance, of unreason.'

The logical processes of social development, as of every other development (biological, for example), in so far as they are embodied in the time series as concrete, may be arrested or delayed at any stage. They must, it is true, assert themselves in their completeness at some time or other, but not necessarily at any particular time or in any particular case. Individuals, as such, may therefore very easily accelerate or retard indefinitely the course of progress (since they are working in their own element, that of chance), in spite of the fact that progress is in the last resort logically determined in its main outlines.' 39

At the particular juncture of the early eighties, these issues and debates were very much in the background. In much the same way as Marx and Engels had felt it necessary to stress the way in which history was economically determined in response to idealism, the first English marxists stressed the economic aspects of their arguments in order to differentiate themselves from the prevailing liberal orthodoxy.

Throughout the popular pamphlet written by Hyndman and Morris, A Summary of the Principles of Socialism, economic factors were the crucial ones in determining

economic and social development, more so than in Hyndman's The Historical Basis of Socialism for instance. Even in their Golden Age in the fifteenth century, 'The economic forms, the methods of production, were the direct cause of this universal well-being and sturdy independence.'<sup>40</sup> This stressing of the economic aspect of history, although in advance of much that had passed as 'Radical' versions of history could lead to a very narrow view of the process involved.<sup>41</sup> Edward Aveling, soon after his return to the Federation in the mid-nineties published a pamphlet on socialism and radicalism. In this he declared that the dying out of capitalism and its replacement by socialism was 'historical necessity':

How soon the end will come no man can say. But it is coming as the result of inevitable physical, and historical laws. None of us can prevent it. And we can do very little to impede or to help it on. But what little we can do, let it be on the side of the movement, even if only from the poor motive of being on the winning side. 42

That such views would be unlikely to lead to positive action or practical measures on the part of socialists is clear.

However, while these views were being propagated Bax continued to outline and develop his own particular view of historical causation and the role of different factors in this process. Until the end of the nineties there were no expressions of disagreement with Bax, no sign that his views were felt to conflict with those held by other socialists, and little in Britain in the way of controversy over this question. The only hint of theoretical problems at the time came from Germany, the

homeland of philosophical disputation, and these were to remain unknown to British socialists until their disagreements began to be aired at the end of the century.

Bax set out his views in an essay, 'The Economical Basis of History'.<sup>44</sup> He began with a straightforward and simple case for a philosophical materialism when applied to human affairs. The economic interpretation of history rested 'on a well-known, simple and obvious law of human nature', that our 'animal nature' must be satisfied before all else, 'the satisfaction of material, animal, wants' he said 'takes precedence of all else in human affairs.' Under certain conditions 'economics' became 'the motive-power of progress'. Class antagonisms and economic pressures were causal factors of historical change and he suggested that these were present in the Reformation, the struggle between paganism and Christianity during the fourth century, the end of the 'mediaeval system' and the success of the Protestants in England. The mistake however was 'to regard the economic side of things as in all periods of history equally determinant.' It had been true in the past that 'the material conditions of existence, the modes of the production and distribution of wealth' had been 'the leading factor', but this had not been the case throughout history. There were intervals when these factors were counterbalanced, 'periods of quiescence'. Philosophic speculation, although only arising in a class which was 'economically safe and sound, has no positive connexion with the prevailing modes of the production and distribution of wealth', but these modes could prepare

the way for the acceptance of ideas by 'the popular mind'.<sup>44</sup>

The economic interpretation of human evolution said Bax pre-supposed the existence of private property and therefore did not apply unequivocally to earlier prehistoric periods when primitive communism was the economic basis of society. At such times societies were always under 'economic pressure ... from natural causes', but in their internal development 'economics' did not 'occupy the constant predominance' it did in modern societies. He suggested that speculative belief could have an important effect on the development of such societies, breaking down 'primitive forms of the gens and tribe', and giving rise to the patriarchal family and the early phases of monarchy. For Bax the process at work in all societies was a complex one and contained elements of the dialectical method, and he spoke of 'social life' as a 'synthesis' with its 'basis' in 'the production and distribution of the necessaries of material welfare', but only as 'an element merely of a synthesis'.<sup>45</sup>

Overall however he assigned an inferior role to non-economic factors in human evolution. He repeated the notion, noted in Hyndman's Historical Basis of Socialism above, that religion constituted a conservative element hindering the course of political and social change. In Bax's schema the role of material conditions bore a direct relationship to the extent to which wealth was held in private hands, and this had reached a high point at the end of the nineteenth century: 'The mere economic machinery enslaves us to-day in a manner which it has never before done throughout history.' The

contradictions involved in this would be resolved with the collectivisation of the means of production, only then would economic processes be consciously determined by the will of men. In this 'post-historic society', the conditions he outlined as being necessary for economics to be the motive-power of progress would no longer apply, classes and private property having been abolished: 'Here then, for the first time, will Human Evolution have once for all subordinated its economic conditions, ... Here, for the first time, will the economical interest definitely cease to be the determining power of human progress.' 46

Bax's ideas on the materialist conception of history are usually regarded as exceptional, differing from the generally accepted views of those within the SDF and those of other socialists.<sup>47</sup> Bax had studied philosophy, was well read in the works of German philosophers and was aware of the problems and difficulties of a materialist theory of history. Given this interpretation, Bax's opinions were isolated and the rest of the SDF held on to a narrowly defined materialistic view of history, strictly determinist and completely oblivious to the existence of Bax's qualifications. Bax's views however, far from being hermetically sealed from the rest of the SDF were discussed, accepted, modified, attacked and dismissed by different people with differing outlooks and temperaments, and contrasting views on the value and meaning of the materialist conception of history. The relationship of Bax's views to the ideas of other members of the SDF can only be considered in the light of those

ideas.

Debates over this issue were at their clearest and sharpest in the pages of the Social-Democrat. Prior to the production of the journal in 1897 there was little sign outside of Bax's work that the complexities of the materialist conception of history posed any problems or gave rise to disagreements within the SDF. That the Social-Democrat was the place for such disputation on the issue of historical causation was clear from the front cover of each issue where the declaration appeared:

In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organisation necessary following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch. - KARL MARX.

Prior to 1900 there seems to have been a great deal of inconsistency among members on the issues, yet contradictory opinions did not give rise to controversy. That strong views on the role of non-economic factors were beginning to develop beside those of Bax is apparent from some of the pronouncements of John E. Ellam in 1899.<sup>48</sup>

The debate about the materialist conception of history took on a practical form with the analyses of the causes of the Boer War and arguments about the position the SDF should adopt in the light of them. This is particularly noteworthy as debates about historical causation had up to this point relied upon Greco-Roman classical history, the Reformation and aspects of the middle ages for their foundation. The Boer War was however a live issue and the relationship between theory

and practice over a concrete subject was at stake.

The controversy opened with an article by Thomas Kennedy entitled 'Was War Inevitable?' In short his answer was yes. Class war he argued was an inevitable expression of the capitalist regime and would continue until that system had 'by the historical, evolutionary method, exhausted itself' and the new era arisen. The class war took various forms and was expressed through a variety of mediums. The South African war had its roots in the discovery of gold and the development of the mining industry, but conditions in South Africa 'prevented capital from carrying on its part of the struggle profitably, by means of war in the industrial sense, war in the military sense ensued.' 'War', he continued 'is implied in capitalist commerce, and its inevitable accompaniment.' He concluded that socialists had not acted in accordance with the facts and had consequently responded incorrectly; in particular he was critical of those socialists who had joined with the Liberals in labelling the war 'one man's war' (i.e. Chamberlain's).<sup>49</sup>

The article prompted a response from Ellam. He agreed that war was the inevitable outcome of capitalism, but denied that such wars could only be prevented once the capitalist system had been replaced. It was the job of socialists to 'introduce counteracting influences, and to evoke, as far as possible, factors that shall lead to its disintegration.' They must show people that war was the result of capitalism and when this was understood the transformation would occur. In particular he accused Kennedy of determinism:

The transition from capitalism to collectivism is as inevitable in the order of social evolution as the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Determinists realise this. But determinists seeking finality do not all realise the fact that this evolution can be stimulated, and the decadence of the system, to which our movement supplies the disintegrating factors, considerably hastened ... 50

He suggested that although the present was 'the sum-total effect of all past causation', the future 'turns upon the initiative of the present'. Thus man had a limited control over a conditioned future. The nature and extent of this initiative 'we do not know, and have no means of knowing.' Consequently they refused to lose themselves in the world of metaphysics and declared themselves materialists. '[A]bsolute finality' was unattainable and it was because of Kennedy's failure to realise this that he had gone astray. His determinism was 'simply another word for helpless fatalism', and seeing a drunken man staggering towards a precipice, he would merely speculate on the inevitability of his being dashed to pieces. He concluded by marvelling that Kennedy should consider it worthwhile writing articles protesting against actions he must have regarded as inevitable.<sup>51</sup> The argument continued in the following issues of The Social-Democrat. Ellam attacked the '"gross" materialist position' that everything including the mind was a manifestation of matter. A belief that mind was merely the product of a physical constitution would lead to a condition of 'complete mental atrophy'.<sup>52</sup>

Hyndman too intervened in the debate, to take up cudgels against Kennedy. Taking Kennedy's argument to its logical conclusion he said, resulted in the



elimination of ethics, either personal or social: 'vice and virtue, honour and dishonour, nobility and meanness, have no longer any significance whatever.' Unlike Ellam, he accepted Kennedy's assertion that men were sentient automata and that mind was 'only a function of matter', but argued that once it was understood what our automatic nature was capable of, it was possible to gain control over our own automatism. Mind, said Hyndman, 'though emanating from and conditioned by matter, reacts on matter, modifies, affects and even revolutionises matter, when once mind has been developed and has become, within limits, a law unto itself.' Chamberlain must accept responsibility 'in bringing about a war which itself I deny to have been inevitable'. Slavery, feudalism and capitalism were 'necessary and inevitable stages in the growth of our race', but individuals bore responsibility for their misdeeds. It was possible for people to outrage 'the ethics of their time'.<sup>53</sup>

Hyndman, like Ellam attempted to steer a course between historical inevitability and human agency or 'responsibility', without overcoming the theoretical difficulties involved. The dialectic, that deux et machina of many later marxists attempting to overcome this dilemma, was not a part of his vocabulary, instead he took refuge in a theory of ethical responsibility. Responsibility developed over time with the development of human society and eventually gave man a degree of control over his surroundings. History was determined, but it was determined in such a way that it would eventually cease to be determined and man would end up in control of his environment and responsible for his

actions.

In the continuing debate, Kennedy dug in his determinist heels, while Ellam attempted to define the extent to which human history was inevitable. Man, he said, was 'conditioned' with regard to physical constitution and social environment, but not 'ideation, aspiration and will', then 'he' was master of his own destiny and 'Realisation of the power to will provides a consciousness of moral freedom.' Readers interested in the question could do no better than to read John Stuart Mill. He concluded his contribution to the debate thus:

Future material developments depend entirely upon whether our efforts are rightly directed or not. It is our business to understand the trend of social events, to place ourselves in line, as it were, with evolution, and so turn events to good account as they occur. Thus man possesses a definitely unconditioned control over the future, and can make of evolution a process uniting the greatest efficiency with absolute social harmony and individual well-being. By exercising this control wrongly, or, following logically the determinist doctrine, by not exercising at all, he will drift to the inevitable goal through ages of otherwise unnecessary wrong-doing, suffering and misery. 54

In their debate Ellam and Kennedy were both keen to represent history as following a particular pre-determined course. The major difference was over the nature of the positive role man could consciously play. For Kennedy the progression was inevitable and would occur regardless. Likewise for Ellam, but in his account the process and its timing could be affected by human intervention. It was possible by positive action to bring the result about earlier and influence the nature of the outcome. Negative action or inaction could lead to a postponement of the transition to socialism, or a

negative step into a period of barbarism pushing the accomplishment of socialism into the far distant future.

At the heart of the disagreement was a philosophical dispute about the nature and influence of the human mind. To Kennedy it was made up of matter and functioned as such: his materialism was that of early materialist philosophers and was incorporated into his theory of historical development. Ellam held to the same broad theory of development but without limiting himself to the same kind of narrow materialist basis. The power of mind for Ellam was an 'unknown quantity'<sup>55</sup> which could not be grasped, but which gave man control over his identity, and was determined somehow through the process of evolution. This gave man a free will which could be guided by morality and wisdom. Ellam's notion of free will owed much to contemporary liberal philosophy. He acknowledged his debt to Mill, but his notion of freedom used positively as a factor in social development had much in common with the 'positive freedom' espoused by T.H.Green and his followers. Hyndman although rejecting Kennedy's conclusions, was willing to accept the basis of his materialism. Unlike Ellam he accepted mind as a function of matter but having done this imported a moral responsibility and a freedom of action similar in effect to that in Ellam's analysis.

It is interesting to contrast the opinions of Bax with those of the antagonists in this debate. His opinions on this question came across most clearly in his earlier dispute with Kautsky which was first published in Neue Zeit in 1896 and 1897. It is worth considering this debate as it helps us to clarify the views of Bax, and to

place his ideas and those of other SDFers in the context of the views of Kautsky, perhaps the leading spokesman of Second International orthodoxy on questions of marxist theory. The controversy is also important because it was presented to SDF members reading the Social-Democrat where it was reprinted during 1902 and 1903 as an example of Bax defending his ideas against a stricter marxist position. The debate was long and involved, but it was longer on the part of Kautsky than that of Bax, Kautsky using his editorial discretion to limit the size of Bax's pieces and express his own views over a series of lengthy articles.<sup>56</sup>

In the first of Kautsky's contributions printed in the Social-Democrat he replied to an earlier article by Bax.<sup>57</sup> As a 'materialist historian' Kautsky did not neglect the 'psychological factor' or the role of ideas in history, but the sequence of ideas was 'determined by law'; to every economic epoch there corresponded distinct forms of religion, morals and law, and he refused to accept Bax's 'psychological motor power'.<sup>58</sup>

For Bax many of the defenders of the materialist conception of history were too extreme and one-sided. They failed to take into account any causal factors that were not economic. One of his favourite illustrations was that of the poet: if a poet did not eat he would not write poems, but this could not account for the poetic qualities of his work. In the 'totality of the human development' Bax suggested that there were two principal factors, 'a psychological motive power' and 'the mode of life' or economic conditions. 'The action and reaction of both these two factors forms historical evolution';

he also talked of reciprocal action and the independence of the two. The fault of the 'neo-Marxist writers' he concluded was that they used the category of cause and effect,

this category is in the last resort not applicable. The true category of historical research is, namely, that of 'action and reaction' (Wechselwirkung). Political and economic institutions are, taken by themselves, no independent whole, which could function as cause, but they are dependent parts of the whole. By themselves they are nothing. Economic formations make history only in connection with human mind and will  
... 59

Here we see Bax the philosopher rejecting notions of causality and introducing basic elements of the dialectical method into his analysis.

One of, Kautsky's major criticisms of Bax was that he confused material interests with material conditions. Bax, would, 'explain the methods of production from the class interests, and not vice versa! According to Bax, it is not necessary to study the method of production to understand the class interests of capitalists and proletariat, but vice versa.'<sup>60</sup> This was a particularly apt criticism of Bax's views. Invariably Bax's 'economic factors' were class interests or 'animal' desires for such things as food and shelter. His understanding of materialism was grounded in a philosophical materialism which saw the world in terms of 'matter' as a determinant, in which "the idea is simply the function of the brain".<sup>61</sup> With such a limiting definition of materialism, Bax was bound to reject this as a sufficient grounding for his world view. His materialism was not the same as that of those like Kautsky, who saw the world

in terms of the determining influences of forces and relations of production. Bax's criticisms of Kautsky followed a philosophical logic, but were flawed by his inability to comprehend fully Kautsky's position owing to his narrow conception of materialism.

In a later article Bax professed to agree with three quarters of what Kautsky said, though he continued to refute the 'extreme school'; to Kautsky this merely showed how little Bax had grasped his arguments.<sup>62</sup> Kautsky, quoting Marx, said he was trying to distinguish 'the "hidden foundation" of the social total processes, from the "numberless empirical circumstances" which condition their appearance at any time'.<sup>63</sup> For Kautsky Bax's talk of interaction, and of economic relations with the intellect predominating in different periods was proof of his eclecticism. Kautsky praised the role of polemic in making new theories clearer, and suggested that his debate with Bax was analogous to those between Duhring and Engels, and Marx and Proudon, with Kautsky himself playing the roles of Marx and Engels!<sup>64</sup>

This debate helps to give us a clearer idea of the nature and limitations of Bax's position. Kautsky made particularly clear the inadequacies of Bax's notion of materialism. In order to overcome the problems inherent in this limited materialism for a theory of historical development, Bax introduced among other things a 'psychological motive power' (something akin to his earlier 'alogical principal'). The difficulties and incompatibilities of relating this idea to Bax's limited materialism were resolved by introducing elements of dialectical reasoning into his arguments. This should

not however lead us to see Bax as a 'dialectical materialist' in the later sense of the concept. His philosophical background and possibly his earlier friendship with Engels meant that he was aware of dialectical modes of reasoning. Mingling the dialectical method with his limited materialism was less a case of theoretical rectitude than of philosophical eclecticism. Ethics, psychology and materialism were mixed together to produce Bax's world view, and what could be better for breaking down the inconsistencies in this metaphysical mish-mash than the dialectic?

Up to this point what we have seen among all SDF theorists is a very limited view of materialism. There was a tendency for those who adopted a purely materialist position (like Kennedy) to come across as extremely limited and unconvincing determinists, their position obviously flawed and their arguments weak. The shortcomings of such a materialism led the more perceptive within the SDF to search for a missing link which could make a materialist position tenable. Bax turned to a psychological motive force and a theory of ethics, Hyndman to a very similar but less sophisticated theory of ethical responsibility, and Ellam to a theory of social evolution guided by free will.

It has been suggested that marxian analysis denies the need for an ethical basis or a moral philosophy for socialism<sup>65</sup> and the ethical nature of the ILP is often contrasted with the supposed scientific and harsh SDF. In fact, the absence of too strict a determinism meant that the organisation's leading theorists spent a good deal of their time searching for and trying to expound a

socialist ethics.<sup>66</sup>

After the republication of the Bax-Kautsky debate, the meaning of materialism took on a more orthodox form among certain members. For some a strict materialism could involve a technological determinism of a kind prevalent among later marxists<sup>67</sup> interpreting changes in modes of production as responses to the application of new technology:

With the great motive power of electricity actually within the grip of the present generation, are we extravagant in assuming that in another two generations, when electricity has become the handmaiden of the municipality, that the economic relations of society within that time will undergo as great a change as steam created. 68

For those coming to see a more carefully defined materialism as the dominant influence, the role of Kautsky in connecting materialism and practical activity was important:

As Kautsky truly says in his life of Engels: 'We must not attempt to forcibly surprise natural development or to diplomatically outwit it. "We have learned to wait," said Engels to me, and "you must in turn learn to wait your time." But by such waiting he did not mean waiting with folded arms and open mouth until one of the roasted doves of spontaneous development should fly down the throat, but waiting in tireless labour - labour organisation and propaganda.'

69

But the linking of materialism and action was taken to new heights and expressed with a rhetorical flourish lacking in earlier accounts, by Theodore Rothstein in 1905. On 'the fateful day of January 22' he said,

the proletariat of St.Petersburg sealed with their own blood the claim of Marxist sociology to the title of science, and proved



that in the discoveries made by Marx we at last possess a means of social prognostication of wonderful magnitude. 70

He continued,

If historical destiny is at all amenable to human effort it is only on the condition that this effort is itself in accord with the trend of that destiny; and if, as the events have proved with astonishing clearness, the trend has been prognosticated with an unparalleled accuracy down to its very details, it is the supreme duty of everyone who wishes to see the destiny realised, to emphasise that fact so as to shape his effort accordingly. 71

During the course of 1905 and 1906 criticisms of Bax's position became increasingly pronounced and arguments about the nature of the materialist conception of history became more developed and sophisticated. J.B. Askew in an article on philosophy, considered among other things, Bax's notion of the alogic. He suggested that there were elements of chance and the unknown in everything, but this did not mean an entirely new explanation was required.

Besides, what is this alogical element? What does it explain? It does not even explain itself, much less anything else. Its qualities are purely negative, and, personally, I see no reason to invoke a ghostly spectre, even to save free will. When Bax saves the situation by suggesting that the causal chain is conditioned by an infinite number of circumstances, so that one can never be quite certain that chance is not somewhere to be found, I am reminded of Lewis Carroll's 'Hunting of the Snark,' rather than a serious discussion of a scientific problem.' 72

In 1905 after the debate with Kautsky had been published in the Social-Democrat, Bax read a paper to the Central Branch of the SDF reiterating his views and

criticising Kautsky for 'shifting his ground' in the course of their dispute. Towards the end of this paper, published in the Social-Democrat, he expressed the view that the analogy of economic foundation and an intellectual superstructure was 'inexact' because it did not express the reciprocal interaction involved between material and psychological factors. He ended with 'the frank recognition of the dual nature of ... the evolution of human society.'<sup>73</sup>

This article and especially its final assertion raised the hackles of Theodore Rothstein: Bax's criticisms of Marx would have been better left unpublished. It showed up a 'predilection for eclecticism of the worst type'. Marx had done away with dualism and 'laid the foundations of a real, unadulterated monism', and now Bax had reintroduced 'the worst features of modern bourgeois thinking.'<sup>74</sup> He repeated many of Kautsky's criticisms of Bax. In particular he said that Bax had too narrow a view of the economic factor, 'when we speak of the economic factor we do not mean by it the material interests of an individual or even of a class (as conceived by it), but what Marx has called "the totality of the relations of production".'<sup>75</sup> He then quoted the famous passage from Marx's Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy in which he spoke of the economic structure as 'the real basis' of the legal and political superstructure. Bax's way of explaining historical development in relation to two factors, with events not explained by one being explained by the other, Rothstein pronounced unscientific and like 'the proverbial man in

the street.' To claim that Marxists were one-sided and mechanical was to misrepresent them. He quoted Marx and Engels in his defence, and their precise meanings were elaborated and analysed: 'man is an organic being which thinks and feels. This is a biological fact, which is quite independent of 'economics'. But the form, how and what he thinks, and how and what he feels, depends directly on the economic conditions.'<sup>76</sup>

Religion was used as an example of this process, different religions 'corresponding'<sup>77</sup> to different economic stages. He analysed consciousness and its forms, arguing that only when a social consciousness arose did it become a historical fact, but then its contents would be determined by the totality of the relations of production. The same applied to will,

We say, as always was said, that history is made by man - by his intelligence, by his feelings, by his will; only instead of making man and his powers a mere plaything in the hands of blind chance - for that is what the expression 'psychological spontaneity' and such like really imply - we make them the expression and the bearers of the law.<sup>78</sup>

This process was then applied to the socialist movement and the development of a 'special proletarian psychology'. He denied the spontaneity of any psychology and likened it to a silkworm's cocoon: it was both the proletarian's product and his means of further development.<sup>79</sup>

The significance of this article is that it helped the development inside the SDF of a more mature understanding of the meaning of materialism within a marxist tradition. It is perhaps significant in this respect that Rothstein came from a Russian background;

his rejection of Bax's 'dualism' and talk of Marx's 'monism' were based on a knowledge of Plekanov's writings.<sup>80</sup> The course of his arguments suggests that Kautsky was equally important.

Bax defended his ideas at length and Hyndman also jumped to his defence.<sup>81</sup> Rothstein said Hyndman, adopted the wrong 'style', he 'apparently forgot that he was discussing with a man, who, ... is possessed of quite exceptional learning, and who, in the domain of pure philosophy, has shown himself, beyond dispute, to be one of the most acute intellects of his time.'<sup>82</sup> Rothstein wrote of him 'as if he were a mere sciolist'. The main developments in human society had been influenced by economic causes and when Marx and Engels had systematised the materialist conception of history it had been necessary to emphasise this. But it was important to recognise 'that there is something in history beyond the annals of production and distribution.' Mind had to be taken into account, the 'psychical motive' having dominated the physical motive for long periods. He accepted Bax's argument that history had two main factors, the material or economic, and 'the second, always present, and at special periods dominant, the psychical or mental factor.' With no mention of the central role assigned by Bax to the process of interaction, he finished by saying that Marx should not be placed on a pedestal.<sup>83</sup>

In the following month Rothstein returned to the fray much humbled by Hyndman's strictures: 'Bax may be a god, and I may be an insignificant beetle; and yet I make bold to assert, in as plain English as a foreigner

can command, that he does not know the subject he is discussing.<sup>84</sup> A number of 'bourgeois' writers were cited and quoted at length to show that they were saying the same thing as Bax. What Bax had regarded as conclusions on Marx's theory 'is in reality but the fag-end of his pre-Socialist way of thinking.' Bax's notion that non-economic factors were more important in the past was mocked at. Rothstein argued at length the case for his 'historical materialism', pointing to the causal relationship of 'economic series' in the impulse to observation and to reflection, and the way in which the conditions of life provided the foundation and the problems with which the human mind was confronted before it could arrive at the truth. On the role of individuals in history, 'it is only when ... individual wills and consciousness coalesce into a social will that they collectively acquire an historical value.'<sup>85</sup> This conflict between 'Marxists' and their 'opponents' was for Rothstein the old battle between materialists and idealists. In strong language Rothstein declared it to be a 'wretched dualism, the handmaid of theology and reaction,' and its combination with socialism was a 'curious sight.'<sup>86</sup>

Bax responded to this challenge in an article that highlighted both the limitations of his own position and his perceptiveness. He described the different senses in which he believed 'causal efficacy can be ascribed to economic conditions.'<sup>87</sup> The list he drew up showed that his conception of materialism had not been advanced or modified over the years despite the debates he had participated in and the articles in which its limitations

had been stressed and an alternative clearly set out. Nonetheless, his 'synthetic theory of history' was succinctly summarised. In it the 'psychic side' of evolution had a 'relative independence' of its own, unlike the case with 'one-sided economic determinism'.

According to the synthetic doctrine of history, social evolution as a whole, is, in the last resort, reducible to two elements, material (largely economic) conditions, and intellectual and emotional activity. The latter, up to a certain point, follows its own line of causation, but is also acted on by, and, in its own turn, reacts upon, economic conditions. In every concrete phase of social evolution you can trace these two elements in the total result. But the psychic activity has a double character. On the one side it can be traced as a causal series, and therefore is not 'spontaneous.' On the other hand, it has a side that is not wholly reducible to law - that of personality, of individual intelligence and will as such. This is the incalculable element, the unknown quantity in history, accelerating, retarding, and modifying phases of social evolution in their realisation. Such, in a word, is the position of the synthetic doctrine of history. 88

The limitations in Bax's materialism, make him a 'worse' marxist than his peers who were beginning to develop a maturer understanding of historical materialism with the help of continental theorists, particularly Kautsky. However the very limitations in the materialism of Bax forced him to develop a more active role for human agency and helped him to steer clear of too pronounced an economic reductionism.

In the following years the controversy over historical materialism died down somewhat in the pages of the Social-Democrat as more pragmatic concerns came to the fore. As the twentieth century progressed the SDF seems generally to have been less concerned with the

issues which generated so much heat at the turn of the century. In the course of 1911 space was given in The Social-Democrat to someone calling themselves Huw Menai, who was able to deliver an elaborate attack on the very foundations of historical materialism in a lengthy article spread over two issues, which the editor presumably published to encourage polemic. The responses to it showed that there was life still left in the issue and that there had been further development and refinement in the ideas of those who tackled these problems.<sup>89</sup> This debate shows up some of the limitations and the advances since the discussions at the turn of the century. Menai in attacking materialism as the foundation of historical materialism limited himself to discrediting the philosophical position which asserts the centrality of matter. For some this still constituted the foundation of their materialism, and his attack was well aimed. The most astute reply came from H.J. Stenning, whose case was firmly based in the works of Marx and Engels as well as that of Kautsky. Further, he incorporated the dialectic and his position was much more akin to that of continental socialists. Marxists today still disagree over the problems of historical causation, but it is generally conceded that Second International orthodoxy as represented by Kautsky was too rigid and deterministic.<sup>90</sup> Views within the SDF varied from those whose rigidity made Kautsky seem flexible particularly in the period before 1900, through to Bax, who continued to defend his position despite the sophistication of his fellow members who were increasingly moving into line with Second International orthodoxy.

The problems of the practical results and interpretations of the materialist conception of history within the SDF has always been difficult. For Dona Torr and Henry Collins, the SDF had a narrow orthodox stance which led them to neglect the potential of trade unionism, waiting on the course of history rather than the activity of the working class to bring about socialism.<sup>91</sup> The clearest expression of this view was that of the Fabian W.S. Sanders recalling his experiences as a young member of the Battersea branch of the SDF in 1888.

I had learned as a result of my study of the Marxian system that man is entirely a creature of external circumstances; that social and economic evolution takes its own course regardless of man's will or desires, and that he cannot, broadly speaking, effect it in any way, at least consciously; that society is rapidly developing into a condition in which the possessors of wealth and capital would be exceedingly few, the propertyless proletarians overwhelmingly numerous; and that at a moment, not determinable, the great mass of disinherited workers, who become increasingly miserable as the few becomes increasingly wealthy, would discover the power of numbers, rise up in their myriads, violently expropriate the handful of expropriators, and establish the Socialist Commonwealth. 92

They were led to believe he said, that one night they would go to bed living under capitalism and the next day they would wake up in a socialist state.<sup>93</sup> This account was a reminiscence written fifty years later, and tells us more about Sanders' view of contemporary marxists in the late 1920s than it does about the SDF, but it is often cited as typifying the narrowness of SDF theory.<sup>94</sup> Undoubtedly some members were limited economic determinists, but many held a belief in the capacity of



human agency to influence events. Economic evolution provided them with a positivist belief in progress and the coming of socialism. The economy they believed, was developing in a socialist direction, but this alone was not enough. Socialist transformation required both economic development and an understanding of the potential of that development.<sup>95</sup> Because economic evolution was so advanced there was an enthusiasm about the potential for the achievement of socialism in their own time.<sup>96</sup> Hyndman observed the way that the Japanese had been able to accomplish the transition from 'Middle-Age Feudalism to modern capitalism' in the span of one generation;

if, I say, they have thus been able to rush through the social stages in one lifetime, which it cost empires that preceded them centuries to traverse, what might not the Socialist Party accomplish by organised and fearless effort, now that we know we are ready for the next great change? Have not we Socialists become somewhat too automatic and evolutionary, in the somnolent sense, of late years? 97

Hyndman was particularly impressed by the willingness of the Japanese to die for their ideals, and he contrasted their experience with that of the German Social Democrats. There were three million of them, they had control of a large portion of the German army, they knew what they wanted, and their economy was ripe for change. 'They have had a revolutionary party for 40 years - just the time of the Japanese uprising. Where is their revolution?'<sup>98</sup> In Britain the second half of the equation which had economic evolution on one side and educated consciousness on the other, was missing, so the SDF like their German counterparts worked practically in

the circumstances in which they found themselves. Their practical activities will be considered in a later chapter, but their active participation and leadership of working class struggles over wages, conditions, unemployment, the eight hour day, municipal improvements and so on, activities which suggest that they were trying to organise the working class politically for socialism, do not rest easily with the view of the SDF as dogmatic adherents to a limited determinism.

On the materialist conception of history there was no clear 'position' that can be regarded as authoritative for the SDF. Using popular science, and the work of Darwin, Morgan, Marx and Engels, they developed views on the nature of historical evolution. With regard to historical causation a variety of opinions were held and over time the kind of historical materialism associated with German Social Democracy became increasingly the norm. Overall SDF views were not as restrictive as has been suggested, there were plenty of individuals arguing that they had a role to play in the achievement of socialism and working from that premise. The road to socialism may have been guaranteed, but sufficient members believed that it would require hard work on their part to ensure a timely delivery into the Co-operative Commonwealth.

FOOTNOTES

1. H.M. Hyndman, The Economics of Socialism (London, 1909), pp.256-7; Justice, 16 August 1890, p.3; H.M. Hyndman, Further Reminiscences (London, 1912), p.336.
2. Justice, 26 January 1884, p.3; Edward Aveling, Charles Darwin and Karl Marx: A Comparison (London, 1897); J. Addison, 'The Survival of the Fittest in Politics', The Social-Democrat, XIV, No.7, (July 1910), pp.299-300.
3. John E. Ellam, 'The Marxian Position', The Social-Democrat, XII, No.4, (April 1908), p.146.
4. *ibid.*, pp.146-7.
5. Henry F. Northcote, Syllabus of Course of Five Lantern Lectures on 'Evolution and the Coming of Social-Democracy' (London, 1910); see also J. Addison, 'The Survival of the Fittest'.
6. E. Belfort Bax, and H. Quelch, A New Catechism of Socialism (London, 1902), pp.30-31.
7. *ibid.*
8. J. Connell, Socialism and the Survival of the Fittest (London, 1908).
9. J. Rhind, 'The Survival of the Fittest', The Social-Democrat, XIV, No.12, (December 1910), p.546-7.
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11. G. Whitehead, Socialism and Eugenics (London, [1911]), p.1.
12. J.B. Askew, 'Socialism Adapted to the Small Bourgeoisie', The Social-Democrat, IX, No.9, (September 1905), p.533.
13. E. Belfort Bax, 'Universal History from a Socialist Standpoint', The Religion of Socialism (London, 1901), pp.25-6.
14. H.M. Hyndman, Economics, p.4.
15. H. Quelch, 'Reform and Revolution', The Social-Democrat, XI, No.6, (June 1907), p.332.
16. *ibid.*
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18. *ibid.*
19. *ibid.*, pp.4-5.
20. For the development of these ideas see Glyn Daniel, The Idea of Prehistory (London, 1962), Chapter 3.
21. Hyndman reviewed Engels' Origin in Justice, 8 November 1884, p.3.
22. E. Belfort Bax, Religion, p.iii.
23. H.M. Hyndman, Economics, pp.5-12.
24. E. Belfort Bax, Religion, pp.9-11. Hyndman gave particular prominence to the development of slavery, H.M. Hyndman, Economics, pp.12-13.
25. E. Belfort Bax, Religion, p.11.
26. H.M. Hyndman, Economics, p.15.
27. *ibid.*, pp.22-3.
28. *ibid.*, p.28.
29. A summary outline of the whole process can be found in 'Lecture I. A Brief Survey of Methods of Production', H.M. Hyndman, Economics. He was to develop the same ideas in more detail later in his The Evolution of Revolution (London, 1920); E. Belfort Bax, 'Universal History'.
30. A.P. Hazell, Slavedom, Serfdom and Wagedom (London, 1910); H.W. Lee, and E. Archbold, Social Democracy in Britain (London, 1935), p.33.
31. Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One', New Left Review, No.120, (March-April 1980), pp.38-40; editorial preface, *idem.*, (ed.), People's History and Socialist Theory (London, 1981), p.xxvii.
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45. *ibid.*, p.136.
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91. Dona Torr, Tom Mann and His Times, vol.1, 1856-1890 (London, 1956), pp.212-4; Henry Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', Asa Briggs, and John Saville, (eds.), Essays in Labour History 1886-1923 (London 1971), p.68.
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93. *ibid.*, p.30; Bax and Morris explicitly repudiated the idea that socialism rested on this view in their Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome (London, 1893), p.280: 'It is a matter of course that we do not expect to see this done by catastrophe, - that some Monday morning the sun will rise on a communised state which was capitalistic on Saturday night.'
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96. H.M. Hyndman, Death and the Socialist Ideal (London, 1904), p.10.
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## Chapter 5

### IMPERIALISM

The Social Democratic Federation existed during a period of intense imperialist rivalry in which Britain as the dominant imperial power was heavily involved in all parts of the globe. For SDF members, apart from periods of excitement and war, the question of imperialism was not the central issue of the day, but this is not to say that they ignored what was happening or did not form opinions on the subject. The most recent assessment of the SDF's position suggests a strong strain of imperialism within the organisation up to the Boer War, and an ambiguous and compromised anti-imperialism after it.<sup>1</sup> What follows will be a consideration of how members tried to understand the issues involved. Most of them would have been unequivocal in regarding themselves anti-imperialists but conceptions and interpretations change over time. Today definitions of imperialism within a marxist tradition begin with Lenin, Hilferding, Luxemburg, with some prominence being given in modern works to the contribution of Kautsky. Set beside these, the SDF's theoretical pronouncements are thin fare indeed, but this is no justification for neglecting their views or dismissing them glibly as pro-imperialist. Initially attention will be given to attempts at formulating a general theoretical understanding. Broadly speaking there were three approaches to imperialism within the SDF and each will be dealt with in turn. Firstly there was an analysis based on an understanding

of the way capitalism was developing in the 1880s, observing in the spread of imperialism a search for markets and investment outlets abroad. Secondly there were theories which produced favourable responses to British imperial ventures by suggesting that they were a force bringing the end of capitalism closer. Thirdly there was an attitude resting on moral principles and based on pragmatic and patriotic views, which was a development of earlier liberal-radical views. Having studied these basic positions more elaborate theories will be examined, analyses linking imperialism and social reform, and SDF activities on these issues within the Second International. An assessment will follow of SDF views on specific experiences of imperialism, concentrating on British activities in Africa and India.<sup>2</sup>

Finally there will be a discussion of the changing ways in which the words 'empire' and 'imperialism' were used, and the way this affects interpretations of the SDF's position.

The continuation of an aggressive imperial policy in Egypt on the part of the Liberal Government was a source of resentment for many of the radicals who found their way into the SDF in the early eighties. Analyses of this intervention in Justice during 1884 concentrated on finance: British intervention was 'wholly mischievous and unnecessary', the Egyptian troubles 'arose solely from financial causes', and British officials in Egypt were 'merely the agents of a financial clique'.<sup>3</sup> For Hyndman and Morris, British action constituted a 'bondholders battue'<sup>4</sup> and although there was no developed argument about the relationship between finance and

imperial aggression, it is noteworthy that they were connected in this way. Far more usual in the 1880s was the linking together of the spread of commerce and imperial expansion. In a front page comment in Justice during 1884 entitled 'Colonies and Commerce' it was pointed out that 'colonies mean ... simply an extension of the capitalist system'<sup>5</sup>; and an article in April 1885 suggested that posterity would regard the crusade for new markets with the same amazement as it did the crusades of the middle ages. The reason for the expansion was clear: 'Ask any manufacturer or merchant in England what is the chief need of the time, and he will say, almost without a moment's reflection, that we must open up new markets; that the old outlets are choked up; and that competition has reached such a pitch that something must be done.'<sup>6</sup> All European countries were affected by this development, and all were spending money on foreign enterprises that would have been more profitably spent at home.

Bax, whilst a member of the Socialist League had begun to develop a theory that the opening up of Africa would prolong the life of capitalism, and Justice commented in 1888 that things were 'going too fast ... for this theory' both at home and abroad.<sup>7</sup> By the 1890s Bax had returned to the Federation, and as the speedy end of capitalism had not occurred, an explanation of what was happening was developed with his assistance. Bax's main contribution was to argue that in the course of the capitalist development, the home and foreign markets of each of the advanced capitalist countries were being exhausted; consequently new outlets were essential for the system's continuation, 'the one hope of prolonging

the existence of the present capitalist system lies in the opening up of new territories to commercial and industrial enterprise, in other words, in the extension of the world market and the acquirement of fresh sources of cheap labour.<sup>8</sup> At the end of 1892 Justice attacked the 'aggressive jingo policy' of the government, alleging that it acted 'under the coercion of Lord Rosebery and the gang of market-hunters, stock-jobbers, land-grabbers, and high finance scoundrels at his back'.<sup>9</sup> It emphasised that expansion in Africa meant the 'granting of a renewed lease of life to Capitalism' and an outline was given of 'How the Trick is Done'. First of all went the missionary who with 'trinkets or cajolery' built a congregation 'of the baser sort of natives'.

He next persuades, and finally insists upon his 'converts' embracing the principles of civilisation and decency, as prescribed in white duck trousers and other cheap cottons and calicoes. Cheap spirits follow in the wake. Thus the trader is brought in, the missionary sometimes combining the two functions in his own person. The market is now founded, and the home speculators anxiously await events in the shape of a row. As soon as the native chief begins to observe the demoralising influence produced by the gospel and European wares in combination, it is likely enough he gives tangible expression to his sentiments, and thus disturbance begins. 10

The missionary then sent home lurid stories of unregenerate tribesmen and a howl was raised for the protection of Christians and of England's honour. The outcome was eventual annexation followed by 'Plunder, robbery, and enslavement in the guise of bogus free contracts and treaties, far worse than the undisguised slavery they supplant'.<sup>11</sup> As a means of combatting this process, Bax was impressed by the idea put forward by the

South African labour party during the Matabele war of 1893. The native tribes should be instructed 'in the rudimentary tactics of civilised warfare' and taught how to shoot properly; they would then present 'as solid a front as may be to the forces of Imperialist, Chartered Company, and Colonial Capitalism.' This would be backed by public opinion at home making itself felt at the poll. 'The union of the native struggling to preserve his home and the proletariat struggling to attain his emancipation fighting side by side in a conflict with capital would be indeed a hopeful sign of the times.'<sup>12</sup> He added to this advanced and modern sounding analysis the opinion that it was crucial to the speedy realisation of socialism that annexation and colonial expansion be stopped immediately.

By the mid-nineties the SDF had evolved a basic critique of imperialism. This derived in the main from the understanding Bax had developed in the 1880s. The idea that capitalism required new markets for its continued existence and that this formed the impetus for colonial and imperial ventures formed the foundation of analyses whenever the topic of imperialism was mentioned in Justice, and the role of finance and that of 'speculators' was also occasionally mentioned. To suggest that the SDF had a 'theory' of imperialism this early is a little grand. Bax had provided an explanation which was incorporated into their general accounts and analyses whenever the topic of imperialism was raised. This rudimentary analysis of the workings of imperialism was not elaborated in detail in the manner of later theories, but it did provide the foundation for a theory of imperialism which could be built on in the course of

the South African war when the issues became more immediate.

No-one either within the SDF or outside it had, by the 1890s produced a protracted account with a detailed conceptualisation of the subject or a consideration of the problems involved, and the SDF should not be criticised severely for not having a mature and articulated theory of imperialism before the 1900s. True, they lived at the heart of the world's largest empire in an era of imperial expansion, but the development of imperialism as a systematic concept backed by a coherent theory only really emerged in the two decades after 1900 and the intellectual groundwork was done not by British but by continental socialists: Kautsky, Luxemburg, Hilferding, Bukharin and Lenin.<sup>13</sup> In the 1900s the whole of the European Social Democratic movement was groping its way towards an adequate analysis of imperialism. The most developed theoretical work in Britain in the early twentieth century was to come not from the socialist tradition, but from that of Liberal radicalism in the work of Hobson.

An alternative perspective to Bax's on empire within the SDF was put forward by J.R. Widdup in an article in the Social-Democrat in 1898. Pointing to contradictions in the arguments of some anti-imperialists, he argued that colonial conquest would only come to an end when the limits of expansion had been reached. 'Commercialism cannot break down by its own sheer rottenness and incapacity until economic development has made this an international possibility.'<sup>14</sup> If Britain did not push on with the

development of capitalism in fresh territories, then other countries would do the job in her stead. 'We must either plunder or slaughter the Matabele, the Mashonas, the Soudanese, and perhaps the Chinese, in the near future, or stand by idle while this is done by some other country equally desirous of adding to her dominions, and extending her commerce.'<sup>15</sup> The choice before them was to either push for 'Anglo-Saxon domination'<sup>16</sup> or to 'become Social-Democratic "Little Englanders"'.<sup>17</sup> Workers living under British rule had more liberty and public safety than foreigners; personal and political liberty had been won by earlier generations in England and this freedom was extended to newly acquired territories.<sup>18</sup> Given this, the ultimate elimination of national differences could best be achieved

by going on with our Imperial development rather than by waiting to see the unappropriated portions of the world fall under the control of Governments who are not compelled to accord to their subjects that degree of freedom which the English governing class are compelled to give to their peoples the world over. 19

By helping on the progress of British expansion suggested Widdup, they would be providing these nascent capitalist economies with the seeds of their own destruction.

This argument not only conflicted with the interpretations we have already noted, but in practical terms would lead to the direct opposite - support for British imperial adventures. A similar point of view was expressed by Thomas Kennedy in the course of his debate with John Ellam on historical materialism in 1900 and 1901. Arguing that the South African war was 'inevitable', he said those who opposed it and supported

the Boers were guilty of 'unpractical sentimentalism' and of allowing ethical considerations and moral standpoints to mar their judgements.<sup>20</sup> The war was part of the inexorable process of capitalist development:

An attempt to prevent the extension of the influence of capital in South Africa is, in my opinion, as logical and useful as the attempt of foolish persons who try to prevent the development of the huge industrial combinations and trusts which are the inevitable product of capitalist commerce.  
21

It is important to note is that both of these points of view contradicted the actions and agreed policies of the SDF, and did not stand uncriticised.<sup>22</sup> Each appeared in the Social-Democrat, a journal in which the editor encouraged polemic.<sup>23</sup> Kennedy's argument was part of a much larger debate<sup>24</sup> in which he was attacked by Ellam, Hyndman, and Bax. Nowhere else do we come across the idea that imperialism was progressive in the sense of bringing the end of capitalism nearer. And the notion that British imperialism was beneficial either economically or politically was explicitly attacked in numerous places<sup>25</sup>, as was the view that the British were somehow better than the other imperialist powers.<sup>26</sup>

A different but distinctly anti-imperialist view was offered by James Leatham in his pamphlet What is the Good of Empire?(1901). In this he considered the alleged benefits of imperialism. First of all he asked if militant imperialism was a good thing for the mother country and came to the conclusion that it was not. It did not add to the wealth of the nation; trade may have been brisk during the wars it gave rise to, but it was the taxpayer and the consumer who had to pay for it; it



was analogous to fire or flood in that waste and destruction rendered repair and replacement necessary. Some trades benefited, but increased demand would force up prices, while the workers' wages remained the same and taxation was forced up. Further, an aggressive policy, like the one adopted in South Africa did not help Britain to hold on to foreign markets, on the contrary it worsened her competitive position.

While America and Germany are beating us in all markets we shut ourselves up in a fool's paradise and say British goods never, never shall be beaten and ousted from the world's markets. Instead of sending our young men to technical schools, we send them abroad to fight; we give our own minds, not to industry but to adventure in strange lands; to the conquest of territory which other nations bid fair to exploit; to the blowing open with gunpowder, of a door by which not we, but the Germans and Americans shall enter in and take our commercial possessions. 27

Having expressed a concern for the health of British capitalism, he asked if imperialism was good for those who went abroad. For a range of sentimental and dubious reasons he suggested that it was not beneficial to the emigrant, and that it was not truly patriotic to leave the country anyway as there was a need for good men at home. Those who did inhabit other lands tended to meddle in foreign politics and the end result was not always healthy.

The average Britisher's idea would appear to be that if he is living in a good country it is his duty to plot and intrigue against its Government. The finer the climate, the richer the soil, and the more valuable the products, the more strongly is he convinced that Britain ought to step in and bring that country under the flag. 28

It had to be made clear to those living abroad that

people at home had no interest in expanding 'our already bloated Empire', and that peaceful trade was possible without political domination.<sup>29</sup>

Leatham's next concern was whether imperialism was advantageous to the conquered population. Conquest interfered with the 'ineradicable' sentiment of national independence, and among white races this led to despair and conflict, history having shown their domination to be rarely possible. With the 'inferior' races the problem was different, but it had to be admitted that imperialism had proved a curse to them also.<sup>30</sup> Finally he traced the history of 'Imperial races' and suggested that on the whole they had left little behind 'but ruins and the memory of tyranny'. The alleged benefits of empire were an illusion, rents, profits and wages were not increased, but taxation and the price of basic necessities were.<sup>31</sup> The belief that new markets could be won by aggression was 'fallacious', it did not win markets that high quality goods at low prices could not have secured alone, without soldiers.

Every mile of territory we add to our dominions is a new source of expense and trouble to the Homeland, without any necessary result of trade to the capitalist or taxation to the Imperial exchequer ... Empire as understood to-day means a great fleet, a large army, frequent wars, an over-burdened exchequer, and a horde of useless Imperial adventurers - soldiers, police, and other non-producing officials ... And as an offset to this there is only the empty sentiment of bigness, and the capricious 'loyalty' of colonists - a loyalty which we do not need if we will only keep the peace with our neighbours and mind our own business. 32

Instead of a strategy based on a coherent theory of imperialism, Leatham elaborated a stance for SDFers to

adopt in relation to the most important aspects of British foreign policy. A strong anti-imperialist position was developed which had little in common with the analyses of imperialism already considered. The difference was one of definition, imperialism was not part of a developing worldwide capitalism, instead it was an aggressive policy justified mistakenly by some on the premise that it would open up new markets. It was a policy that was of no benefit to the conqueror, the conquered, the emigrant or the 'Imperial race' and was therefore best abandoned. It had no role either in the development and prolongation of capitalism or in its demise and destruction, it was as the popular expression would have it 'neither use nor ornament'. British interests were best secured by producing high quality products that could compete effectively with those of America and Germany both at home and abroad<sup>33</sup>, through an extension of technical education and training, and a diffusion downwards of increased purchasing power.<sup>34</sup> Leatham's opposition to imperialism was essentially that of a liberal free trader and his prescriptions were akin to those of liberal radicalism.

The most elaborate formulation of a theory of imperialism by an SDF member was written by John E. Ellam at the time of the South African war. This was published in the Westminster Review and summarised briefly in the Social-Democrat.<sup>35</sup> The war, despite the rhetoric of its supporters and the ideals of those who advocated a 'higher' Imperialism' was about financial advantages. The object was

increased dividends to be obtained by the

employment of cheap black and yellow labour, directed on a plan not far removed from absolute slavery, in place of white, and by the abolition of various restrictions which prevent them from carrying out these and other schemes for the more effectual exploitation of the territories involved. 36

Imperialism here too was a policy implemented in the interests of the economically dominant classes<sup>37</sup>, but its adoption was tied in with the development of capitalism. In pre-capitalist societies it had been possible for foreign conquest to be conducted in the interest of noble ideals, but in a modern capitalist state, it was the Stock Exchange that had the strongest influence on foreign policy, and the values of stocks and shares was the prime motive for action. Capitalists had exploited their own countries to the utmost, and being unable to find immediate investment for their capital at home, they had to seek employment for it elsewhere. Ellam quoted with approval a statement by Cecil Rhodes that war was no longer conducted for the amusement of royal families but in the interests of an international association of capitalists. It was hypocrisy to suggest that expansion involved the spread of civilisation.

When the possibilities of exploitation at home are exhausted it becomes necessary for the system to extend its sphere of activity in order that the surplus capital may be more profitably employed ... This extension being in the nature of the capitalist system which, by restricting the consuming powers of the masses by paying wage-labour so much less than the value of its product, and by allowing the surplus to pass into the private possession of the capitalist classes, finds itself every now and again overburdened by its wealth either in the form of commodities for immediate consumption or as capital for investment. This must find an outlet abroad since it can be no longer disposed of profitably at home. Hence the policy of capitalist Imperialism. 38

Countries under imperial domination suffered material impoverishment and 'racial extinction', and those who remained at home were heavily taxed to pay for armaments.<sup>39</sup>

Capitalism would only exist, he continued, so long as it was able to carry on opening new markets, when the limit was reached the system would collapse. The possibilities open to economic competition were coming to an end, trusts were beginning to develop, the decline of England had already begun and internationalism was taking the place of competition between nations and making patriotism an obsolete sentiment. Competitive capitalism was 'coming to a deadlock'<sup>40</sup> and overproduction on a worldwide basis would eventually lead to a crisis which would have no relief short of a change in the economic system. The outcome would either be the collapse of civilisation with the system beginning 'to prey on itself', or 'the proletaire will gain the economic ascendancy, and with it political supremacy.'<sup>41</sup>

This account is qualitatively different from earlier accounts derived from Bax's analysis. For Ellam the driving force was not just the search for new markets to make up for the deficiency in home demand, but also a search for investment outlets for surplus capital abroad, the role of finance capital being more than just hinted at. Further, although imperialism would extend the life of capitalism, eventually the limits would be reached and worldwide economic collapse would follow.

The position arrived at was an elementary theory of imperialism having much in common with debates and analyses beginning to develop on the continent, and it is

notable that an article from Vorwärts was published in the Social-Democrat in 1900 tracing the history and development of imperialism and the way its nature changed as competition between industrial states intensified. In particular it suggested that policy towards colonies changed once their importance as markets was realised and changed again when their potential as areas of investment was discovered, emphasising the role of finance capital.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, it is possible to suggest that Ellam's ideas preceded and had much in common with those espoused by J.A. Hobson whose Imperialism appeared the following year. It has been pointed out that Hobson's views owed nothing to the SDF's theories<sup>43</sup>, and suggested that his book 'evoked no reaction' from them.<sup>44</sup> However, his analysis had much in common with that of the SDF; he too linked imperialism to the development of the capitalist system, pointing to surpluses produced at home, and stressing the importance of the desire for new markets and investment outlets abroad.

The SDF were not unaware of Hobson's views nor did they ignore his work. In the year that his Imperialism was published, the sixth chapter 'The Economic Taproot of Imperialism', was printed as an article in the Contemporary Review. This included the key elements of his theory and a large chunk of it was reproduced in the Social-Democrat in its capacity as a socialist Review of Reviews as were articles on all manner of subjects by non-socialists.<sup>45</sup> It can be suggested that the editor reprinted this excerpt because it was in line with the general basis of their economic theories, and his arguments on the nature of imperialism were in overall

agreement with their own views on the question. The significance of this reprint of Hobson's article should not be exaggerated, however the similarity between his views and those of Ellam cannot be ignored.

Ellam had rejected some of Hobson's conclusions even before the book was published. In his final chapter Hobson suggested that one possible outcome of imperialism in the advanced countries was that the wage earners would cease to be productive workers. Instead they would become retainers pandering to the wishes of the rich, who would live entirely off the dividends from the productive labour being done in the outposts of empire, a state of affairs analogous to that in the late Roman empire. This idea was first put forward by W. Clarke the Fabian in an article in the Contemporary Review.<sup>46</sup> It was through this work rather than the later work of Hobson that the thesis was attacked by Ellam, whose prognosis was quite different. The rich in Ellam's view would be unable to turn the poor into slaves because as new markets were exhausted the sources of their wealth would dry up.

Many of the supporters of imperialism linked imperial politics with social reform, either in the belief that the strength of the empire rested on the welfare of the working class, or the liberal variant which started with the condition of the working class and argued that unless this improved they would be incapable of defending the empire.<sup>47</sup> Hyndman showed an awareness of these views in a letter he wrote to the Morning Post in October 1900 in which he made the case for free maintenance for schoolchildren, arguing that it was important 'Even from the new "Imperialist" point of

view'.<sup>48</sup>

The role of imperialism in domestic politics was the subject of an article by Theodore Rothstein in 1901.<sup>49</sup> In this imperialism was connected with the abandonment of laissez faire attitudes by ruling political parties. This was seen as a response to the development and growth of competition from abroad where economies were flourishing as a result of paternalistic state intervention. Just as laissez faire individualism was beginning to be questioned and socialist arguments partly conceded, the more intelligent sections of the bourgeoisie give birth to the Fabian Society<sup>50</sup>; the 'idea of the State' started to make headway and Liberal Party began to rot. A section of this rotting party then adopted imperialism, but it was the desire to organise and concentrate the forces of the state which was 'at the bottom of the desire for the more particular consolidation of the Empire', and this was linked with a programme of social reform. This 'State idea' carried by the Liberal imperialists would, said Rothstein, come to dominate British politics in the ensuing years.

He elaborated on the danger inherent in these trends and in a 'surmise' on the nature of future developments and the types of 'red herrings that are going to be trailed across the path of the working classes', he said that the programme of these individuals would be

directed towards the strengthening of the power of the State by means of an Imperial Federation, of a great centralisation of the administrative functions of the State, and the subordination to them of those of the municipality, of a radical army reform on conscription lines, and, perhaps, of an



enhancement of the power of the monarchy; further, towards the limitation of the rights of the subject by means constitutional, judicial, administrative, and otherwise; and, lastly, towards the entrenchment of the economic position of the ruling classes by direct means of protection-tariffs, export bounties - perhaps nationalisation of the railways, &c. - and by indirect means of social reforms, calculated to raise the physique and morale of the working classes. Such will be an improved system of national education, some grappling with the housing question, old age pensions in some shape or other, a further development of factory legislation, &c.,&c. 51

Rothstein saw imperialism as part of an opportunist attempt by a section of the ruling class to organise and direct an extension of state power in the long term interests of British capitalism.

The contradictions inherent in an attempt to link imperial politics and social reform at home were taken up in an editorial of the Social-Democrat in 1903. Responding to Joseph Chamberlain's notion that an import duty on foodstuffs might be a source from which old age pensions could be drawn, it was argued that it was

the exhaustive burdens of Imperialism which stand in the way of old age pensions. The millions of treasure which are yearly wasted on expansion and aggrandisement, and which have been thrown away on aggressive wars, are not available for old age pensions, for education, or for other useful domestic purposes. We cannot have our cake and eat it too. Having chosen Imperialism in preference to domestic reform, we cannot now have the latter unless we are prepared to submit to additional taxation. 52

The relationship between colonial expansion and the rivalry between the imperial powers was a central concern within the Second International. The Paris Congress of 1900 set up an International Socialist Bureau to organise future congresses and co-ordinate activities between

congresses, as well as to 'pronounce publicly on all vital and major issues of the day which affect the interests of the working class.'<sup>53</sup> Hyndman and Quelch were the SDF delegates to this Bureau and at its first meeting at the end of 1901 it adopted a resolution proposed by Hyndman which drew attention to 'the policy of Imperialism' being adopted by European countries and the United States. The worldwide nature of the exploitation involved was highlighted, an appeal made to the world's workers not to be misled by capitalist statesmen and the capitalist press, and international solidarity recommended against 'the last and worst form of class domination.'<sup>54</sup>

At the request of the Bureau Hyndman produced a report on colonies and dependencies for presentation to the Amsterdam Congress of the International in 1904. Considering the question historically he suggested that from ancient times colonisation and conquest had been chiefly dictated by economic considerations, and that this was more apparent now than ever before. In the course of his address he gave a perceptive account of the changing character of British imperialism. Personal gain it was argued provided the initial impetus, the 'Imperialist sentiment' followed much later. Most of Britain's colonies and dependencies had been

founded by private enterprise: the Government ... only making its appearance on the spot with its officials and soldiers at a very late period, when the position had already been secured by individuals or companies. First the pioneer, then the trader, next the merchant and administrator, later the colonist and settler, often then a few policemen and a law court, last of all, and sometimes never, the military. Such has been the general development of the British

Empire. 55

This development was contrasted with the methods employed by other states who started out desiring an empire and often sent the soldiers in first, the traders arriving last and being unable to make a commercial success of the venture. The spread of commerce and settlement was 'more favoured' by the British system 'than by the more rigid military and bureaucratic policy adopted by the other nations.'<sup>56</sup> This proved to be a 'thoroughly profit-mongering Imperialism, even before the word Imperialism was used.'<sup>57</sup> No-one any longer suggested that Britain intervened in the interests of Christianity and civilisation, new markets and the export of capital were the prime objectives. 'In every direction ... the same unscrupulous tactics are being relentlessly pursued avowedly now in the interest of new markets, and to obtain further outlets for English capital, shaken in its self-confidence at home by German and American competition.'<sup>58</sup> The outcome of this 'conscious expansion' was that it helped 'to retard the ultimate breakdown of the capitalist system'.<sup>59</sup> Considering British rule in India he suggested that for the Indians it was worse than that of previous conquerors; however, taken as a whole the English were no worse than other capitalist colonisers, who 'only fall short of the English in the scale of their depredations, because they have not as yet so wide a field for robbery, extortion, swindling and murder.'<sup>60</sup> It was the duty of international socialists said Hyndman in his conclusion, to denounce and prevent colonisation and conquest, 'leaving to each race, creed and colour, the full

opportunity to develop itself until complete economic and social emancipation is secured by all.<sup>61</sup> The inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the evidence examined here is that the SDF from its origins was consistently anti-imperialist. Over time individual members developed a theory which condemned imperialism as an extension of capitalist exploitation resting on the search for new markets and outlets for surplus capital. It was seen as the means by which the life of the capitalist system was being extended, and the potential for revolution at home held in check. Given this, the role of socialists was to attack it and do all in their power to halt its growth, although as Ellam noted, if they failed, like domestic capitalism it too would reach the limits of its expansion and collapse. The theory was not an elaborate one resting on detailed formulations from Marx's Capital in the manner of Rosa Luxemburg's, for example, but in general terms it was as advanced as that of most commentators within the Second International, as their choice of Hyndman to present the report of the International Bureau to the Amsterdam Congress suggests.

When the issue was debated at the Stuttgart Congress of the International in 1907 the SDF members opposed the motion put forward by the majority members of the Colonial Commission which would have committed the Congress to a policy recognising that at times imperialism could have 'a civilising purpose'.<sup>62</sup> The motion was eventually defeated, but the debate divided the British delegation, with Ramsay MacDonald speaking for it and Harry Quelch against. The resolution finally

adopted by the Congress was in line with the SDF position, condemning all 'capitalist colonial policies'.<sup>63</sup>

If by the 1900s the SDF had develop a theory condemning the spread of imperialism, how did they respond to specific instances of imperial expansion? One issue requiring early comment was Britain's continued presence in Egypt. This was roundly condemned in Justice, although when Gordon's expedition found itself in trouble in 1884 there was heated argument over his status as a hero and whether or not he deserved to be rescued.<sup>64</sup> The issue was brought before the Executive Committee by Bax and the rescue mission criticised, but despite this when Gordon was killed it was reported in Justice as 'The Death of a Hero' and described as 'a mournful end to a noble life and a gallant defence.'<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless the opportunity was taken to state that they were still opposed to British intervention in Egypt, with the E.C. reaffirming its position and the warning given that people should not be misled by the death of a hero or calls for vengeance 'into action which is alike immoral and injurious'.<sup>66</sup> Continued activity in Egypt and Sudan was described later in the year as 'Patriotic Butchery' and sympathy expressed for the Arabs, 'splendid fighting men who are simply striving to repel the invaders of their country', though care was taken to praise the 'courage and endurance' of the British troops, and place the blame firmly on the shoulders of Gladstone and the Radicals.<sup>67</sup> Although Egypt received less attention in ensuing years it is noteworthy that Theodore Rothstein produced a series of articles on the Egyptian

question in the Social-Democrat from 1908 on, and in 1910 produced a detailed account of Britain's involvement under the title Egypt's Ruin; this placed emphasis on the role of finance and bondholders being subtitled 'A Financial and Administrative Record'.<sup>68</sup>

As we have seen, the rest of Africa became a cause of concern from the early nineties and provided the foundation for Bax's analyses of the nature of British imperialism. 'Land Grabbing in Tropical Africa' was attacked in Justice as foolish, greedy and dangerous. That the English who already had so much territory under their control 'should go in for grabbing regions which our race can never colonise, is one of the most striking instances of nineteenth century lunacy.'<sup>69</sup> It was undertaken solely for markets and brought them up against 'the touchy Chauvinism of our friends and enemies across the Channel'.<sup>70</sup> 'That the exploitation of Africa is going on apace is certain' said H.W. Lee,

France, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, England, all the great European nations are endeavouring by every means to get as large a share as possible out of the African scramble. And their sole object is that of trade, in other words, to find fresh markets for goods which the workers of all countries badly want, but for which they cannot afford to pay. 71

Bax pointed to the iniquities of the Charter granted to the British East Africa Company. It amounted to the handing over 'to seven irresponsible capitalists a large share of the African continent as a perquisite.'<sup>72</sup> It was noted that they made their own laws among which was a £500 levy upon imported guns 'to obviate the difficulties with the natives,' so that when a new market was opened

up 'they mean to have unarmed rather than armed natives to shoot down - which is quite natural isn't it?'<sup>73</sup> The company was observed to be working hand in hand with the missionaries who had 'succeeded ... in Uganda in stirring up an internecine religious war which will undoubtedly pave the way, by the weakening of the population, for the subsequent easy introduction of British wares into the extensive territory ...'<sup>74</sup>

In West Africa a similar process was seen at work. Rumour had it that certain Belgians had made large fortunes in the Congo, so the Britisher wanted his turn in this part of the continent, and a 'plundering expedition' had been sent 'with the object of "opening up" fresh fields and pastures new for market hunting swindlers at home.'<sup>75</sup> Under 'the flimsiest of pretexts' war was made upon the Ashanti, and Ashantiland would 'sooner or later, come under British control to the honour and glory of the British lion, and the profit of a syndicate of British financiers.'<sup>76</sup>

It was southern Africa which engaged most attention and comment.<sup>77</sup> The activities of the British South Africa Company in taking control of large tracts of territory containing precious metals were noted in 1892, and its elaborate administrative structure commented on: 'the British South Africa Company .. resembles a nation worked on strict business principles, and run for the benefit - of shareholders!'<sup>78</sup> Lee pointed to the relative sophistication of their methods: where in the past the East India Company had used the force of arms, they purchased concessions from 'ignorant native chiefs' by means of grants and allowances, and he highlighted the

role of Rhodes as the company's managing director.<sup>79</sup> The use of British troops against the Matabele in 1893 was deplored as having been undertaken with the capital of the company in mind, and the Government was called upon to intervene immediately before the name of Englishmen became 'synonymous with modern piracy'.<sup>80</sup> This imagery of piracy was taken up again by Lee in his article 'Marauding the Matabele' in which he traced the background of the company and the unfair nature of their dealings with African natives and their rulers. 'White civilisation' he said, could have benefited the Matabele, but instead the company carried on with its activities. 'The object is not to spread civilisation, but to collar Matabeleland, which Cecil Rhodes and his fellow marauders believe to be rich in minerals.'<sup>81</sup> The South African Labour Party was congratulated for its action in calling for volunteers to help the Matabele 'in their unequal struggle for liberty against the plundering "white" scum of the "Chartered Company".'<sup>82</sup> When in 1895 Rhodes claimed in the City that he was acquiring Africa for the sake of Englishmen at home, Justice commented:

The only people at home he has contrived his Stock Exchange 'corners' for and organised his raids to benefit, are the lowest kind of capitalist Jews, Rothschilds, Barnatos, Ecksteins and persons of that character, whose agent and tout the Right Honourable Cecil Rhodes really is. Nobody knows better than Mr. Rhodes that tropical Africa is wholly unsuited to colonisation by Englishmen, and that his capitalist Jews and his punting dukes ... can only make profits by the most infamous enslavement of the native population. 83

When Jameson invaded the Transvaal, the raid was condemned; William Morris who by this time was



reconciled to the Federation (although he had not rejoined) said that the Transvaal situation was 'a case of a pack of thieves quarrelling about their booty'<sup>84</sup>, and Hyndman's assessment of the situation was that the Transvaal had been stolen from the natives by the Boers who were however, preferable to the 'Jew capitalists and Christian financiers' who had financed Jameson's 'piratical expedition'.<sup>85</sup>

In the months preceding the outbreak of war in South Africa, rumours grew as to the possibility of war and 'those who had excellent sources of information'<sup>86</sup> believed as early as May 1899 that war had been decided upon. Hyndman was included in this privileged circle and consequently the SDF held an anti-war meeting in Trafalgar Square in July 1899. A manifesto was issued against 'piratical Jingoism' warning of the threat of Government action against the South African Republics, and in the course of the meeting resolutions were passed calling for the maintenance of peace at all costs and protesting against Chamberlain being left in control of the situation during the Parliamentary recess.<sup>87</sup> Further resolutions were passed at provincial meetings and the secretary was able to tell the annual conference held at the beginning of August that the 'danger of war seems passed for the moment', while warning of the unreliability of 'the jingo Colonial Secretary' when freed from parliamentary criticism.<sup>88</sup>

The July anti-war meeting called by the SDF had passed peaceably but this was not to be the case with the demonstration organised by Radicals in September at which Hyndman spoke. By this time 'feeling ... had become very

hot indeed<sup>89</sup> and Hyndman believed he was lucky to escape with his life. On mounting the base of Nelson's monument he found himself 'face to face with a hostile and howling mob' who 'began to throw open knives at us'. Had the meeting been organised by Social Democrats, sufficient large and pugilistically inclined supporters would have been on hand for their protection, he wrote, but the Radicals had taken no such precautions. Realising he was not going to get a hearing Hyndman decided to retreat. 'Directly I got down a lot of roughs made for me, and if it had not been for the late H.R. Taylor and another Socialist whose name I never knew, I should have been knocked down and seriously injured before I got out of the Square.'<sup>90</sup> Aided by mounted police he made his way to the Hotel Victoria 'where the guests jeered at us and the porters shut the door in my face'; the police 'accompanied by the mob' then took him to the police station at Scotland Yard, and he wrote afterwards to the editor of the Daily Chronicle that it was 'solely due to the admirable and courageous behaviour of the police that I have the honour of addressing you with only sore ribs, a bruised leg and a battered hat to complain of'.<sup>91</sup>

This meeting was very much a sign of things to come; when the war was at its height, those adopting an anti-war position were very unpopular, found it difficult to obtain halls in which to hold meetings, and were constantly in danger of having their meetings broken up. When the war did break out, the SDF immediately opposed it; this was not as Norman Etherington has suggested, a case of them jumping on to an anti-war bandwagon which was 'an opportunity for self-advertisement too good to be

missed', and contradicting their earlier views.<sup>92</sup> Instead it was a principled stand consistent with attitudes and opinions on Africa expressed throughout the 1890s.

A manifesto was published in January 1900 entitled War in South Africa which spoke of a 'war of aggression waged on behalf of cosmopolitan millionaires'<sup>93</sup> and the theme of the war dominated Justice in ensuing months. The position eventually arrived at went beyond a mere anti-war stance as the SDF, along with many Liberals and Radicals, came out in support of the Boers. The Social-Democrat reproduced photographs of Boer leaders accompanied by glowing biographies, and pamphlets and leaflets were produced on the capitalist nature of the war, making the Boer case. Much of their propaganda work was produced by F. Reginald Statham who it seems was the nearest they had in their ranks to an expert on South African matters. He produced an account for the Social-Democrat entitled 'South Africa in the Past and Future' which was reproduced as a pamphlet.<sup>94</sup> His account however rests uneasily with other SDF analyses of the war, and it did not stand uncriticised. His article was in the main a history of white settlement, but he went on to say that it would be a foolish act to crush the resistance and exterminate the two republics. 'The British Empire has been built up on a foundation of justice and constitutional liberty' he said, striking a pose similar to that of Widdup and Statham cited above, and to fly in the face of these principles would endanger the empire; the whole situation had arisen because constitutional principles had been over-ridden.<sup>95</sup> The

alternative was to come to terms with the Boers: 'to bring strength to the Empire and permanent peace to South Africa by seizing the first opportunity of making friends of those to whom South Africa owes its existence as a civilised country, and who are and will continue to be, no matter what we may do, the dominant factor in its population.'<sup>96</sup> In the following issue of the journal Theodore Rothstein argued strongly against this view that British rule, wherever it existed, was somehow advanced; the war, despite the progressive appearance of the British middle class, was reactionary. The British empire did not benefit Britain or any other country; Britain's greatness rested at home with her industry, science, literature, political institutions and so on, and these were likely to receive a stimulus should she lose her colonies. When rid of such 'red herrings' democracy in England would receive a new impetus.<sup>97</sup>

Disagreement about attitudes to the war and their position in relation to the Boers was in fact rife within the organisation. These differences were foreshadowed in the correspondence columns of Justice when the war first broke out<sup>98</sup>, but the issues were hammered out in the pages of the Social-Democrat while the war was raging. Towards the end of 1900 Thomas Kennedy posed the question 'Was the War Inevitable?' and came to the conclusion that it was. In the main his argument was one about the materialist conception of history, which has already been considered, but the subject matter was the South African War. He quoted with approval the remarks of an observer that 'the trail of the financial serpent' ran through the South African controversy, but was critical of the

reaction of socialists.

Is it not true that while this awful tragedy has been played out on the African veldt, we have, or most of us have, wasted our time and our energy, discussing and debating with every political gossip, not the best means of killing the serpent, by finding and uprooting the material hell which nourishes it and its kind, but whether its tail passes through the Colonial Office, and, if in form and colour it answered to the description of a creature which had once whispered something to Mr. Rhodes, and then passed on to Dr. Jameson? 99

The class war he said was at the heart of socialism and it was the mission of socialists to demonstrate its existence and explain its effects. Class war was the inevitable expression of the capitalist regime; until the capitalist system came to an end the class war would be ceaselessly waged 'and will continuously express itself in various forms and through various mediums'.<sup>100</sup> The discovery and subsequent mining of minerals in South Africa introduced 'certain aggravated forms of the class war' into that country, but 'because the circumstances prevented capital from carrying on its part of the struggle profitably, by means of war in the industrial sense, war in the military sense ensued.'<sup>101</sup> The centrality of the role given to Chamberlain in many socialist accounts of the war was attacked;

instead of treating the war as the inevitable symptom of a disease with which we are thoroughly conversant, we have joined hands with those whose political mission it is to treat this, and every other vicious growth of capitalism, as accidental, and, therefore, avoidable by other means than the radical transformation of the material basis of commercialism. 102

'War' he concluded was 'implied in capitalist commerce and its inevitable accompaniment', and armed warfare

abroad was no worse than the war against the labourer at home.<sup>103</sup>

While Kennedy's arguments on historical inevitability and the narrow basis of his materialism were attacked, his main antagonist John E. Ellam conceded that the war was a capitalist war and that capitalist commerce made it inevitable. Ellam's main contribution was to roughen the edge of Kennedy's determinism by suggesting that human intervention was necessary for the actual act of war to take place, and that wise diplomacy and moral statesmanship could have enabled capitalism to extend its influence without the need for armed conflict.<sup>104</sup> Hyndman also spoke up, as he was unwilling to allow Chamberlain to get away scot free, relieved of personal responsibility.<sup>105</sup> Kennedy responded by emphasising the ethical foundation of his opponents' case, he sought his explanations he said, in material conditions and dismissed his critics as idealists. On purely moral grounds he too would have supported the Boers, but as the issue was not a purely moral one socialists were guilty of 'unpractical sentimentalism' in standing for the 'independence of two, petty States.'<sup>106</sup>

In the course of his argument against those sympathetic to the Boers, Kennedy suggested that the suffering in India was worse than that in South Africa and the destruction of child labour in British factory towns as iniquitous as what was occurring in British concentration camps. These assertions annoyed Bax. The British presence in India, he wrote, unlike that in South Africa was a legacy of past generations, not something undertaken 'by the present generation of Englishmen

yesterday', and the horrors of India 'are indirect, and the result of a vicious system, and not deliberately and wantonly inflicted as in this war.'<sup>107</sup> In an interesting argument he separated the results of British capitalism at home from those of British intervention abroad. The British administration of India had been designed by the British official classes for 'blood-sucking', and it 'might conceivably be changed, even under the present system of society, more or less speedily, by individual administrators.'<sup>108</sup> This was not the case with capitalism at home, which was proving a hard nut to crack in spite of the enthusiasm and devotion of socialist parties. The situation in South Africa was different again being analogous to the harmless citizen attacked by a band of ruffians, 'the unfortunate Boer ... only wants to govern himself on democratic methods and cultivate his farm in peace', but 'the dastardly and criminal British power' was 'bent on robbing him of his land and political existence to share with cosmopolitan capitalism.'<sup>109</sup>

These arguments brought forth an attack on 'Pro-Boer Sentiments' from Kennedy. Even when stripped of its 'absurd sentimentalism' it was 'opposed to every acknowledged principle of Socialist political action'<sup>110</sup>; the Boer cause was not a socialist cause. He reiterated that the war was an expression of the class war, and viewed scientifically it was a result of 'well-defined material conditions.'<sup>111</sup> Imperialism represented 'the dominant impulse of the age' which was bound to succeed, and it had found itself in conflict with Republican Conservatism. Only political charlatans levied praise or blame, 'stern Necessity dictated the tune to which

Britain and Boer have danced', the extinction of small nationalities was the tendency of the day, and therefore 'the support the Boer cause has received from our more sentimental brethren, besides being opposed to Socialist principle, has been quite out of proportion, relatively speaking, to its political or economic importance.'<sup>112</sup>

A similarly anti-Boer conclusion was to be reached by Hyndman but unlike Kennedy he carried the argument a stage further, suggesting that 'The country belongs neither to the Boer nor the Briton', and the 'future of South Africa is ... to the Black man'. If he had to agitate for independence, 'it is for the independence of the splendid native tribes who are being crushed by the Boers and ourselves together'.<sup>113</sup> He had decided that a British victory would be in the interests of the Africans, and although the SDF did not come out in support of British activities, Hyndman managed to get a resolution through the executive abandoning further anti-war agitation.<sup>114</sup>

This decision did not win unanimous approval within the executive and Rothstein and Bax continued to argue against it. Bill Baker contrasts Hyndman's position with the views of Rothstein who deplored what he saw as Hyndman's separation of the struggle against imperialism involved in support for the Boers, from the struggle for socialism at home.<sup>115</sup> Hyndman's changed views however, should be placed in context. The change of opinion occurred at a time when, although the Boers had been nominally defeated, their guerilla campaign was having notable successes; at the same time the actions of the British were becoming less popular at home as stories



spread of the destruction of farmsteads and widespread death and suffering of women and children in British concentration camps. By the middle of 1901 continued support of the Boers was viewed as a threat to their political independence vis a vis the Liberals.<sup>116</sup> The Boer War had caused the SDF to modify its previously agreed policy towards other political parties. Before the war their major political enemy had been the Liberals and they had agreed to give their votes to the Tory where no suitable socialist candidate was standing.<sup>117</sup> The war had forced them to abandon this position, and given the division in the Liberal ranks they felt able to work side by side with Liberal anti-imperialists. The change of policy was confirmed by the 1900 annual conference and the general election of that year found the SDF committed to working with Liberal anti-imperialist candidates.<sup>118</sup> It may have been the dangers inherent in this relationship of closeness to Liberals and radicals that caused Hyndman to suggest in the middle of 1901, when strength of feeling on the war was declining and sympathy for the Boers spreading, that 'the business of the Social Democratic Federation is to spread socialism' and that this was not done 'by helping the Liberals'.<sup>119</sup> Although the position of Rothstein and Bax in linking the struggle for socialism and the fight against imperialism appears with hindsight the more theoretically mature, to Hyndman and the majority of the executive, the more pragmatic concerns of building a socialist party in Britain and protecting one's members from the taint of Liberal radicalism seemed more appropriate.

We can see from this that there was a diversity of

responses and interpretations within the SDF to the Boer War and that their position changed with the ebb and flow of the war and changed circumstances. If it had been true, as Etherington suggests, that their pro-Boer attitude was opportunist, one would hardly expect them to abandon their active propaganda just at the time when the Boer cause was at its most popular in Britain. The more public propaganda material continued to stress the capitalist nature of the war and remained pro-Boer. A manifesto 'The Boer War and its Results' issued in May 1901 emphasised the cost of the war in money and men. At home the only beneficiaries of the war would be 'the greedy coal owners, the "patriotic" shipowners, and the swindling contractors', and the money spent could have been used to check the degeneracy of the great cities. Once the war was over, backward glances concentrated on its capitalist nature and the corruption it allegedly gave rise to. In 1905 a manifesto was issued entitled 'Capitalist War, Waste and Corruption', which referred to 'Mr. Chamberlain's buccaneering war in South Africa' saying that 'the capitalist system ... naturally engenders such criminal enterprises.' It had been conducted in the interests of capitalists and 'the main object was to supplant the Boer Government by an Administration entirely under the control of the cosmopolitan capitalists who own the Rand mines' so that cheap labour could be introduced. The Report of the Committee on Sales and Refunds to Contractors in South Africa showed up the 'corrupt gambling and swindling' that had gone on during the war, and the point was made that such scandals 'are only part of the corruption,

rascality, political roguery, incapacity and imbecility inherent in the capitalist system'.

There is a thread of ambiguity that runs through SDF accounts of the war. Many differed little from those of Liberal anti-imperialists, Chamberlain having a prominent place as the villain of the piece. The main stance was pro-Boer, and one can agree with Kennedy that the dominant image of the Boer was a sentimental one, with even Bax talking of the brave democratic Boers who wanted nothing more than to be left in peace to farm their land. There is also the problem of the nature of their analyses. Richard Price has suggested that socialist accounts of the war tended to rest on a conspiracy theory making Rhodes and Chamberlain responsible, and that to the extent that the war was referred to as a capitalist war it was in the sense that individual capitalists had conspired to bring it about, and not an argument that wars were an integral part of nineteenth century capitalism.<sup>120</sup> There is much to be said for this account, but it will not do as an evaluation of the SDF. Interpretations of any historical event take place at a number of different levels, and this was true of SDF analyses of the war. Ellam's elaborate account of the nature of imperialism began as an attempt to account for the war, and others, particularly Kennedy, were keen to stress the connection between the spread of capitalism and its relationship to capitalist expansion and war. At the same time the emphasis on speculators, gold miners and Jewish capitalists, added to this picture of a squalid and degenerate capitalism spreading its influence. To move

from capitalism to capitalists as greedy warmongering bogeymen in one's agitational material is a characteristic still common to popular socialist journals and propaganda materials, and it does not follow that all SDF analysis was limited to this level of understanding.

SDF members were not experts on South African politics and history, they had no one with the equivalent of Hyndman's experience of Indian affairs. Consequently they relied upon material available to them in the press, particularly that produced by the Liberal anti-imperialists. The nearest they had to a specialist was F. Reginald Statham whose mixture of socialism and praise of the benefits of British rule, was uncharacteristic. For these reasons their accounts were rent with inconsistency, but for all this they remained on the whole committed anti-imperialists throughout the war, and although criticism was aired of their support of the Boer cause within the organisation's journals, they remained publicly committed to it throughout.

Whenever the topic of India was raised, it was more often than not Hyndman who acted as the spokesman. His family had 'been connected with India for generations'<sup>121</sup>, and although he never visited the country it had been a great interest of his since the 1870s, and he was widely regarded as an authority on the subject. He published a series of articles from the mid-seventies coming to the conclusion that native rule was superior to British administration, calling for the application of a liberal policy and economic development with private capital from Britain, British policy to date having merely perpetuated famine. His aim at this time

was 'a native state administered under British supervision'.<sup>122</sup> Following the publication of his articles the House of Commons Committee on Indian Finance invited him to give evidence but he declined, claiming that his material, not being based on personal observation was 'second hand'.<sup>123</sup> In forming his views he had been particularly impressed by the work of Dadabhai Naoroji whose statistics and whose theory of the 'drain' of wealth from India to Britain he adopted in his article 'The Bankruptcy of India' which was published in the Nineteenth Century in 1879.<sup>124</sup> A chapter of England For All(1881), the book Hyndman distributed at the founding conference of the Democratic Federation, was devoted to India, and in it he reiterated his analysis, demanding that Britain resolve 'to restore to the natives, in some degree at least, the control of their own Government and their own property'. The Indians 'would recognise with joyous loyalty a determined effort to relieve them from the excessive pressure of foreign government, and the ruinous drain for foreign payments, which now impoverishes them more and more.'<sup>125</sup> Under fair conditions the Indians would grow in wealth 'with but slight supervision from us'<sup>126</sup>, and the ensuing exchange of products would be more advantageous to both sides than the existing impoverishment. He also outlined his analysis of India in The Historical Basis of Socialism(1883) comparing the famine and suffering with that of Ireland, but laying the blame on 'capital and officialdom' rather than landlordism, and he summarised his views on how the situation was brought about.

We are draining from that unfortunate country

year by year as interest on railways, interest on debt, profits for transmission, pensions for work done and salaries in the country, agricultural produce to the amount not less, certainly, than £30,000,000 a year - that is to say, the food of fifteen million human beings a year. Here at once is enough to account for the appalling increase of poverty and the deterioration alike of the soil and of the people of India. 127

Capitalism over the previous twenty five years had proved 'more injurious than any invasion of Mogul hordes that poured down through the passes of the Himalayas.'<sup>128</sup>

It is interesting that these accounts of India do not entirely correspond with the more general view within the SDF that imperial expansion prolonged the life of British capitalism. An 'editorial brevity' in the Social-Democrat pointed out that India could have played such a role by providing a better market for British products than the areas of white settlement.<sup>129</sup> Instead India had been bled to death and there was no longer any hope that a prosperous India could support an ailing British capitalism. The resultant suffering was deplored but encouragement taken from the belief that the ruin of India would hasten the downfall of the plundering class.<sup>130</sup>

The idea of continued British supervision of some sort, which Hyndman developed in the seventies, was to remain a central component of his position on India. In 1886 he reprinted his earlier articles in book form as The Bankruptcy of India with a new introduction stating that the time had come for Britain to withdraw and that the noblest career for Englishmen 'was to prepare the way to a reconstitution of the native governments under English guidance'.<sup>131</sup> Writing to Naoroji he said he

wanted the Indians to do more for themselves, but his aim was a fairer partnership between the two countries.<sup>132</sup> When the Socialist International came to discuss British policy in India at the Amsterdam Congress in 1904 it was the English delegates who formulated the resolution which was adopted, and Hyndman's influence is apparent from its concluding demand: 'Congress calls on the workers of Great Britain to compel their government to abandon its present infamous and degrading colonial system and to introduce the perfectly practicable system of self-government for the Indian people under English sovereignty.'<sup>133</sup> Even the workers international did not question the continuation of this paternalistic imperial bond thought necessary by Hyndman.

During 1897 there was widespread famine in India and a meeting was called by the Lord Mayor at the Mansion House to discuss relief.<sup>134</sup> In the course of the meeting Hyndman intervened demanding a resolution be put calling upon the Secretary of State to suspend drawings on the Indian Exchequer, and to authorise the Indian government to devote the millions saved to saving lives. This was refused by the Lord Mayor, and Hyndman's repeated remonstrances led to his removal by the police, after which Hunter Watts took up the argument only to be ruled out of order. The upshot was that the SDF called its own meeting on the question in St. James Hall with E.S. Beesly in the chair. The meeting was 'literally packed with dense masses of people' said H.W. Lee, and a resolution passed calling for an end to the drain of produce held to be responsible for the famine.<sup>135</sup> The success of this meeting led to follow-up meetings up and

down the country including a large and successful one in the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. Requests for further meetings continued to be made to the central office of the SDF, but the large meetings already held had exhausted the reserves of the central funds allotted for the agitation, and activity had to be toned down despite its continued popularity. 'The agitation was, to some extent nullified by our financial inability to hold a mass meeting directly after its predecessor' said the secretary to the annual conference later that year.<sup>136</sup> This conference affirmed its support to Indians accused of sedition and expressed sympathy with efforts made by Indians to end 'our present shameful and ruinous rule'; the motion was moved by Hyndman who said that 'Unless the government of India were completely changed, it should be known that they sympathised with rebellion in India'.<sup>137</sup>

The commitment to the Indian cause was strong and deeply felt. During the South African war it was said that British imperialism in India was worse in its effects than British action in South Africa, as despite the war it involved more suffering.<sup>138</sup> In his report to the Amsterdam Congress of the International, Hyndman called the ruin of India by Britain 'the greatest crime which has ever blackened the annals of the human race'.<sup>139</sup> and he told the world's socialist representatives that 'Socialism itself for Western Europe is less important than the prevention of this wholesale atrocity'.<sup>140</sup> When the Indian nationalist movement seemed likely to become more militant in 1904, this was welcomed in Justice.<sup>141</sup> The deportation of Lala Rajput Rai under an early nineteenth century statute, and his imprisonment without



trial along with other Indian nationalists, led Hyndman to write to the Secretary of State in 1907. He proposed, he said,

to put the truth about India once more before the world, to denounce the infamies of our rule, and to proclaim my sincere sympathy with all Indians who are in revolt against your policy. I challenge you and the Liberal Government to prosecute me when I do so. You cannot deport me 'under the law of 1818,' or conveniently refuse me bail, or decline to appear in court yourself on subpoena. 142

The trial of Lokamanya Tilak for sedition in 1908 led to a special edition of Justice dedicated to the Indian cause<sup>143</sup> and at the 1909 annual conference, to emphasise the continuity of their commitment a resolution was passed asserting that

This 29th Conference of the Social-Democratic Party, in pursuance of its policy from the date of its foundation in 1881, in regard to India, sends its sincere greetings to the many races and peoples of Hindostan, and wishes them an early emancipation from the despotic and ruinous domination of Great Britain. 144

The suggestion by an American socialist that the Indian nationalist movement was essentially a bourgeois movement which aimed to replace white capitalists with black ones, and was therefore undeserving of socialist support, met with opposition from Harry Quelch. The defeat of the Raj would mean far more than replacing one set of masters with another he said; British rule meant that British working people were helping their masters to plunder India and socialists could not be indifferent to this, 'no native capitalist could produce such impoverishment of the whole country as is brought about by the constant drain of foreign tribute'.<sup>145</sup> He desired

to see the people of India with national independence and political rights , as well as 'social and economic liberty and equality.' If Indians wished to remain subject to their own capitalists that was their business and did not justify 'us in forcing the rule of our capitalist class upon them.'<sup>146</sup> In short it seems clear that the SDF was determined in its commitment to the independence of India and opposition to British rule, the only ambiguity being Hyndman's continued belief in some kind of continued British supervision, but this was not questioned, even in the ranks of the socialist international.

The words empire and imperialism only began to take on their modern meanings in the late nineteenth century. While SDF members were beginning to form views on the subject, develop analyses and elaborate theories, the same process was occurring in different ways elsewhere in British society. In the hands of the supporters of empire, the words were used in a positive sense and associated with the spread of civilisation. At a time when the concepts were rent with ambiguity and definitions unclear, strict meanings cannot always be assigned to usage, and this was particularly the case before 1900. Given this lack of clarity, it is fairly easy, if one chooses one's sources with care, to present the SDF as an organisation sympathetic to the British empire, especially in the years before the South African War, and this is what Norman Etherington has done in his article on the subject.<sup>147</sup>

Hyndman's abortive attempt to mix his early radicalism with socialism in England For All, contained

numerous references to empire and these are cited by Etherington with relish.<sup>148</sup> Hyndman's clear abandonment of such a simple position in his more mature analysis The Historical Basis of Socialism is conceded, but much made of his suggestion of a federation of Celto-Teutonic peoples. At the 1884 SDF conference a resolution was put calling for an 'imperial' policy on social revolution abroad, the difficulties inherent in the concept were realised and the word replaced with 'international'. For Etherington this was the work of those who were to leave the SDF at the end of the year and conflicted with Hyndman's views, but he gives no reason for believing this. In the following fifteen years, it is claimed, Hyndman 'received substantial support for his nationalist and imperial policies', but the only evidence cited is an article by Herbert Burrows in Justice in 1886 which called for a 'Federation of Democracy'. This is made out to be self-evidently imperialist, the word 'Anglo-Saxon' being added to Burrows' simple and idealistic appeal to give us a flavour of how nationalist and imperialist it really was; this demand was 'an important plank in SDF electoral appeals' (again no sources) and attempts by Burrows to differentiate his proposed federation from schemes of Imperial Federation are dismissed as inadequate and as typifying the approach of the SDF to imperial ideas. The deficiencies of this approach should be clear.

In view of Etherington's account it is necessary to say something of the use within the SDF of the developing concepts and the relationship between imperial expansion and the spread of socialism. Taking Hyndman's call for

an alliance of Celto-Teutonic peoples first, for Etherington this constituted a case of 'national, and racial assertion'.<sup>149</sup> True, it is difficult to read such accounts today without being struck by the air of cultural superiority involved, and if we wanted to be glib and slipshod with our concepts we could accuse Hyndman of 'cultural imperialism', but what was he saying and why did he make this demand? To place his demand in context, it was part of an argument about the difficulties of realising socialism on an international basis, 'different civilised countries have arrived at widely different stages in the social and economic growth.' Given the relative backwardness of Russia for instance, common action would prove very difficult; consequently the basis of 'the first real socialistic combination' was among 'the great Celto-Teutonic peoples in America, in Australia, in these islands, and possibly in Germany, ready to accept assistance and help from any other quarter'.<sup>150</sup> The argument was one about stages of development and ripeness for change, and Russia 'with her people just rising from barbarism below'<sup>151</sup> could not be included.<sup>152</sup>

The suggestion is often made that imperialism and socialist internationalism are close bedfellows: each embodies an ideology which proclaims superiority over other political systems and which is eminently suitable for export across the globe.<sup>153</sup> The connection is tenuous and puerile when applied in the context of Second International socialism. The spread of a liberating philosophy calling on the workers of foreign countries to expropriate their capitalists and take control for

themselves, is presented as tantamount to the annexation and exploitation of those same countries. The inadequacy of this interpretation is clear from SDF accounts, even when the word 'empire' continued to be used in a supportive way.

Justice in a front page piece entitled 'Tory Empire' in April 1885 declared that the empire was built on starvation in India and misery at home and was not worth keeping; it called for a 'voluntary federation of free and self respecting peoples.'<sup>154</sup> This call was reiterated in the following month, but in a form that adds piquancy for those wishing to dismiss the SDF as imperialists: 'We are for Empire too, in a sense - a voluntary association of free peoples'<sup>155</sup> In this same piece, at a time when little of analytical significance had been written on imperialism, and the word empire could be used in a seemingly progressive sense, care was taken to distinguish this from 'Commercial Imperialism', which was attacked. When Burrows made his call for a 'Federation of Democracy' he pointed out that imperial federation was 'a new title for ... exploitation' through the extension of capitalism. 'All over the world', he said, '- in Egypt, Africa, India, Australia, Canada, and last, but not least, in Ireland - the 'glory and honour of the empire' has meant unscrupulous greed, selfishness, and rascality of our capitalist classes.'<sup>156</sup> The federation he called for was a 'voluntary association of free democratic peoples', and a 'true international brotherhood whose only foundations are the equal rights and equal duties of every free man and free woman in the world-wide democratic state.'<sup>157</sup> Even if this is

dismissed as rhetoric, it is inadequate for an indictment of Burrows as a supporter of imperialism. The idea was taken up again by H.W. Lee in 1893; writing on 'The Imperialist Revival', he argued that socialists should attack such reactionary ideas with 'the higher ideal of international solidarity'. Workers had nothing to gain from imperial aggression, and everything to gain from an understanding of 'their fellows of other nationalities.' Talk of country and empire was 'so much dust thrown' in the workers' eyes. 'We grant that a federation of the English speaking race is in itself a grand idea', but its object should be to take a foremost part in the social revolution, not to extend markets.<sup>158</sup> Elsewhere he implied that 'white civilisation' could benefit and civilise the barbarians if only it were not tainted by commercialism.<sup>159</sup>

Ellam, in his Westminster Review article also used the word imperialism in an equivocal sense, but took care to separate it from anything that could exist under capitalism.

... the Brotherhood of Humanity. It is here that the significance of international democracy becomes most apparent. As an Imperialism it is much more decided than cosmopolitan capitalism, for it aims at nothing less than world-wide domination; but instead of playing off the peoples against each other, it urges them to combine in one common band against the tyranny of the last of all class-dominations - the plutocratic oligarchy. The democratic idea of progressive civilisation is to advance the welfare of all peoples alike, not at the expense of each other, but by means of peaceful co-operation on the basis of international interdependence and good-will. Before this gigantic ideal of international democracy the petty schemes of exploitative capitalism appear dwarfed into insignificance. 160

This would seem to be the latest use of the terms imperialism or empire in any progressive sense inside the SDF, but the demand for a democratic federation remained as part of their opposition to capitalist imperialism. In 1903 an editorial in the Social-Democrat said that they were 'entirely opposed to Imperialism and Empire in any form ... Democratic Federation, certainly, for social progress and the advancement of humanity; but Imperialism means ascendancy and domination, and the maintenance of all the old jealousies and antagonisms.'<sup>161</sup> Quelch in his reply to a questionnaire from the French journal La Vie Socialiste said that socialists could have no sympathy with 'colonisation as it is now understood or practised.' While it was arguable that they had rights over sparsely populated areas or those 'not developed by the backward races inhabiting them', such rights could only be exercised without injustice at a future stage of development' but not while capitalism existed.<sup>162</sup> While this latter view had more of a tinge of the imperialistic about it than earlier statements, it was against any such thoughts of a post-revolutionary imperialism that Theodore Rothstein wrote in 1908:

Those who, are inclined to take the view that it is possible to moralise colonialism or introduce a Socialist policy of colonisation will do well to remember this simple truth. Colonisation has for its basis the subjection and the exploitation of the native, and by sanctioning the former even to a degree you sanction the latter to the full extent. There is no middle course whatsoever. 163

The SDF has, on the whole, had a 'bad press' with regard to its attitudes to imperialism and responses to

the more aggressive and assertive aspects of its British variant. Its reputation in this respect is undeserved. In the eighties and nineties there was a good deal of equivocation; but given the lack of any developed theoretical work, they managed to make a principled stand on most of the issues facing them. At first this was a continuation of radical responses to Disraeli's buccaneering foreign policy in the seventies, but even from the early eighties attempts were made to connect imperial adventures to the spread of new markets, with asides at the villainous involvement of financiers and bondholders. From the nineties this was developed into an analysis of a capitalism in crisis and in danger of collapse, being given a new lease of life through the exploitation of new markets abroad, so that by the end of the century a foundation was laid for the development of a more sophisticated theory. At the turn of the century, continental theorists were beginning to elaborate in more detail the role of finance capital and the desire to export capital in the spread of a new imperialism. These ideas began to take root in the SDF, even before the publication of Hobson's famous work, the general tenor of which they were aware.

These theoretical developments were used as an aid to understanding the goals and achievements of British imperialism, and helped them to deepen and extend the progressive response to imperial activity which they had inherited from the earlier radical tradition. Their position on and understanding of specific issues was by no means uniform and homogeneous. Ideas were being formed and developed, and this process occasionally



involved polemic and disputation. Imperialism and empire were words undergoing important changes of meaning, and for some the progressive implications of these concepts, linking them to the spread of civilisation, were only abandoned slowly and in the light of experience. A few members clung to a belief in the advantages of empire until at least the turn of the century, but their views were usually criticised and should not be taken as typical of the SDF. At a time of increased imperial rivalry, when the extent and nature of imperialism was undergoing important changes, the SDF was surprisingly consistent in its opposition to imperialism both theoretically and in the ways it responded to the actualities of imperial involvement, particularly that of their own government in India and Africa. In future less time should be devoted by historians to the atavistic responses of a limited number of individuals at a time of transition, and more to an appreciation of the SDF's emerging understanding and growing commitment to anti-imperialism

FOOTNOTES

1. Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social-Democratic Federation, and Imperialism', Historical Studies, Vol.16, No.62, (April 1974).
2. Africa and India are chosen because they were the areas most widely commented on, though they were by no means the only ones chosen for comment. See for instance Justice, 9 January 1886, p.4; ibid., 4 December 1886, p.1 (Burma); ibid., 4 March 1893, p.4 (Hawaii); Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1904 (London, 1904), p.20 (Tibet). Ireland has been dealt with already - see chapter one above.
3. Justice, 26 January 1884, p.5.
4. ibid., 15 March 1884, pp.4-5.
5. ibid., 28 June 1884, p.1.
6. ibid., 25 April 1885, p.2.
7. ibid., 24 November 1884, p.1.
8. ibid., 1 May 1896, pp. 7-8. See also Bernard Porter, Critics of Empire (London, 1968), pp.98-100. Etherington quotes Bax making similar statements in 1904 and suggests that he 'foreshadowed Lenin'. Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social-Democratic Federation', p.98. Bax's analysis however had little in common with that developed later by Lenin who gave much more emphasis to monopoly, finance capital and the export of capital, than to the need for fresh markets and cheap labour. Lenin, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (Peking, 1970). To the extent that it 'foreshadowed' any of the classical theories of imperialism, it was that of Rosa Luxemburg who argued, from what she perceived as a logical flaw in Marx's analysis, that surplus value could not be 'realised' without recourse to non-capitalist markets. For Rosa Luxemburg's theories see Anthony Brewer, Marxist Theories of Imperialism (London, 1980), chapter 3; Tom Kemp, Theories of Imperialism (London, 1967); Peter Nettle, Rosa Luxemburg (London, 1969), pp.160-173; Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism: 2. The Golden Age (Oxford, 1978), pp.65-76.
9. Justice, 3 December 1892, p.1.
10. ibid.
11. ibid. See also ibid., 4 June 1892, p.1; James Leatham, What is the Good of Empire? (Peterhead and London, 1901), p.11; E. Belfort Bax and H. Quelch, A New Catechism of Socialism (London, 1902), pp.32-3.

12. Justice, 16 June 1894, p.4. See also ibid., 4 June 1892: 'Oh that a military genius would arise who could train and weld into a fighting mass the disorganised tribes under the control of the arch usurper into a well-ordered, compact, fighting mass, and annihilate the swarm of canting anti-slavery humbugs and other pioneers of civilisation in the dark regions of the earth!'
13. For assessments of these see Anthony Brewer, Marxist Theories of Imperialism; Tom Kemp, Theories of Imperialism, *passim*.
14. J.R. Widdup, 'Socialism and Colonial Development', The Social-Democrat, II, No.7, (July 1898), p.209.
15. ibid.
16. ibid.
17. ibid., p.210.
18. ibid., pp.210-11; F. Reginald Statham makes a similar point in 'South Africa in the Past and Future', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.2, (February 1900), p.49. Cf. the view of Cecil Rhodes, who believed that 'We happen to be, the best people in the world, with the highest ideals of decency and justice and liberty and peace, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better for humanity.' Cited in Bernard Porter, The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1970 (London, 1975), p.134.
19. ibid., p.211. This is similar to the view developed by George Bernard Shaw in Fabianism and Empire: A Manifesto (London, 1900). For the Fabians and Imperialism see Bernard Porter, 'Fabians, Imperialists and the International Order' in Ben Pimlott, (ed.), Fabian Essays in Socialist Thought (London, 1984), p.58; A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics 1884-1918 (London, 1962), chapter V.
20. Thomas Kennedy, 'Political Determinism', The Social-Democrat, V, No.3, (March 1901), pp.79-81.
21. ibid., p.81. See also idem., 'Pro-Boer Sentiments', The Social-Democrat, VI, No.2, (February 1902), pp.47-9, and below.
22. Etherington presents Widdup's opinions as an 'effort to sharpen his party's fuzzy thinking on foreign policy', suggesting it was representative of their outlook, writing of 'everyone's imperial enthusiasm'. Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social-Democratic Federation', p.96.
23. 'we hope to make polemical discussion on all phases of the social problem a special feature of our magazine ... the writers alone will be responsible for the views expressed in their contributions, we

ourselves being responsible only for editorial articles.' 'Introductory', The Social-Democrat, I, No.1, (January 1897).

24. See below, and chapter four above.
25. James Leatham, What is the Good, p.10; John E. Ellam, 'Imperialism, and the Coming Crisis for Democracy', The Westminster Review, CLVI, No.3, (September 1901), p.244-5; Theodore Rothstein, 'Colonial Civilisation', The Social-Democrat, XII, No.8, (August 1908), pp.350-1.
26. 'Editorial Brevities', The Social-Democrat, VII, No.6, (June, 1903), p.322: 'For ourselves ... We have no more love for Anglo-Saxon Empire than we should have for a Teutonic or Slavonic Empire'; Theodore Rothstein, 'The War and Democracy', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.3, (March 1900), pp.71-3; see also H.M. Hyndman, Colonies and Dependencies (London, 1904), p.14.
27. James Leatham, What is the Good, p.6.
28. *ibid.*, p.9.
29. *ibid.*, pp.9-10.
30. *ibid.*, p.11.
31. *ibid.*, p.14.
32. *ibid.*, p.16.
33. *ibid.*, p.15.
34. *ibid.*, p.16.
35. John E. Ellam, 'Imperialism, and the Coming Crisis'; The Social-Democrat, V, No.9, (September 1901), pp.286-7.
36. *ibid.*, p.238.
37. *ibid.*, p.240.
38. *ibid.*, p.244.
39. *ibid.*, pp.244-5.
40. *ibid.*, p.247.
41. *ibid.*, p.248; *idem.*, 'The Individualist Debacle', The Social-Democrat, III, No.4, (April 1899), p.105.
42. 'Germany, England and the World-Policy', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.8, (August 1900).
43. Bernard Porter, Critics.
44. Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, Our History, Pamphlet 59, (London, 1974),

p.13.

45. J.A. Hobson, 'The Economic Taproot of Imperialism', The Contemporary Review, LXXXII, (August 1902); The Social-Democrat, VI, No.8, (August 1902.) For The Social-Democrat as a socialist Review of Reviews see 'Introductory', I, No.1, (January 1897).
46. William Clarke, 'The Social Future of England', The Contemporary Review, LXXVIII, (December 1900). This article is not cited by Hobson, but the similarity between his conclusion and Clarke's points are too striking for there to be no connection.
47. Bernard Semmel, Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social Imperial Thought 1895-1914 (London, 1960), p.246.
48. Morning Post, 29 October 1900, cited by C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism (London, 1961), p.148.
49. Theodore Rothstein, 'The Coming of the State', The Social-Democrat, V, No.12, (December 1901).
50. *ibid.*, p.361.
51. *ibid.*, p.362.
52. 'Editorial Brevities', The Social-Democrat, VII, No.6, (June 1903).
53. Cited by J. Braunthal, History of the International 1864-1914 (London, 1966), p.244.
54. The resolution was reprinted in 'The New International', The Social-Democrat, VI, No.6, (June 1902), p.166.
55. H.M. Hyndman, Colonies and Dependencies, p.6.
56. *ibid.*
57. *ibid.*
58. *ibid.*, p.9.
59. *ibid.*
60. *ibid.*, p.14.
61. *ibid.*
62. J. Braunthal, History of the International, p.318.
63. The full resolution is printed in *ibid.*, pp.318-9; Social Democratic Party, Annual Conference Report, 1908, (London, 1908), p.22.
64. C.L. Fitzgerald, 'England (with Israel) in Egypt', Justice, 26 January 1884, pp.4-5; H.M. Hyndman and William Morris, 'The Bondholder's Battue', *ibid.*, 9

- February 1884, p.4; 26 April 1884, p.1; 10 May 1884, p.4; 24 May 1884, pp.1, 6; 31 May 1884, p.6; 20 September 1884, p.5.
65. *ibid.*, 24 May 1884, p.1; 14 February 1885, p.1.
66. *ibid.*, 14 February 1885, p.1.
67. *ibid.*, 28 March 1885, p.1.
68. For the background to Rothstein's interest in Egyptian affairs see John Saville's introduction to the reprint of Theodore Rothstein, From Chartism to Labourism: Historical Sketches of the English Working Class Movement (London, 1983) pp.viii-x.
69. Justice, 16 June 1894, p.1.
70. *ibid.*
71. H.W. Lee, 'The Exploitation of Africa', Justice, 10 December 1892, p.2.
72. *ibid.*, 28 May 1892, p.1.
73. *ibid.*
74. *ibid.*
75. *ibid.*, 23 November 1895, p.5.
76. *ibid.*
77. This was not just from the time of the South African War as Etherington suggests. Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social-Democratic Federation', pp.96-7.
78. Justice, 10 December 1892, p.2.
79. *ibid.*
80. *ibid.*, 28 October 1893, p.1; 21 October 1893, p.5.
81. *ibid.*, 4 November 1893, p.4.
82. *ibid.*, 2 December 1893, p.1.
83. *ibid.*, 26 January 1895, p.1; For anti-semitism in the SDF see Edmund Silberner, 'British Socialism and the Jews', Historica Judaica, XIV, (1952), pp.38-52; Colin Holmes, Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939 (London, 1979), pp.22-4, 68-9; Geoffrey Alderman, The Jewish Community in British Politics (Oxford, 1983), pp.57, 81-2.
84. Cited in C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.125.
85. *ibid.*, p.126.
86. H.M. Hyndman, Further Reminiscences (London, 1912), p.157.

87. ibid., p.157; Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, p.6.
88. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1899, (London, 1899), pp.17-18.
89. H.M. Hyndman, Further Reminiscences, p.160.
90. ibid., p.161.
91. ibid.; Daily Chronicle, 26 September 1899, cited by C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, pp.127-8
92. Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social-Democratic Federation,' p.97.
93. Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, p.7.
94. F. Reginald Statham, South Africa: in the Past and Future (London, 1900); he also produced South Africa and the Transvaal (London, 1900).
95. F. Reginald Statham, 'South Africa in the Past and Future', p.49.
96. ibid.
97. Theodore Rothstein, 'The War and Democracy', The Social-Democrat, V, No.3 (March 1900), pp.71-3.
98. Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, pp.7-8.
99. Thomas Kennedy, 'Was the War Inevitable?', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.11, (November 1900), p.331.
100. ibid., p.332.
101. ibid.
102. ibid., pp.332-3.
103. ibid., p.333.
104. John E. Ellam, 'The Logic of Our Opposition to the War', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.12, (December 1900), pp.159-62; idem., 'The Achievement of Finality', The Social-Democrat, V, No.2, (February 1901), pp.42-5.
105. H.M. Hyndman, 'Thoughts on Responsibility', The Social-Democrat, V, No.2, (February 1901), pp.46-7.
106. Thomas Kennedy, 'Political Determinism', The Social-Democrat, V, No.3, (March 1901), pp.79-82. See also Ellam's further reply 'Determinist Sophistry', The Social-Democrat, V, No.4, (April 1901), pp.109-11.
107. E. Belfort Bax, 'Pro-British Arguments', The Social-Democrat, VI, No.1, (January 1902), p.6.

108. *ibid.*
109. *ibid.*, p.7.
110. Thomas Kennedy, 'Pro-Boer Sentiments', The Social-Democrat, VI, No.2, (February 1902), p.47.
111. *ibid.*
112. *ibid.*, p.49.
113. Justice, 20 July 1901, cited by Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.129.
114. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.129.
115. Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, p.11.
116. H.M. Hyndman, letter to Justice, 11 July 1901, cited in Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, p.11; Thomas Kennedy, 'Pro-Boer Sentiments', p.49.
117. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1899, pp.22-5. See also chapter seven below.
118. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1900, (London, 1900), pp.8-10.
119. Justice, 11 July 1901, cited in Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, p.11.
120. Richard Price, An Imperial War and the British Working Class (London, 1972), pp. 236-7; Howell makes a similar point with reference to the ILP and the war: David Howell, British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906 (Manchester, 1983), pp.345-6.
121. H.M. Hyndman, The Unrest in India (London, 1907), p.2; C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.21.
122. H.M. Hyndman, 'Bleeding to Death', The Nineteenth Century, viii, (July 1880), cited by C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.24.
123. H.M. Hyndman., Unrest, p.2.
124. For the response to this and other articles see C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.23-5.
125. H.M. Hyndman, England For All (Brighton, 1973, first edition London, 1881), p.150.
126. *ibid.*, p.151.
127. H.M. Hyndman, The Historical Basis of Socialism in England (London, 1883), pp.472-3.
128. *ibid.*, p.473.



129. Hyndman also makes this point in Unrest, p.16 and in Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1900, p.23.
130. 'Editorial Brevities', The Social-Democrat, VII, No.6, (June 1903), p.325.
131. Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social Democratic Federation', p.94; H.M. Hyndman, The Record of an Adventurous Life (London, 1911), p.176.
132. C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.127.
133. The resolution is printed in full in J. Braunthal, History of the International, p.312.
134. Hyndman was to express his own views of charitable relief ten years later 'the policy of us foreigners in India is draining away wealth at the rate of £35,000,000 a year for our own benefit - we have drained away in the last five years at least £140,000,000 - and then when we send £500,000 by way of charity, we claim great credit for our beneficence, because the Indian people are saved from starvation!' Unrest, p.7.
135. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1897, (London, 1897), p.10.
136. *ibid.*
137. *ibid.*, p.25. Less sanguine members could express doubts about the encouragement of rebellion as did C.J. Scott of Northampton at the 1906 annual conference. Their job was rather, he suggested, to educate the people of Britain to do justice to the people of India. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1906, (London, 1906), pp.25-6.
138. 'The Ravages of Empire', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.6, (June 1900). But cf. the views of Bax above.
139. H.M. Hyndman, Colonies and Dependencies, p.4.
140. *ibid.*, p.14. Cf. Bill Baker, The Social Democratic Federation and the Boer War, pp.11, 13, who suggests that Hyndman separated the struggle for socialism from the struggle against imperialism and thus weakened the SDF's anti-imperialism.
141. C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman, p.195.
142. H.M. Hyndman, Unrest, pp.11-12.
143. Justice, 18 July 1908.
144. Social Democratic Party, Annual Conference Report, 1909, (London, 1909), p.29.
145. H. Quelch, 'Social-Democracy, Nationalism, and Imperialism', The Social-Democrat, XI, No.7, (July

- 1907), p.393.
146. *ibid.*, p.394.
147. Norman Etherington, 'Hyndman, the Social-Democratic Federation,'.
148. *ibid.*, pp.91-2.
149. *ibid.*, p.94.
150. H.M. Hyndman, Historical Basis, p.433.
151. *ibid.*, p.433.
152. For stages theories, barbarism etc., see chapter four above.
153. Etherington is keen on this, and he quotes G.K. Chesterton, a doubtful witness, making the point in his autobiography, 'Hyndman, the Social-Democratic Federation,' , p.89.
154. Justice, 25 April 1885, p.13.
155. *ibid.*, 9 May 1885, p.1.
156. *ibid.*, 19 June 1886, p.2.
157. *ibid.*
158. *ibid.*, 13 May 1893, p.4.
159. *ibid.*, 4 November 1893, p.4.
160. John E. Ellam, 'Imperialism', p.250.
161. 'Editorial Brevities', The Social-Democrat, VII, No.6, (June 1903), p.322.
162. His answers were reprinted in The Social-Democrat, IX, No.9, (September 1905), pp.543-4. The questions can be found in *ibid.*, IX, No.7, (July 1905), p.415.
163. Theodore Rothstein, 'Colonial Civilisation', The Social-Democrat, XII, No.8, (August 1908), p.350.

## Chapter 6

### THE CLASS WAR

For all Victorian and Edwardian socialists, the first premise of their socialism was an enraged morality. They lived in a world where poverty and deprivation existed side by side with wealth and luxury. 'All around was a state of dreadful anarchy; abundant richness, luxury, vice, hypocrisy, poverty, starvation and crime. Men literally fighting with each other for the privilege of working for their bread, and little children crying with hunger and cold and slowly perishing of want.'<sup>1</sup> The feeling of anger and disgust pervaded the movement and formed the stock in trade of stump oratory; it was the centrality of this concern that attracted many to the socialist ranks. The sense of injustice was captured in a pamphlet by the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin entitled An Appeal to the Young. This particular work was translated by Hyndman and published in 1884 in the journal To-day, at that point under SDF control. Soon afterwards it was reprinted in Justice, later appearing in pamphlet form, and was reprinted and re-issued throughout the life of the SDF.<sup>2</sup> It took the form of an appeal to a young man about to start on a career, with the author assessing the futility of the assortment of trades and professions open to him. 'Let us suppose that you intend to be a - doctor' says Kropotkin in a characteristic passage. He then takes the young man to visit the sick wife of an unemployed slum dweller:

What will you prescribe for the sick woman, doctor? You who have seen at a glance that the cause of her illness is general anaemia, want of good food, lack of fresh air? Say a good beefsteak every day? a little exercise in the country? a dry and well-ventilated bed-room? What irony! If she could have afforded it this would have all been done long since without your advice!

3

The next day he is taken by a footman to visit a wealthy lady who cannot sleep, who devotes her life to 'dressing, visits, balls, and squabbles with a stupid husband.' Her prescription consisted of a 'less preposterous habit of life, a less heating diet, walks in the fresh air', and to compensate for the absence of useful work 'a little gymnastic exercise in her bedroom.' 'The one is dying because she has never had enough food nor enough rest in her whole life; the other pines because she has never known what work is since she was born.'<sup>4</sup>

This perception of injustice was present in all socialist accounts in these years, it formed the background not only of anarchist and SDF politics, but was at the centre of Fabian propaganda in the various editions of their Facts For Socialists, and was the foundation of ILP socialism with its strong moral and ethical basis. It was the class nature of this inequality, and the class nature of the proposed solutions that was to divide the various socialist groups. In this chapter the SDF's commitment to the class war will be considered. The attitudes of the Fabians and the ILP will be outlined in order to place the outlook of the SDF in perspective, and this will then be presented in detail. Opinions and beliefs about the working class will be analysed: its character, the

likelihood of different sections finding socialism appealing, and the reasons put forward for the SDF's failure to attract it to socialism. Finally there will be an assessment of SDF views on those class-based, class conscious institutions of Victorian and Edwardian society, the trade unions.

The class war was for SDF members a shibboleth of revolutionary purity. Recognition of the class war suggested Hyndman, was a factor which separated a Social Democrat from a mere socialist.<sup>5</sup> Belfort Bax who was keen to ensure vigilance in these matters, suggested that they were too lax, accepted all sorts of individuals who were not socialists into their ranks, and were loath to expel people who were insufficiently socialistic. 'Oh Socialism, Socialism,' he said 'what queer fish they would have us assimilate in thy name!'<sup>6</sup> In an article entitled 'Treachurous Toleration and Faddist Fanaticism' he asked 'What is vital in Socialism?' and of the four points he came up with, the second was 'The doctrine of the class war as the general historical method of realising the new form of society'.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, at a time when fusion with the ILP was under discussion, John Leslie who was at the time the Organising Secretary of the Scottish District Council of the Federation, said in his chairman's address to the 1898 annual conference that 'the S.D.F. is looked upon and considers itself the trustee of the Socialist cause in Great Britain ... Let us look to it that no brand of Socialism, warranted home manufacture and suited to insular tastes, is thrust upon us for that which takes its stand irreconcilably upon the Class War.'<sup>8</sup> In 1904 when a number of socialist

societies requested affiliation to the SDF, the issue was put to that year's annual conference, and it was decided that the only criterion should be 'That local Socialist bodies wishing to affiliate to the S.D.F. must recognise the class war'.<sup>9</sup>

The class war did not occupy quite the same place in Fabian politics. The Fabians did not deny the existence of class conflict, nor did they provide an alternative definition or analysis of class, but there was an insistence that class struggle did not have a role to play in the attainment of socialism, and that everyone, not just the working class, was being swept along by the advance of socialist ideas.<sup>10</sup> From the mid-nineties a much firmer position on class struggle was advanced by Bernard Shaw. He argued that class conflict might engender industrial unrest, but it would not bring about socialism. The struggle for socialism did not involve antagonism between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, on the contrary, support for socialism cut across class lines, as did opposition to it, and he mocked at 'the crude Marxian melodrama of "The Class War; or the Virtuous worker and the Brutal Capitalist"'.<sup>11</sup> The ILP, although accepting the importance of the working class and the need to win them over to socialism, nonetheless balked at the idea of making too direct a working class appeal, and like the Fabians rejected the centrality of the class struggle to the attainment of socialism.<sup>12</sup> Glasier in particular denounced 'the class war dogma', arguing that their role was to rescue the cause of Socialism from the SDF which preached 'the Class War and other inane questions'.<sup>13</sup> Socialism in the ILP

view was not about intensifying class conflict, but about the development of social harmony.<sup>14</sup>

At the Labour Representation Committee's founding conference in 1900 the SDF tried to commit those present to the formation of 'a distinct party ... based upon a recognition of the class war ...' but this was firmly rejected in favour of Keir Hardie's better known and more moderate proposal of 'a distinct labour group in Parliament'.<sup>15</sup> At the following year's LRC conference Harry Quelch submitted a similar resolution which was also thrown out, and later in the same year the SDF decided to withdraw from the LRC. However, the class war was not mentioned in the SDF conference debate on the subject, the major reason given for leaving was that the bulk of trade unions had not joined the organisation as originally anticipated.<sup>16</sup> Later however, the LRC's refusal to act in Parliament as 'the class conscious representatives of the proletariat' was given as the reason for the SDF's refusal to reconsider their attitude towards them.<sup>17</sup>

In 1905, an article by Hardie entitled 'An Indictment of the Class War' gave rise to a polemic on the issue, allowing prominent socialists to air their views on the subject. Mocking the idea of the top hatted and tail coated Hyndman sharing a class consciousness with the poor worker, Hardie asserted the need for them to make 'war upon a system, not upon a class'. Bax and Hyndman responded to his arguments in Justice, and later in the year Bernard Shaw joined in the attack on SDF views.<sup>18</sup> The contrasting positions on the class war come across clearly in a lengthy review of Ramsay MacDonald's

Socialism and Society in the Social-Democrat during the same year by J.B. Askew. Referring to MacDonald's denial of the class war, he highlighted an illustration used by MacDonald, in which a Primrose Dame shaking hands with an elector was alleged to have temporarily abolished the class war.

The idea of the dukes and duchesses of the Primrose League abolishing by a shake of their lily-white hands, the most radical and deep seated conflict not only of our time, but of all history, is something for which I cannot find an appropriate epithet. 19

He continued: 'Let people preach human solidarity, and try to cover up the class war as much as they will, the truth will out. There can be no human solidarity so long as the proletariat has to carry the capitalist on his [sic] back ...'.<sup>20</sup>

Other socialists may have preached harmony and spoken of socialism as the 'Gospel of Love' said James Leatham, but in response the SDF preached 'the gospel of hatred, because in the circumstances it seems the only righteous thing we can preach.' 'Those who talk of the Gospel of Love with landlordism and capitalism for its objects' he said, 'want us to make our peace with iniquity.'<sup>21</sup> Further, although other socialists may have denied the class war, in their labour and trade union activities they were themselves the actual embodiment of that war even though they may not have recognised or accepted it: 'The L.R.C. represent', said Askew in 1906, 'so long as they remain independent, the political class war itself.'<sup>22</sup>

Given that the class war had such a central place in the SDF's politics, what did they mean by it and why



was it so important? In 1901 they issued a leaflet entitled 'The Class War' which began by defining the concept:

Broadly speaking, modern society is divided into two classes - the possessors of property and the non-possessors; the dominant class and the subject class; the class which rules and the class which has to obey. He who possesses sufficient wealth to exercise control over the labour of others, to exploit that labour for his own profit, belongs to the one class; he who possesses nothing but the power to labour contained in his own body, and who is therefore compelled to sell that labour power in order to live, belongs to the other. Between these two classes there is a constant struggle and conflict, none the less real, none the less bitter, because many of those concerned do not recognise it and many others deny that it exists at all. It is this struggle and conflict between these two classes, that Socialists call the class war ... 23

This conflict was not something new, class antagonism was 'the great factor in all human progress throughout history from the break-up of the village communities to our own time.'<sup>24</sup> The interests of workers and capitalists were 'necessarily and naturally opposed', and this opposition had its basis in material interests, with the worker needing to sell his labour power to the highest bidder and the capitalist desiring to purchase it as cheaply as possible.<sup>25</sup> Besides these two major classes, others also existed, but these were to be numbered with the 'labourers'. There was, 'a large portion of the lowest middle-class who practically depend upon and are a portion of the proletariat', there were 'certain of the intellectual proletariat, clerks, &c., who are learning how they are being exploited themselves by their employers'; and there were 'the domestic servants, whose servile, degraded position will be felt

more and more as education spreads.<sup>26</sup> The growing antagonism between the two sides was to be final and its scope was worldwide. 'All other antagonisms, complicated as they were, have now faded into one simple unmistakable hostility of clearly defined inimical interests between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.'<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, 'There is no way in which the Class War can be avoided.'<sup>28</sup>

It will be seen from this that the class war, far from being the sacred mantra it is often made out to be, was an important component of their view of society derived from and related to their economic analysis of capitalism and their historical materialist perspective. It is a view of society based upon the theory of surplus value and a process of historical change with class conflict at its centre. As such it is an important feature of their claim to 'scientific socialism', placing them firmly in a marxist, or international Social Democratic tradition. Such class consciousness has always been an important component of marxist socialism, and despite the danger of it becoming a 'catechismal orthodoxy' it denotes a commitment to revolutionary social transformation and a realisation of the need to transform property relationships before socialism can be achieved.<sup>29</sup> As the SDF's adherence to the class war has often been presented as a case of 'catechismal orthodoxy' and its adoption of the term as evidence of its dogmatism, it is necessary to consider some of the qualifications and the limits placed upon its use.

In the early 1900s there developed deep political differences within the SDF. These were to culminate in

what has been called 'the impossibilist revolt' and lead to a series of defections and expulsions which resulted in the formation of the Socialist Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Great Britain.<sup>30</sup> The question of class and the way commitment to the class war was to be put into practice was an important part of the rift. The problem first arose out of the discussion, at the 1900 congress of the International held in Paris on 'Ministerialism' or the participation of socialists in bourgeois governments. The controversy stemmed from the involvement of the French socialist Millerand in the government of Waldeck-Rousseau, a government which contained General Galliffet renowned for his butchery of the Paris Communards. Feelings naturally ran high, but eventually a compromise resolution drawn up by Karl Kautsky was adopted opposing participation in principle but accepting that it might be necessary in exceptional circumstances. Apart from G. Yates, an SDF member from Leith in Scotland, the whole of the SDF delegation to the congress had supported the Kautsky resolution. With difficulty Yates and his supporters raised the issue at the 1901 SDF conference, attacking those who had supported the decision and suggesting that in doing so they had abandoned the class struggle. It is noteworthy that although no one supported the actions of Millerand, the conference refused to attack the Kautsky compromise.<sup>31</sup> Support for the class war was not to be a dogmatic limitation on the future tactics of the SDF. This was made even clearer when, in the aftermath of the decision to withdraw from the LRC, the same individuals tried to get the organisation to repudiate all political

alliances 'with any organisation which does not make its principle aim the intelligent and purposive prosecution of the class war'.<sup>32</sup> In the debate which followed, Herbert Burrows spoke strongly against, arguing that it would lead to his own expulsion for his vice-presidency of the Women's Industrial Council and his membership of the committee of the Women's Trade Union League, and would destroy all that Will Thorne had built up in West Ham. Quelch argued that the SDF were 'possibilist and opportunist', and that the resolution would make them 'impossibilists and inopportunist'.<sup>33</sup> The motion was defeated, support for the class war was not to incorporate a declaration of war against the rest of the labour movement, and was not to be a means of turning them into isolated sectarians.<sup>34</sup>

The adoption of the class war would tend to suggest that the SDF were reverential towards the working class. After all it was the activity of the workers that was going to bring into being the Co-operative Commonwealth. 'The emancipation of the working-class' said Harry Quelch 'must be the work of the working class themselves'.<sup>35</sup> In the light of this it is useful to consider their views on the nature of the British working class, and the reasons given for their failure to turn them into the class conscious agents of revolutionary change.

For attitudes to class, one almost instinctively turns first to a consideration of the views of Hyndman; for both contemporaries and historians there has always been something self-evidently amusing about an unmistakably bourgeois stockbroker trying to instil into the working class a hatred of the bourgeoisie. Hyndman

is sometimes presented as a snob in regard to his relationships with working people.<sup>36</sup> Although he had embraced the cause of the workers, he continued to wear the top hat and tails in which Shaw suggested he had been born, symbolic as they were of upper class propriety. Possibly the most tactless of Britain's socialist leaders he liked to remind working class audiences that he owed his wealth and position to their labour and referred to 'my class' and 'your class'; serious working class activists could easily take offence at what Hyndman no doubt considered amusing asides.<sup>37</sup> Later, almost in confirmation of his snobbishness we find him fawning over the Countess of Warwick after her admission into the SDF.<sup>38</sup> But to stress these aspects is to concentrate on the superficial and journalistic. Too easily is the history of late Victorian and Edwardian socialism dismissed as an episode in the tradition of music hall reminiscences with its top hatted leaders and red countesses.

As a bourgeois, Hyndman clearly had problems relating to working class people, and many workers would have found it difficult to relate to him.<sup>39</sup> However once he had adopted a socialist position his commitment to a class basis for his socialism was absolute: 'the revolution must come from below. The workers must achieve their own conquest. For that reason we appeal to the higher natures of all classes to take our side, to strive with us side by side with the wage-earners'.<sup>40</sup> Thus wrote Hyndman in 1884, and he was to cling firmly to his belief in the working class as the only revolutionary agency. This is not to say that he entertained a

romantic view of a heroic proletariat, or did not despair at times of winning their support. In an article in The Challenge, the newspaper owned by his American friend Gaylord Wilshire he wrote of them in 1901: 'Ignorant, conceited and too often degraded and embruted by their wretched surroundings, the English working classes are not nice people to work for.'<sup>41</sup> Later in the same year he continued along the same lines, 'It is useless to try to disguise from ourselves that the mass of the English workers are ignorant, conceited, apathetic, addicted to gambling and drink, and for the most part indifferent to their own welfare.'<sup>42</sup> This was written at a low point in Hyndman's political career when he had resigned from the executive of the SDF and had taken a rest from political activity. However, even at this point, he added, 'We must not despair on that account assuredly, but must keep working on to awaken them to class-consciousness and vigorous action.'<sup>43</sup>

The role of the socialist movement argued Harry Quelch was to inspire the working class with a 'consciousness of their present enslaved position' and a 'passionate desire for their own emancipation'. 'That', he said 'is where we have failed.'<sup>44</sup> A variety of reasons were put forward to account for this failure. One approach, similar to Hyndman's, was to see the working class as having potential but being too brutalised by their surroundings to develop an awareness of their condition or do anything about it. In the Ragged Trousered Philanthropists where the socialist who had sold out to the bourgeois political parties gave vent to his reasons for despising the working class, all that

the stunned educated socialist Barrington could come up with in reply was that 'Circumstances make us what we are; and anyhow, the children are worth fighting for.'<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, in his capacity as socialist lecturer he was asked by a working man: 'Do you mean to say as the time will ever come when the gentry will mix up on equal terms with the likes of us?' He replied 'Oh, no ... When we get Socialism there won't be any people like us. Everybody will be civilised.'<sup>46</sup> This kind of limited view of the working class had important repercussions for the role they would be able to play in the coming transformation. 'The hungry and the drunken, the dissipated and the brutal, may make riots and rebellions, but a class revolution, with a definite constructive programme, is far beyond their grasp', said Hyndman.<sup>47</sup> A social revolution would be made by 'well fed and determined men',<sup>48</sup> and it would help if 'they were all temperate, thrifty, [and] ready to combine'.<sup>49</sup>

This belief contrasts with an earlier tradition concerning the propensity of working people to rebel. 'I defy you to agitate a fellow with a full stomach' said William Cobbett.<sup>50</sup> Engels, and a later generation of British marxists were to develop this kind of argument further in the labour aristocracy thesis in which it was suggested that the better off sections of the working class had been 'bought off', their relative prosperity moderating their politics.<sup>51</sup> This type of approach was also to be found within the SDF: in an early account Hyndman, after speaking of the ignorance of the majority of workers, said that 'above this rank and file of labourers there stands the aristocracy of labour - the

trade unions' and their leaders 'are almost without exception, more or less in the pay of the capitalists - mostly Liberals who, in effect, use them to keep back their fellows'.<sup>52</sup> However, it was much more common within the SDF in later years to observe the revolutionary potential of the better off and respectable workman, particularly from the late eighties when their attitude towards trade unionists became more positive. This was one of the major justifications for their adoption of a palliative programme: it was a means of turning the degenerate and demoralised into responsible steady individuals. The 'lower strata of the working classes' said Theodore Rothstein 'are the least accessible to noble appeals, the least capable to grasp a new idea, the least prepared for a conscious effort and unremitting struggle.' On the contrary it was

the better paid artisan, the skilled labourer, the earnest trade unionist, who is decently clad and fed, who enjoys a home and a friendly circle, who knows how to respect himself and be respected by others, who constitutes the really progressive element in every community; conscious of his rights and duties, used to organised life and actions, possessing a mind cultivated by reading and social intercourse, he is the chief actor on the stage of politics and revolutions - the easiest convert to new doctrines and parties.

53

This argument was taken a stage further by James Leatham who suggested that not only were they more likely to become socialists, but once converted the respectable artisan of good character made a better socialist than the 'rougher type'.

What we find is that if in a certain town the movement be taken up at the outset by the better class of workers, with a sprinkling of



the middle and lower-middle class, like attracts like, and the movement, standing moderately well in the public estimation, goes forward from one success to another; but let Socialism be taken up by the rougher type of the rough-and-tumble Socialist, and so far as that centre is concerned, it will never get much beyond fighting the police, with unemployed agitations and deputations to the authorities ending in smoke of indignant oratory. 54

Similarly, J.J. Terrett discovered through his experiences on the West Ham Council that 'the "shovel-funker" and the man whose motto is "Thirty bob a week, and mind you don't wear your broom out" is no good as a municipal employee, and utterly unreliable in political or trade union work'.<sup>55</sup>

The problem however was that even the better paid and respectable workers did not prove as responsive to socialist ideas as they would have liked. The dilemma was summed up by a critic of Hyndman in the 1880s who attacked him for making appeals to this strata:

he surely must strongly misunderstand the steady, respectable English artisan ... if he thinks his revolutionary doctrines would find favour with him; the man who has settled down, who has his wife and family about him in his own home, who has his account with the Post Office Savings Bank, who belongs to a working man's club, who has the franchise, and who honestly and intelligently exercises the political power which it gives him. 56

A further suggestion for their lack of success was the general conservatism of the working class as a whole, who tended to be easily satisfied, and as such unresponsive to the lofty appeals of socialists. The British worker 'was not a man of exalted ideals nor high-pitched social ambitions' suggested Leatham; Marx and Engels, may have appealed to him with the idea that

he could get along without his boss, and Ruskin and Morris to instil in him a desire for beautiful and generous surroundings, but

he was not disposed to quarrel very much with red brick, a one-pair back in a dull street, comfortable shoddy, for literature the evening paper, pictures out of the illustrated weeklies, a run into the country or the seaside once-a-year in the fine weather, a shilling or two for 'the public', the football match, or the music halls. 57

Linked to this conservatism it was suggested, was an astuteness on the part of the ruling class whose adeptness, diplomacy and use of 'the velvet glove' added to the compliant conservatism of the workers. English workers, *said Quelch, were no less intelligent than those* in the rest of Europe where socialism was much more popular, but they were more imbued with bourgeois ideas, more reverential and less class conscious. 'In this conservatism of the masses, added to the readiness of the ruling class to adopt - and to adapt to their own ends - any ameliorative measures, I see the chief cause and abundant explanation of such failure as is manifested by the present position of the Socialist movement in England.'<sup>58</sup>

Theodore Rothstein developed this argument about the ruling class in more detail, but in doing so abandoned the idea that it had anything to do with an inherent conservatism on the part of the working class. For him the key to the whole process was to be found in Britain's peculiar economic and political development. He stressed the importance of the long term involvement of the British bourgeoisie in the struggle against despotism and the achievement of civil liberties, and

contrasted this with the position in other European countries. The process was linked to the early maturity of the British middle class and its advantageous position regarding its ability to accumulate capital. In other countries workers themselves had to battle for the basic civil liberties won so early in Britain, often against the opposition of their own bourgeoisie, and this provided them with 'a tremendous object-lesson in class-consciousness' denied to the British working class.<sup>59</sup> Lacking this experience 'the gospel of Socialism, preaching class-war, fell upon an entirely unprepared ground, and failed in consequence to strike root.'<sup>60</sup> It was 'exactly because the middle classes of England entered the social and political arena at an early date that the proletariat is now unable to see the true nature of the relations which exist between them.'<sup>61</sup>

The major problem for SDF members was that their appeal to the working class, particularly the better educated and more prosperous section of that class, was on the whole unsuccessful. The individuals they wished to attract were the same section of the working class who were likely to belong to trade unions. Unlike their equivalents on the continent, the SDF were confronted at their inception with a strong and already established trade union movement. Whereas the German social democrats found themselves forming trade unions, British socialists had to decide upon their attitude to the healthy and vigorous organisations already in existence, which, to the extent that they were political were allied to the Liberal Party. Further, although from the eighties, social democrats were active in the formation

and creation of new unions among the unskilled, these bodies were not always responsive to socialist appeals and were only won over gradually to a limited labour politics in the adverse conditions at the turn of the century. These limitations taken together with the need to appeal to the organised working class that the unions represented gave rise to much ambiguity in the SDF's response to trade unionism.

One SDF member speaking at the 1897 conference said 'the position of Social-Democrats to trade unionists was generally misunderstood. Because the Social-Democrat pointed out that trade unionism had its limits, it was believed that he was opposed to trade unions'.<sup>62</sup> This misunderstanding has often been perpetuated by historians.<sup>63</sup> The SDF has been presented at times as antagonistic to trade unionism, as unsympathetic to trade union struggles and demands, and as dismissive of its possibilities. While there is much truth in such allegations, they will not stand as general assessments of the organisation's relationship to British trade unionism.

One misapprehension that can be abandoned immediately, is the idea that the SDF's attitude was determined by an acceptance of the 'iron law of wages'. It has been made clear above that this was not the limitation it was once believed to be, had a degree of flexibility, and was incorporated into a theory of wages that allowed for the improvements and gains of trade union struggles. SDF views on the general uselessness of strikes are also cited in this context, but the usual reason given by members for their objections to the use

of the strike weapon was that it was a waste of resources which could be put to better use in the sphere of politics.<sup>64</sup>

It is in the period before 1889 that the view of the SDF as opposed to trade unions is easiest to sustain. In 1884 they issued an address 'to the Trade Unions of Great Britain'.<sup>65</sup> In the opening section it appealed to them 'in the interests of the class whose representatives you have, as we think, long ceased to be.' In a phrase which was to be much reiterated in the following years, it claimed that they represented 'only the merest fraction of the workers, the aristocracy of them.' They claimed, it said, to be Friendly Societies, but 'to the majority of workers, they are not even friendly.' On strikes, it was suggested that isolated action was useless. 'Until the time comes - and it is coming - when strikes can be organised and universal throughout not one country but many, it is wiser for the workers to suffer, to protest, and to remember.' Further, there was no doubt as to the outcome of the struggle, it would end in victory for the 'employed', and: 'In that victory Trades Unions as they now are cannot hope to participate.' Social-Democrats in this view, had superseded trade unionists as the true representatives of the working class.

All of this is not to suggest that the SDF were antagonistic to trade unionists and unsympathetic to strikes. Times of strife were seen as golden opportunities for the recruitment of Social Democrats and large strikes in these years were the occasion for intensive activity on the part of leading activists.

Herbert Burrows for instance did much work among the miners and ironworkers of South Staffordshire, Tom Mann was sent to work among the striking miners in the North East of England in 1887, and the 'Labour Notes' column reporting on current disputes became a regular feature of Justice.

The development of New Unionism in the years prior to 1889 and the events of that year were to mark a turning point in the attitudes of some members towards trade unionism. The interesting point about reactions to the dock strike in that year was the variety of opinions expressed and the absence of any attempt to articulate a coherent response to the issues among members. The first edition of Justice following the strike merely gave a narrative account of some of the key incidents.<sup>66</sup> The following weeks, reports were particularly ambiguous. 'Each and all of these oppressed people feel at last there is a chance for them. Let us hope they will not be disappointed' it said in a manner unlikely to generate enthusiasm. It continued in words reminiscent of the 1884 Address: 'Let this great strike encourage all Social-Democrats to prove to themselves more vigorously than ever that petty gains are of little value, and that nothing short of a complete Social Revolution can really benefit them or their children in the end.'<sup>67</sup> However, in the same issue, with no suggestion of disagreement or differences of opinion W.S. DeMattos spoke enthusiastically of 'The most momentous revolt of labour against the grinding tyranny of capital', a successful outcome of which would 'enormously strengthen the sinews of labour'. The lesson of the strike brought nearer he

said, 'the coming day when the exploited will burst the chains Capital has woven around them'.<sup>68</sup> The front page account in Justice the following week, returned to the old pessimism. SDF platform speakers it said 'never weary, while they canvass for the dockers, of pointing out that a strike is only guerilla warfare for very small results; but that Social Democracy means that strikes shall become unnecessary and misery unknown.'<sup>69</sup>

Different views on the role of trade unionism and the value of strikes were commonplace in the following years. Too much value has been placed by historians on the much quoted statement in Justice in 1890 that the dock strike had been 'a lowering of the flag, a departure from active propaganda, and a waste of energy'.<sup>70</sup> Such attitudes were common, but need to be set aside many glowing references. The very range of views on trade unionism and strikes has led one historian to talk of the development of three distinct tendencies within the SDF in the period 1888-95, a pro-union, an anti-union and an 'orthodox marxist' tendency.<sup>71</sup> Such an analysis is over-schematic and suggests a coherence among different groups of members which the evidence does not support. However, the point needs making: there was a variety of views on the value and nature of trade unionism within the SDF in these years; although with maturity, there was less antagonism towards unions, and a recognition that despite their limitations, they were important organisations in which it was important for socialists to work on a harmonious basis.<sup>72</sup> At the 1897 Annual Conference, a motion was passed with only two votes against, counselling all members where possible to join

trade unions 'and to work harmoniously with trade unionists and co-operators as representing organisations having for their object the improvement of the status of the workers', while insisting that long term improvement could only come from the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange.<sup>73</sup> Thus after much equivocation the value and importance of trade unions and the need for a close relationship was recognised officially.

Trade unionism began to be taken more seriously in the aftermath of this decision, it came in for more careful study and there was more interest shown in trade union affairs. In 1898, Quelch was willing to enter into a discussion of the benefits federation could bring to existing unions, despite the fact that their power remained limited 'by the possession of the means of production by the master class'. In the past such a statement would have precluded discussion of the issue,<sup>74</sup> but as he pointed out in a later article in the same year, machinery was beginning to break down the divisions between workers, particularly that between the labour aristocracy and the rest.<sup>75</sup> By the early twentieth century, it had become clear, trade unionism 'no longer represents a mere aristocracy of labour indifferent to the conditions of the great mass.'<sup>76</sup>

In the years after 1897, the situation was complicated by the activities and statements of those who became known as the impossibilists. These individuals were strongly influenced by the work of the American Daniel DeLeon, and became vociferous opponents of trade unionism, in particular of the 'pure and simple' unionism



of the trade union leaders. By the early twentieth century they had become committed to the idea of 'dual unionism', the setting up of separate and alternative socialist unions. They tried to get a motion on the subject passed at the 1902 SDF conference, but were heavily defeated,<sup>77</sup> and they took their strong views on the subject out of the organisation with them when they left or were expelled in the following years.

As has been noted the SDF's major criticism of strikes was that they were expensive and wasteful of resources that could have been more usefully applied to political work. This created problems for the critics when unions began to move towards independent political activity at the turn of the century in response to the defeats and setbacks of the 1890s. When the Labour Representation Committee was first formed in 1900, the SDF welcomed the opportunity to work politically with the trade unions, and when the legal attacks on the unions culminated in the House of Lords decision in the Taff Vale case, the potential political effects this could have on the unions was welcomed:

If the present campaign against the trade unions leads to such a change of policy on their part as will constitute them a real fighting force on behalf of the working class, a definite class-conscious working-class party, they will ultimately have reason to bless rather than curse the House of Lords. 78

However, in the same month as the above was published, before the decision had time to work in this manner, the SDF decided at its conference, to abandon those trade unionists working politically within the LRC. The major argument presented in support of their

withdrawal was that, 'when we joined this Committee we hoped the trade unionists as a body would also join and that we could do something to bring them along our way. But the bulk of the trade unions had not joined.'<sup>79</sup> In leaving the LRC, they abandoned the most important opportunity to influence the trade unions politically. This is not to say that the potential was not recognised. At the following year's conference a resolution was endorsed, which,

seeing the growing tendency on the part of trade unions to enter upon political action, a tendency developed and encouraged by the legal decisions which have almost deprived them of the power of the strike, this Conference urges upon all members of the SDF the necessity of becoming, as far as it is in their power, active members of their trade unions, and of using their influence as far as possible to turn this political action in a Socialist direction. 80

Having made this assertion, and emphasised the cultivation of good feeling between members and trade unionists, despite the latter's absence of commitment to socialisation and the class war, the same lengthy resolution concluded that branches of the SDF

will be prepared to co-operate with trade unions for the promotion of any definite immediate object with which Socialists are in sympathy, but will not join with them in any electoral committees which will commit the branch to the support of any but Socialist candidatures. 81

In other words they would work with trade unionists in order to try to convert them to socialism, but would not support them politically unless they accepted socialism first. In the view of the traditional Liberalism of leading trade unionists, this position is understandable,

but it was still inherently contradictory and bound to limit their opportunities for propagandist work among trade unionists.

For most of the SDF'S existence, the most important factor about trade unions was that they provided a platform for socialist propaganda and this was particularly the case at times of tension during strikes and lockouts. Edward Aveling, introducing the motion on trade unionism to the 1897 conference, said that 'The use they had to make of trade unions was to get inside them - "permeate" them, if he might be allowed to use the word - and turn their aims and funds to socialist ends'.<sup>82</sup> This limited and elitist view of trade unions was to begin to break down from the turn of the century. Theodore Rothstein argued in the Social-Democrat of 1900 that they had been behaving like a sect, and instead needed to involve themselves more with everyday issues and concerns; when a strike broke out, they regarded it 'primarily as a text to preach Socialism from, not as an incident in the great class war which claims all our sympathy and support.'<sup>83</sup> Although his accusations of sect status were far from popular, his criticisms clearly had their effect. Quelch the main defender of their record against Rothstein's allegations in 1900, was to be found making similar assertions two years later. 'It is quite clear', he said, 'that if the S.D.F. is to take the lead in the working-class movement it must be in and of that movement. Otherwise the movement would pass it by as a mere sectarian body of doctrinaires and dogmatists.'<sup>84</sup>

Henry Collins' belief that the narrow view of trade

unions persisted up to the war is not entirely true. The mistake he made was to concentrate on views expressed by Hyndman.<sup>85</sup> Hyndman's article for a Russian journal at the end of 1900 certainly reiterated the old view, which Collins called the 'prevailing view', and Hyndman was to express the same opinion in his reminiscences in 1912.<sup>86</sup> A focus on British periodicals however, suggests that Hyndman did not have his finger on the pulse at the time. Hyndman was very much the elder statesman of British Social-Democracy, and by this time the dynamism was coming from younger members, notably Rothstein and Quelch. Quelch's position was a particularly powerful one. The editorship of both Justice and Social-Democrat gave him a powerful platform and his writings were voluminous. Further, by the 1900s he had developed his influence and his oratorical skills to such an extent that he could usually swing a conference vote with ease, even when in opposition to Hyndman.<sup>87</sup>

Although unusual, by the mid 1900s, it had become possible for members to speak favourably of strike actions. J.B. Askew contrasting the moderation of English railway workers with the militancy of their Austrian counterparts in 1907, said that although they were weaker, 'they applied the policy of passive resistance and in half as many weeks as the English workers had taken months to talk about the matter, they had won all their demands.'<sup>88</sup> Further he stated that the class war itself only had validity to the extent that it helped direct them to the working class and win over the trade unions to socialism: 'the importance of the class war as a theoretical fact is purely in the guidance which

it affords us in laying down the main lines of our policy. Our chief aim must be to get the working classes and especially the trade unionists to accept Socialism, and, through these, to make the trade unions weapons of the Social Revolution.<sup>89</sup>

The industrial unrest after 1910 brought further reassessment and reflection on trade union activity. At the 1910 Annual Conference another motion was passed on trade unionism. It repeated the earlier request that all members join unions and carry on Socialist propaganda within them, but added that they should campaign 'also in favour of the ultimate amalgamation of all unions on the basis of class and not craft.'<sup>90</sup> This motion was a recognition that changes were taking place in the industrial sphere and that a response was necessary, but the wording was sufficiently vague for it not to commit the organisation on any of the issues that were beginning to be debated among militant trade unionists. For them the central issue at the time was *syndicalism* or industrial unionism, but the SDF's official position remained indefinite and unresolved at the time of the Socialist Unity conference which marked the birth of the British Socialist Party. In 1910 and 1911 syndicalist views were not considered incompatible with SDF membership so long as they did not involve a rejection of other facets of Social-Democratic politics. On returning to England from Australia, Tom Mann rejoined the SDF and at the same time, along with Guy Bowman another SDF member, became a leading exponent of militant industrial unionism, touring the country in support of syndicalist principles and editing the Industrial Syndicalist. It

was only when he later decided that syndicalism was incompatible with parliamentary activity that he felt it was necessary to resign from the SDF.<sup>91</sup>

Late in 1910 an article by Fred Knee the SDF compositor appeared in the Social-Democrat, entitled 'The Revolt of Labour!' which set out to analyse some of the changes taking place at the time. He noted how the leaders of the large unions were losing contact with the rank and file, pointed to the folly of unions entering into five and seven year agreements, and suggested that union officials were becoming distanced from ordinary workers. There was too much talk, he said, of collective bargaining and agreements with employers, where the 'object of trade unionism used to be to uphold the price of labour against the encroachments of the employers, not in agreement with them.'<sup>92</sup> It was being forgotten that industrial conflicts '*are only a part of the class war*', that it was impossible for there to be an honest agreement between employers and workers because they could not contract on equal terms, and that 'any agreement is only to be in the nature of an armistice which may terminate at any time on treachery being shown by the other side.'<sup>93</sup> They only made concessions when they were held by the throat; all trade unionists, leaders and led needed to work together not with the object 'of wasting our strength in temporary agreements with the enemy, but of overthrowing him as soon as possible once and for all.'<sup>94</sup> In this article Knee gave an intelligent and perceptive account of what was happening to trade unionism and the way the modern industrial relations system was beginning to develop. He

presented a socialist and class based analysis of what was occurring and linked it to the old SDF realisation that trade unionism was not enough; he added the recognition which had evolved over the years that trade unionists were an important and class conscious part of the working class, and that their struggles constituted the class war itself.

In the aftermath of the 1910 conference resolution, Harry Quelch produced a pamphlet which set out to limit its implications. For him, the existing forms of trade union organisation had been developed over time and adopted for valid reasons, and he could not bring himself to agree with the call for large single industry unions. His conservative conclusion was that

the perfection of the industrial organisation is not to be brought about by the substitution of new forms, by the breaking up of existing organisations and substituting for them a sort of mixed combination which would necessarily breed fresh difficulties and new divisions; but by the development and extension of such organisations as already exist. 95

In part this limited response was due to the fact that earlier demands along industrial union lines had taken the divisive form of dual unionism and this had sullied its appeal. It was also related to disappointments in the hopes they had held of New Unionism in the late 1880s. New Unions had only survived he pointed out elsewhere, where they had 'adopted the very methods of the old unions which they began by denouncing.'<sup>96</sup> Quelch's major concern was that larger and more centralised organisations would mean a loss of democratic control and a decline in local and sectional autonomy.

He did not disapprove of amalgamation but felt it gave rise to problems, the solution to which was 'federalism, in which full play is left to the various sections and localities, and in which there can be maintained the closest bonds of union compatible with the maintenance of the interests of all.'<sup>97</sup>

Quelch believed that amalgamation and federation together would help to bring about 'the ultimate realisation of that complete industrial organisation of the working-class foreshadowed in the resolution of the S.D.P. Conference', and he acknowledged in full the centrality of trade unionism to the realisation of socialism. Trade unions may have had their defects, he said, but they should not be ignored; they were no longer a mere aristocracy, but 'the flower of the working class.' They may, he continued, 'be reactionary, apathetic, difficult, but if they cannot be won for Socialism then Socialism itself is impossible.' They needed to be won over, supported in the pettiest struggles until they recognised the need for emancipation, 'and that the crown and culmination of trade union organisation and effort is Social-Democracy.'<sup>98</sup>

Quelch, who had been a signatory of the 1884 Address to Trade Unions had indeed moved a long way from the view that it would be wiser for workers to suffer, protest and remember, and that they had no part to play in the struggle for socialism. However, despite the theoretical and practical achievements in the area of trade unionism in these years, the SDF's leading spokesman on industrial affairs had moved no further on



the question of industrial organisation than his position of 1898. Support for industrial unionism among younger militants was soon to prove a divisive issue in the first year of life of the British Socialist Party.

The class war was central to SDF socialism. Their adherence to it differentiated them from the other mainstream socialist organisations of the time, the ILP and the Fabian Society, but they did not allow it to turn them into isolated sectarians by refusing to involve themselves in the daily struggles of the working class; those individuals who clung to such an interpretation were to be expelled or to leave the organisation of their own accord. Divisions within the working class were considered to have important political repercussions. The lower echelons of the class were felt to be incapable, mainly as a result of their debased conditions, of becoming an educated and organised revolutionary force. The debased could only foment riots and rebellions, whereas a revolution would require, intelligent, thrifty, hard-working and respectable artisans, capable of thinking through the complexities of economic and social administration, and experienced in organisational work.

The most likely recruits for such a class conscious, slightly superior proletariat were trade unions, and SDF views on these institutions were often ambiguous, though they developed over time. Antipathy towards trade unions was common in the early years, but began to break down with the development of new unionism and gave rise to a diversity of opinions in the 1890s. In 1897 they committed themselves to working in and

through trade unions, and began to orientate themselves more closely to the trade union movement and its aims. When the unions committed<sup>t</sup> themselves to class-based political action at the turn of the century this was initially welcomed, although the alleged lack of response was used as a pretext for abandoning the alliance in the following year, and later, lack of commitment to the class war<sup>was</sup> used to justify their continued absence from the LRC. By the end of its life the SDF had become much more flexible in its response to trade unions and trade union activities, but the lack of a clear perspective on the issue of industrial unionism was to prove a divisive and crucial issue in the first year of life of the British Socialist Party.

FOOTNOTES

1. Robert Tressell, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists (St.Albans, 1965), p.583.
2. Peter Kropotkin, 'An Appeal to the Young', To-day, No.18, (July 1885); idem., An Appeal to the Young (London, [1886]).
3. ibid., [To-day edition], p.286.
4. ibid., pp.286-7.
5. H.M. Hyndman, 'Social-Democrat or Socialist?', The Social-Democrat, I, No.8, (August 1897), p.229.
6. E. Belfort Bax, 'Treacherous Toleration and Faddist Fanaticism', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.1, (January 1900), p.7.
7. ibid., p.8.
8. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1898, (London, 1898), p.7.
9. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1904 (London, 1904), p.18.
10. A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics 1884-1918 (London, 1962), pp.65-7.
11. Cited ibid., p.67.
12. David Howell, British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906 (Manchester, 1983), p.355.
13. Cited ibid.
14. ibid., p.356.
15. Report of the Conference on Labour Representation, 27 February 1900, pp.11-12, reprinted in Labour Party Foundation Conference and Annual Conference Reports 1900-1905 (London, 1967), pp.17-18.
16. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1901 (London, 1901), p.21. See also following debate on the repudiation of all alliances not based on the class war - summarised below.
17. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1905, (London, 1905), p.11.
18. C. Tsuzuki, H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism (London, 1961), pp.153-4.
19. J.B. Askew, 'Socialism Adapted to the Small Bourgeoisie', The Social-Democrat, IX, No.9, (September 1905), p.534.
20. ibid., p.537.

21. James Leatham, The Class War, p.10, cited by J. Ellis Barker, British Socialism (London, 1908), p.78.
22. J.B. Askew, 'Utopian Socialism v. Marxism', The Social-Democrat, X, No.6, (June 1906), p.348.
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24. H.M. Hyndman, The Historical Basis of Socialism in England (London, 1883), pp.476-7.
25. Social Democratic Federation, The Class War; James Leatham, The Class War cited in J. Ellis Barker, British Socialism, p.78.
26. H.M. Hyndman and William Morris, A Summary of the Principles of Socialism (London, 1884), p.50.
27. *ibid.*, p.51.
28. James Leatham, The Class War cited by J. Ellis Barker, British Socialism, p.78.
29. Ralph Miliband, Marxism and Politics (Oxford, 1977), pp.35-6.
30. C. Tsuzuki, 'The "Impossibilist Revolt" in Britain', International Review of Social History, Vol.1, (1956); Raymond Challinor, The Origins of British Bolshevism (London, 1977); Robert Barltrop, The Monument: The Story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (London, 1975).
31. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1901, pp.14-17; see also chapter seven below.
32. *ibid.*, pp.21-2.
33. *ibid.*
34. *ibid.*, pp.21-3. Cf. Keith Burgess, The Challenge of Labour (London, 1980), p.102, who suggests that it was the impossibilists who were breaking away from the 'sectarian aridity' of the SDF.
35. H. Quelch, 'The Present Position of the Socialist Movement in England', The Social-Democrat, XIV, No.3, (March 1910), p.99.
36. See for example Harry Pollitt, Serving My Time (London, 1940), pp.51-2; Harry McShane, No Mean Fighter (London, 1978), p.46.
37. Tom Mann, Memoirs (London, 1923), pp.40-1.

38. Margaret Blunden, The Countess of Warwick (London, 1967), pp.174-6.
39. 'a knot of working-men will almost instinctively stop their conversation if a "gentleman" comes in upon them, even though they know him pretty well and the subject is quite unimportant'. H.M. Hyndman, 'The English Workers As They Are', The Contemporary Review, Vol.LII, (July 1887), p.128. William Morris spoke of the 'gulf in language, manners, and ideas, as divides a cultivated middle-class person of to-day, a "gentleman," from even a respectable lower-class man'. 'Art Under Plutocracy', in A.L. Morton, (ed.), Political Writings of William Morris (London, 1979), p.69.
40. Justice, 23 February 1884, p.4.
41. The Challenge, 1 May 1901.
42. ibid., 11 September 1901.
43. ibid.
44. H. Quelch, 'The Present Position', p.99.
45. Robert Tressell, The Ragged, p.543.
46. ibid., p.495.
47. H.M. Hyndman, The Social Reconstruction of England (London, [1884]), p.22.
48. Hyndman quoted by Hubert Bland, 'The Socialist Party in Relation to Politics', The Practical Socialist, Vol.1, No.10, (October 1886).
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56. Socialism a Snare (London, [1885]), p.2.
57. James Leatham, A Socialist View of the New Trade Unionism (London, 1893), p.10.

58. H. Quelch, 'The Present Position', p.103.
59. Theodore Rothstein, 'Why is Socialism in England at a Discount? II', The Social-Democrat, II, No.4, (April 1898), p.114.
60. *ibid.*, p.115.
61. *ibid.*, pp.116-7.
62. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1897 (London, 1897), pp.21-2.
63. See for instance Keith Burgess, Challenge of Labour, p.61; E.H. Hunt, British Labour History 1815-1914 (London, 1981), p.309; David Kynaston, King Labour: The British Working Class 1850-1914 (London, 1976), pp.121-2.
64. H.M. Hyndman, Social Reconstruction, pp.27-8; Dan Irving, 'The Class War and Political Struggle', in Theodore Rothstein, (ed.), The Socialist Annual for 1906 (London, 1906), pp.20-1; E.R. Hartley, 'The Policy of Labour' in Theodore Rothstein, (ed.), The Socialist Annual for 1909 (London, 1909), pp.38-9.
65. Justice, 6 September 1884, p.5.
66. *ibid.*, 24 August 1889.
67. *ibid.*, 31 August 1889. p.1.
68. *ibid.*, p.2.
69. *ibid.*, 7 September 1889, p.1.
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75. H. Quelch, 'Lessons of the Lock-Out', The Social-Democrat II, No.2, (February 1898), p.43.
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77. Justice, 5 April 1902, p.3.
78. 'The Campaign Against Trade Unionism' [unsigned], The Social-Democrat, V, No.8, (August 1901), p.231.
79. H. Quelch speaking at the 1901 annual conference. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1901, p.21.
80. Justice, 5 April 1902, p.3.
81. *ibid.*
82. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1897, p.20.
83. Theodore Rothstein, 'Our Policy', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.6, (June 1900), p.171-2.
84. H. Quelch, 'Our Policy', The Social-Democrat, IV, No.7, (July 1900); *idem.*, 'The Trade Union Congress and Trade Union Politics', The Social-Democrat, VI, No.9, (September 1902), p.268.
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87. Social Democratic Federation, Annual Conference Report, 1901, pp.18-24; *idem.*, Annual Conference Report, 1905, pp.6-7; *idem.*, Annual Conference Report, 1906 (London, 1906), pp.12-14; H.W. Lee and E. Archbold, Social-Democracy in Britain (London, 1935), pp.83-4.
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89. *ibid.*, pp.52-3.
90. Social Democratic Party, Annual conference Report, 1910 (London, 1910), p.17.
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94. *ibid.*
95. H. Quelch, Social-Democracy and Industrial Organisation (London, 1911), p.16.

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## Chapter 7

### REFORM AND REVOLUTION

Lo! one night, when the giant was asleep, a long procession wound round the valley. First came Fairplay, with his followers; after them the women and children; and after them quite an army of fairies, each with a glittering sword in his hand. They knocked at the door of the palace, and killed the terrible giant, and his servant, Competition, ran away and was seen no more in Happy Valley.

'But what about Capital?' you ask.

Well, I am coming to that. When they tried to find him they could not see the ugly old dwarf anywhere, but, instead, found a beautiful princess, whose long, golden hair reached to the floor.

'The giant wanted to marry me,' she told them; 'and when I would have nothing to do with him he turned me into an ugly dwarf, and made me work for him. Dear people, you have made me free! To show you my gratitude I will work for you all my life.'

So Princess Capital married Fairplay, and they worked for the people, and were happy ever after. 1

Thus the problems of the transition from capitalism to socialism were resolved in The Child's Socialist Reader, illustrated by Walter Crane and published by Quelch's Twentieth Century Press.<sup>2</sup> For adult socialists the problems of transition were more complex and were at the heart of socialist analyses in these years. In the real world socialists could not depend on the support of armed fairies. In what follows, the problems of that transition as perceived by SDF members will be studied: 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. First of all it will be necessary to say something about the problems of terminology and perspective in the light of developments in twentieth century politics.

During the past seventy years the major dividing line between socialists has been that between reformists and revolutionaries. After the First World War Social Democratic parties throughout Europe split into bolshevised Communist Parties affiliated to the Third International, and constitutional social democrats. In Britain the absence of a mass Social Democratic party of the continental type prevented such a split, so instead a new Communist Party was formed out of an assortment of small socialist groups, mainly the remnants of the British Socialist Party. Over the years communism and social democracy increasingly divided over questions of theory, strategy and tactics. For most communists in Europe the experience of the Russian revolution and the newly acquired theoretical works of Lenin were to gradually transform their views of politics. 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 it with organs of proletarian power and a transitional 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

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. These majorities, once elected could proceed to legislate socialism into being. To some extent these later developments have clouded analyses of earlier socialist parties. A strong tendency developed, still evident among some on the left, to label in order to dismiss. Once a party could be categorised as 'reformist', the job of analysis was completed, everything was known about its theory and politics, and the organisation was shown to be unworthy of further study. From a different perspective, the same kind of closure could be worked with the word 'marxist', marxism clearly being beyond the pale, but there were also left-wing variants of this whereby facets of Leninism played the same role, so that to discover an organisation to be 'vanguardist' was sufficient to consign it to history's dustbin.

In the years before the First World War and the Russian revolution the issue of reform and revolution was hotly debated, but the development of strategies was more fluid, and demarcation lines were not so firmly drawn. It was in this context that the SDF developed its 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 word is accepted here not as a term of abuse, but in the positive sense of a strategy for the attainment of socialism which involved using existing state institutions.<sup>3</sup>

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 categorised as someone who aspires to the violent overthrow of the existing state. 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 placed 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. 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 reformist, but evolutionary, yet even here they 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.<sup>4</sup>

Members were not alone in considering themselves revolutionaries. As far as The Times, that journal of the class enemy was concerned, the SDF was the most revolutionary of the main Socialist groups, and its assessment of their 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. 5

This was to be contrasted with the Fabians, whose,

very haziness of thought, their indeterminateness, their hesitation, and their involved language attract persons of a certain order of mind, persons of good or fairly good education and some culture, persons seriously or sentimentally inclined and easily influenced, who prefer vague thinking and are impressed by sounding phrases. 6

The ILP, came 'between them, being more opportunist and supple than the former, less nebulous and elusive than the latter.'<sup>7</sup>

In most areas of marxist theory the SDF had to stumble its way towards an understanding and in no area was this more~~so~~ than that of the nature of the state and political power. In the early days there was a tendency to adopt wholesale prevailing liberal conceptions. In his seminal England For All, Hyndman spoke of the 'State ... the organised common-sense of public opinion,' which 'must step in, regardless of prejudice, to regulate that nominal freedom which simply strengthens the dominant few.'<sup>8</sup> This idea of the state as something above 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 recognised 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 democratise them entirely, and thus do away with that State as class domination for ever.'<sup>9</sup> It was further noted that the state contained elements of socialised production in embryo and 'in this direction lies the best prospect of reform and re-organisation without bloodshed.'<sup>10</sup> 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, to-morrow.<sup>11</sup> 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; it may not have been the case in all countries but it was certainly true of Britain: 'In despotic countries ... it is not enough to open the people's eyes to their real situation. They must not only be enlightened, they must be armed also ... Not so in this country.'<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> In 1901 Theodore Rothstein 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.<sup>14</sup> It was in responding to the Fabian view of the state in the early twentieth century that members asserted most forcefully their views on the state as a class institution and began to develop a more mature understanding of state power.

Fabians were attacked for being too bureaucratic, at the expense of democracy.<sup>15</sup> 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'.<sup>16</sup> In a debate between Bax and 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 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.

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Concurrently with this deepening understanding 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, 'will not be made to submit to law and order which is not their law and order, except by overwhelming superior force.'<sup>19</sup>

SDF candidates stood in most 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 organisation'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. The extent of that role as perceived by SDF members will now be considered. 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.'<sup>20</sup> 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'.<sup>21</sup> It was the ambiguous word 'convention' with its revolutionary 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.'<sup>22</sup> 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.'<sup>23</sup> The motion was moved by Joseph Lane who along with Morris,



Bax and Champion drew up a distinctly non-parliamentary programme for the SDF. Most of the anti-parliamentarians within the SDF however left the organisation 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.'<sup>24</sup> The question was placed in sharp relief by the controversy over the 'Tory Gold' scandal of 1885 and no candidates stood in the following year's general election, however apart from the embarrassment and the loss of some of their best activists, the experience did not cause them to abandon parliamentary politics. 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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.'<sup>27</sup> Although Hyndman in his state of disillusionment at the end of the century came to the

conclusion that democracy without adequate education was a reactionary force, and agreed with the anarchist Bakunin that anything which brought about socialism was justifiable, he nonetheless conceded that he would prefer to see social transformation coupled with democracy.<sup>28</sup>

A lengthy list of political demands became an important part of the SDF programme, including payment of M.P.s and all election expenses, proportional representation, the second ballot, and abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords.<sup>29</sup> On the latter 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.'<sup>30</sup> 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 organisation'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 organisation 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 M.P.s 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, there would have been at least twenty Social Democrats in Parliament at the time.<sup>31</sup>

The impossibilists had been opposed to an emphasis on electoral concerns, but Harry Quelch 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.'<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 nonetheless 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup>

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. Firstly 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.<sup>36</sup>

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. 37

Although a logical argument, the major problem arose over which party to support given the obvious distaste of members and supporters for voting in 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.<sup>38</sup> 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 organise the vote against either Liberal or Tory.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> The conference then adjourned for lunch, and immediately on reconvening, as if 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.'<sup>42</sup> A suggestion that they readopt 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the hatred of Liberals on the part of some SDFers, 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 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.<sup>45</sup> On the whole however, outside of the Boer war years, hostility towards the Liberals was the norm.

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, noted in the previous chapter, that the working class in its existing form was too debased to instigate more than riots and rebellions. 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. At only two points was this approach called into serious question, at first in the early years of the organisation'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), 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.<sup>46</sup>

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 hours day, cumulative taxation, state appropriation of the railways, the establishment of National Banks, the elimination of the National Debt and the Nationalisation of the Land.<sup>47</sup> This relatively limited and eclectic set of proposals was augmented over the years being extended and systematised at the beginning of the new century to include nationalisation of the trusts, as 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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. Capitalism was

producing misery and starvation on a large scale, but the only product was 'barbarians in our own country, which ... will eventually overrun our civilisation of the nineteenth century' unless something was done about it.<sup>50</sup>

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.'<sup>51</sup> 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 organiser, 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 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. 52

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 they served as 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 the work was also of benefit to socialists as 'our party gains experience and insight into legislative and administrative questions, as well as discipline, &c.'<sup>53</sup> 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.'<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting however, that unlike Quelch, H.W. Lee in his report to the 1891 annual conference welcomed the fact that the Conservatives were introducing social reforms to compete with the Liberals, and that E.C. Fairchild suggested that if capitalists seeing the benefits of a healthy and efficient working class were to introduce reforms themselves without pressure, socialists should still not abandon their programme as every measure hastened the demise of capitalism.<sup>55</sup>

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.'<sup>56</sup> '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. 57

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.'<sup>58</sup>

The value and importance of the palliative programme, and their analysis of the issues involved can best be appreciated from a brief consideration of their campaigns, concentrating on their aims and achievements. The SDF had a long and proud tradition of organisation 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.<sup>59</sup>

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'.<sup>60</sup> George Lansbury's schemes were particularly harsh in this respect with the removal of children from vagrants, the placing of men and women 'in settlements in country districts where work of a light character could be engaged in, and where they should be obliged to remain for a stated period not shorter than one year', and with 'the barrack school' being the preferred system for pauper children.<sup>61</sup>

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 revitalising 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.<sup>62</sup> It was eventually conceded however, that such schemes were inappropriate for dealing with urban unemployment, and when John Burns criticised 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.<sup>63</sup> 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'.<sup>64</sup>

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 the unemployed on a national scale, in a co-operative, inter-dependent, self-supporting fashion, is a step towards the abolition of capitalism.'<sup>65</sup> Unemployment 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.'<sup>66</sup> '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.

67

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. 68

They were surprised at their level of success, particularly over the latter, 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.<sup>69</sup> 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'.<sup>70</sup>

The humanitarian element was even clearer in the activities of those who 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 onto 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.'<sup>71</sup> 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 after the governor assured Brooks that the children had eaten full. 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. 72

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 mice 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.<sup>.73</sup> 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.'<sup>.74</sup> 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 SDFers. 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.<sup>.75</sup> So successful was the Rochdale member Tom Whittaker at winning the hearts of the workhouse residents with his work on their behalf, that on failing to secure re-election (paupers being denied the vote) 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.'<sup>.76</sup> 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 of 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 criticised 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.'<sup>77</sup> 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.'<sup>78</sup> 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 bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of poverty recommended in the Minority Report.

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 contacting 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. 79

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 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.'<sup>80</sup> There was a belief, ironic from the vantage point of the 1980s, 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.<sup>81</sup> Dan Irving went beyond the limited idea of the municipalisation 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.'<sup>82</sup> '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 also proposed public nurseries for working women.<sup>83</sup>

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.'<sup>84</sup> Municipal enterprises were discussed at the 1904 annual conference and the only difference of opinion was over what to do with profits.<sup>85</sup>

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 nonetheless examples of "capitalist collectivism".<sup>86</sup> 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.'<sup>87</sup> 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.'<sup>88</sup> 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'.<sup>89</sup>

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.'<sup>90</sup> 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.<sup>91</sup> Class antagonism could not be ignored, and the perceived threat to capitalists was leading some of them, 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.'<sup>92</sup>

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. 93

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'<sup>94</sup> 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 recognising 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', he said,

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"'. 95

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 organisation, and the downtrodden, the oppressed and the exploited were being transformed into healthy educated 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.

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. Writing on 'Dynamite in England' in 1884, Bax said that they had no objection in principle to the use of physical force. They recognised, he said,

that the whole of the our existing civilisation, as of every previous one, is ultimately based on "physical force"; that "physical force" is often criminally used to open up new markets and sinecures for the "privileged classes," and for many other purposes ... What the Socialist maintains is that recourse to violence of any kind should always be a last resort. 96

Peaceful methods were 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.'<sup>97</sup> 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 recognised 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.'<sup>98</sup> Further, with the bulk of the population unarmed and untrained in the use 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.'<sup>99</sup> 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.<sup>100</sup> 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.'<sup>101</sup>

The question of revolutionary theory and strategy is related to the whole of the organisation's development

and maturity, and takes in all aspects of their experience and politics. Over thirty years the SDF which had started life as a radical organisation, evolved into a mature socialist body with a developed theory, and an elaborate understanding of the nature of British society and the British state. Their key ideas were derived from Marx, they rested upon a theory of exploitation, an understanding of the periodic nature of capitalist crises, and an analysis of the way capitalism was being transformed through the centralisation and concentration of capital. Unlike their continental counterparts they believed that this process meant that Britain was ripe for social transformation simply as a matter of administrative change, but was being held back by the lack of an educated consciousness on the part of the working class. Despite their grounding in the works of Marx, they did not always share his wholesale rejection of religion. Although primarily steeped in freethought and secularism, a vague religiosity pervaded the organisation: a variety of religious beliefs existed among members, though it did not affect their views on the evolutionary processes believed to be at work in history. This positivist belief in progress did not preclude a variety of views on the role of human agency in the historical process. A narrow determinism may have been the rule for some, but there were plenty arguing that the achievement of socialism would require active intervention on their part. The years in which the SDF existed were the heyday of imperialism and despite a handful of members who clung to a belief in its progressive possibilities and a few who based their

opposition to empire on patriotic and moral grounds, they managed to develop a relatively mature understanding of the processes at work and were consistent in their opposition to British imperial ventures abroad. Out of their economic theory, they elaborated an account of British society which stressed the centrality of class and posited the class war at the core of their socialist politics. This led them to see the working class as the agent of revolution. Yet observing the British working class they could not help but be disappointed in the revolutionary potential of the great majority of them, and they put their faith in the better-off respectable artisans as the most revolutionary section of the proletariat. In spite of the SDF's anti-union image, a variety of responses to trade unionism emerged over the years. By 1911 trade unions were being taken much more seriously, however divisions over this issue were to split the SDF's successor the British Socialist Party.

The SDF was a reformist organisation. In modern accounts reformism is often presented, in part, as a belief in a neutral state,<sup>102</sup> but the SDF was aware of the state as an institution of class power, and of the potential violence of a class state at a time of transition. Consequently they developed a policy incorporating the disbanding of the army and its replacement with an armed militia. Although they were willing to think through these possibilities, conditions prevailing in Britain meant that their energies were concentrated on working constitutionally through the existing institutions both of the state and of the

working class, in a belief that peaceful change was a possibility if approached with no illusions about the nature of the class enemy.

The Russian Revolution was for many twentieth century socialists a turning point in human history; it revealed to them that it was possible for capitalism to be overthrown, and for a party representing the working class to take control of the state. This experience showed them that the transformation for which they were aiming was attainable, not a utopian dream, but a tangible experience. It also offered them a theory of how it was to be achieved and a strategy to be copied and developed in their own countries. With hindsight, it can be suggested that this was far from beneficial for the West European socialist movement. The first impact was to split and divide those who had previously worked together. Secondly it committed one section of them to a strategy developed to cope with the peculiar conditions of a repressive autocracy and a majority peasant population, which was to prove inappropriate for the democratic republics and industrialised economies of the twentieth century. Confronted with these strategies the remaining social democratic socialists adopted a much more defensive constitutionalism than they may otherwise have done. What this study of British Social Democracy before the First World War has shown is the way this strategy was developing without such a dichotomy.

Henry Collins criticised the SDF for being too didactic and insufficiently dialectical; yet in the absence of theoretical rectitude they were able to develop an integrated theory of revolution which enabled

them to work through parliament, municipal politics, and trade unions, to consider the value of everyday struggles to revolutionary transformation, and to articulate strategies for the possibilities of armed struggle. When Lenin castigated his British counterparts for their revolutionary excesses in his 'Left Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder in 1920, their faults were the very ones that the impossibilists had been hounded out of the SDF for, although he also reproached them for staying outside the Labour Party.<sup>103</sup> In SDF theory and strategy, there was a dialectic of reform and revolution lacking in their more theoretically rigorous successors. SDF theory, despite all of its faults and limitations was not restrictive of political activity, but enabling in a way that post-1917 theory often could not be.

An earlier generation of historians, in studying the SDF were trying to answer the question, 'Why was the British working class not socialist?' The answer for many lay in the nature of the SDF and in particular the weakness of its socialist theory. In older accounts there is often an assumption that the limitations of SDF theory prevented socialists from establishing a popular base in British politics. Although it is undeniable that strict adherence to their principles may have had adverse consequences for the speedy and effective establishment of a Labour politics,<sup>104</sup> the failure to establish socialism cannot be laid at their feet. Their politics were more subtle than has been allowed and changed with time, and no matter how advanced their socialist theory had been, and regardless of flexibility and adaptability, they were unlikely to threaten the stable and secure

capitalist economy which confronted them in Britain.

Nowadays historians tend to ask different questions about the working class. Gone is the teleological belief that they should have been socialist, instead the concern is with the nature of working class politics and the reasons why it took the form that it did. The ensuing explanations take us through working class culture, work processes, factory paternalism and other facets of the lives and experiences of working people. As a result we have a richer and better informed historiography. However, we are still left with a culpable image of the SDF. Although it is no longer held entirely responsible for the failures and inadequacies of British political life, the analyses of it developed in that tradition still remain with us.

SDF socialism is usually presented as limited and dogmatic, and this is considered to have been a hindrance to their political practice. Consequently when historians studying the SDF closely have discovered that they were pragmatic, adaptable, worked effectively with other working class organisations, fought consistently alongside trade unionists, and struggled resolutely for improved local conditions and programmes of municipal socialism, it is suggested that this must have been in spite of, rather than because of, their adherence to marxist theory.<sup>105</sup> This study by no means clears the SDF from criticisms of narrowness, a certain fixity, and dogmatism, nonetheless it modifies the picture to such an extent that we are not surprised to find Social Democrats leading strikes, standing as Councillors, working effectively as members of School Boards and Boards of

Guardians, and working with other labour activists to get socialists elected to Parliament. Having eased some of the 'condescension of posterity' from the shoulders of the SDF it is possible to view their practice as consistent with their developing understanding of socialist politics

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