

## SHAW AND THE UNBLESSSED POOR\*

B. G. Knepper  
Morningside College

Let nothing be done for "the undeserving": let him be poor. Serve him right! Also—somewhat inconsistently—blessed are the poor! *Major Barbara*

Bernard Shaw, prophet and theoretician of Fabian socialism, attacked poverty at every opportunity, from soapbox, platform, stage, and printed page. In 1885, the broad outlines of his social philosophy already defined, Shaw lashed out at the iniquity and ugliness of poverty in his lecture, "Property and Slaves," and warned that poverty is a destroyer of civilizations.<sup>1</sup> Throughout a long career he never wavered in this conviction. Thus, in his last major work, *Far Fetched Fables*, 1948, he was still warning that unless a decent basic livelihood is provided for everyone, "the final destruction of civilization is threatened."<sup>2</sup> His persistence in hammering away at the theme led William Irvine to declare that Shaw "elevated poverty into a theological doctrine, making it the original sin from which all other ills proceed."<sup>3</sup> Although exaggerated and over-simplified, Irvine's witticism, as will appear, is not without merit. Even so, Shaw's views are, in the long run, neither obsessive nor obsolete. Indeed, their pertinence increases as society moves ever deeper into the shambles Shaw so confidently predicted.

Shaw wasted little effort expressing pity for the poor, though he was a notoriously kind and generous man. He said, in a 1912 lecture, "The Crime of Poverty," "there is nothing in the world I hate more than a poor man. . . . [As a child] I thought them most horrible people. I simply detested them. I think such people ought not to exist."<sup>4</sup> Shaw's bias against poverty, then, was not the 19th century liberal's proclivity for a sweet sensibility which found expression as "charity for the deserving." Shaw did not merely deplore poverty and wish to relieve it. He hated poverty and wished to destroy it utterly. What appears

at first to be a callous lack of fellow feeling for the poor turns out to be a passionate revulsion against the conditions which dehumanize them. For Shaw, poverty was obscene, ugly in itself and uglier in the inhumane and unjust gulf which it fixes between the wealthy and the impoverished. Beyond all this lay the greater evil of poverty's threat to the social body. G. K. Chesterton observed, very accurately, early in Shaw's career, that "he cares more for the Public Thing than for any private thing."<sup>5</sup> Shaw's concern for the "public thing" largely determined his attitude toward poverty. Simply put, Shaw held that fully human beings can develop only in a just and humane society. Poverty, being patently unjust in modern society, poisons the social body and thereby aborts man's still emerging humanity. Shaw's conclusion was inescapable: poverty must be destroyed before it destroys, not only all hope for a just society, but mankind itself.

Shaw, of course, is never as simple as all that. He was often a devious man, and his apparent simplicity is frequently deceptive. As Edmund Wilson so ably demonstrated in the section from *The Triple Thinkers* entitled "Bernard Shaw at Eighty," Shaw, characteristically, moved back and forth through several levels of idea in his writing.<sup>6</sup> His approach to social problems was usually three-pronged: what practical steps may be taken at once, what steps will become possible under the self-discipline of socialism, and what steps are conceivable in an ideal world? While Shaw was cocksure to the point of arrogance about the answers for the present and for the socialist future, he was quite humbly aware of his or any man's inability to pierce very far or very accurately into the distant future.<sup>7</sup>

Shaw also discovered progressions everywhere and used them constantly, evolving them into intricate, interrelated systems. Thus, for example, his concept of eugenics led, at least in part, to a theory of evolution, and his theory of evolution led in turn to doctrines of will and teleology. Finally, teleology led to an optimistic religion of willed progress, called Creative Evolution, in which a limited Divinity works through will and by trial and error. As Shaw held that poverty created an insurmountable barrier to eugenic progress, the first element in the progression, Irvine's remark above, that Shaw equated poverty with original sin, has color; yet Shaw's attitudes toward religion in general and poverty in particular are much more complex than that.

\* This paper was presented at the Fall 1967 I.C.T.E. meeting.

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Shaw, "Property and Slaves," *Platform and Pulpit*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), pp. 1-12.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Far Fetched Fables* (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> William Irvine, *The Universe of G.B.S.* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1949), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Shaw, "The Crime of Poverty," *Platform and Pulpit*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), pp. 93-96.

<sup>5</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (London, 1909), p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Bernard Shaw at Eighty," *The Triple Thinkers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Shaw, "Postscript After Twentyfive Years," *Back to Methuselah* (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1949), pp. 269-271.

Nowhere is Shaw's attack on poverty more trenchant than in the preface to *Major Barbara*. There he proclaimed his position in rhetorical terms rivaling the philippic in their animosity. He asked:

Now what does this Let Him Be Poor mean? It means let him be weak. Let him be ignorant. Let him become a nucleus of disease. Let him be a standing exhibition and example of ugliness and dirt. Let him have rickety children. Let him be cheap and let him drag his fellows down to his own price by selling himself to do their work. Let his habitations turn our cities into poisonous congeries of slums. Let his daughters infect our young men with the diseases of the streets, and his sons revenge him by turning the nation's manhood into scrofula, cowardice, cruelty, hypocrisy, political imbecility, and all the other fruits of oppression and malnutrition. Let the undeserving become still less deserving; and let the deserving lay up for himself, not treasures in heaven, but horrors in hell upon earth. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Having said so much, and a great deal besides, Shaw concluded that "the greatest of our evils, and the worst of our crimes, is poverty and our first duty, to which every other consideration should be sacrificed is not to be poor." Having accepted the premise that modern society is based on competition rather than cooperation, Shaw maintained, with certain reservations, as will appear, that the individual must do anything within his power to avoid poverty and to escape from it should he fall into its toils. Hence, Mrs. Warren, in an earlier play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, was not to be blamed because she preferred prostitution to the starvation of body and soul. She became blameworthy only when she, as a brothel manager, exploited other human beings, not in order to survive, but merely to accumulate superfluous additional wealth and power. As Shaw pictured it, then, the modern individual is not only justified in escaping the degradation of poverty however he can, but he has a positive moral duty, even a social mandate, to do so. In recommending that the individual go to any length to avoid poverty, however, Shaw was not issuing a call for anarchy, a political technique which he had abandoned in the 1880s, not because he objected to violence, but because he believed violence destroyed more civilization than

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara* (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1947).

it was worth.<sup>9</sup> Shaw's purpose was to shock his auditors into recognizing that the state, which clung to the tenets of *laissez faire* wherever it could do so without immediate and disastrous results, was itself lawless and anarchistic. Such a state of affairs, Shaw felt, must inevitably first debilitate and then destroy the social body, an organism which, bad as it was, was at least a start toward civilization and must be preserved and improved, even at enormous costs. Yet individual anarchy was precisely what Shaw knew must grow out of economic anarchy. In words prophetic of Watts, Newark, and Detroit, Shaw declared: "Security. . . cannot exist where the worst of dangers, the danger of poverty, hangs over everyone's head, and where the alleged protection of our persons from violence is only an accidental result of the existence of a police force whose real business is to force the poor man to see his children starve whilst idle people overfeed pet dogs with the money that might feed and clothe them."<sup>10</sup>

Equally dangerous to society, by Shaw's analysis, is poverty's unvarying effect of cutting off the supply of natural leadership. Shaw was an elitist, like Carlyle and Ruskin, as Julian B. Kaye pointed out in *Bernard Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Tradition*, who regarded the leadership of the able as an inevitable attribute of a healthy society.<sup>11</sup> Shaw warned, in his essay "Sixty Years of Fabianism," 1947, that "Nature provides the necessary proportion of born managers, statesmen, artists, and philosophers without whom civilization is infantile. At present ignorance and poverty disables most of them. . . ." <sup>12</sup> To waste the limited supply of leaders, then, is to court disaster. To avoid disaster, therefore, the pathways to education and power must be kept open to the ablest children of the entire population. Gifted children must be sought out constantly, nurtured and educated, much as they are in the advanced societies Shaw portrayed in *Back to Methuselah* and as they decidedly are not in surprisingly large segments of present-day society. To do less than to methodically search out and develop the best natural leaders from the entire population, would, in Shaw's mind, lead, more or less rapidly, to an anemia of talent which would add its debilitation to the more direct ravages of poverty.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Shaw, "The Importance of Anarchism," *Essays in Fabian Socialism* (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1949). See also *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism* (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1949) and *Major Barbara*, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Major Barbara*, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Julian B. Kaye, *Bernard Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 9-29.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Shaw, "Sixty Years of Fabianism," *Fabian Essays*, 6th ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1962), p. 307.

If all this were not enough, Shaw further stipulated that, for eugenic improvement, the entire population must be able to interbreed freely. Again a theory of scarcity comes into play. Shaw believed, with Arthur Schopenhauer,<sup>13</sup> that a relatively small, but sufficient, number of people are capable of producing superior children, and that a catastrophic degeneration of the race follows inevitably wherever class taboo prevents their union. In the New York *Metropolitan*, 1913, Shaw wrote:

I do not believe you will ever have any improvement in the human race until you greatly widen the area of possible sexual selection: until you make it as wide as the numbers of the community make it.<sup>14</sup>

Poverty, with its socially crippling discrepancy in basic income, more than any other factor, maintains the social barrier to such unions. Thus, poverty leads to social stratification with further degeneration of race and social institutions resulting. In Shaw's view, a superior duchess not only should but must be able to choose a first-rate garbage collector as a mate in preference to a third-rate duke.

In review, then, Shaw proposed that the one immediate solution to the problem of poverty is for each individual to obtain wealth on whatever terms he can get—for wealth gives the means for obtaining health, education, security, culture, and whatever else goes into making a fully developed human being, and concomitantly, a genuine civilization. This solution, of course, Shaw saw as the consequence of modern social practices and no one was more keenly aware of its inadequacies than Shaw. His socialistic solution, by contrast, represents a logical step in the evolution toward a just society. Shaw proposed that every citizen should have at his disposal a basic income equal to any other citizen's. He proposed the analogy of the gentleman to illustrate the attitude of the fully-developed socialist as follows:

The gentleman makes a certain claim on his country to begin with. He makes a claim for a handsome and dignified existence and subsistence; and he makes that as a primary thing, not to be dependent on his work in

<sup>13</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, "The Metaphysics of Love of the Sexes," *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, Vol. III (London, (n.d.)).

<sup>14</sup>Bernard Shaw, "The Case for Equality," *Metropolitan* (New York), Dec., 1913, Vol. XXXIX, no. 2, pp. 9-13, 44-47. Reprinted London, 1958 by *The Shaw Society*.

any way, not to be doled out according to the things he has done or according to the talents he has displayed. He says, in effect: 'I want to be a cultured human being; I want to live in the fullest sense; I require a generous subsistence for that; and I expect my country to organize itself in such a way as to secure me that.' Also the real gentleman says. . . 'In return for that I am willing to give my country the best service of which I am capable, absolutely the best. My ideal shall be also that. . . I shall strive to give to my country in return more than it has given me; so that when I die, my country shall be richer for my life.'<sup>15</sup>

Such an equality of basic income, Shaw felt, would trigger a number of socially useful consequences. The people's physical well-being would be assured; talented leadership would be drawn from the whole population; social barriers would crumble, allowing the free eugenic selection so central to his evolutionary scheme. In short, Shaw foresaw that, freed from the specter of poverty and from the fetters of artificial social stratification, a vastly superior human breed would emerge and organize itself into a cooperative state in which justice might prevail without coercion. If, however, mankind either cannot or will not devise the means of eliminating poverty, Shaw foresaw man's inevitable extinction. Nor did this especially horrify Shaw. He placed his faith in Life, in Life's evolving the forms to serve what Shaw took to be divine purposes, whatever they might be, and his optimism was of the caliber that could say that Life matters, not its form. If man will not do, than something better must be found. If man blocks his own evolution by injustice, then justice calls for the elimination of man.

Present circumstances make Shaw's views chilling. The symptoms he described meet the eye everywhere—the gap between rich and poor, the failure to draw leadership from all segments of society, the pestilential slum, class breeding, and all the rest. Whether or not the disease he diagnosed is as deadly as he claimed, it certainly is as ugly and as crippling. To allow it to run its course is unthinkable. Meanwhile, unblest are the poor! and, not at all inconsistently—serve us right!

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*