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George Bernard Shaw and the aristocratic ideal

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GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

and

THE ARISTOCRATIC IDEAL

by

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INTRODUCTION

It seems that one of the truly monumental literary tasks that must occupy the efforts of the writers and critics of the next generation will be that of weighing and evaluating the works of George Bernard Shaw in order to place him in proper perspective within the framework of literary history. In this task the most important problem will be that of discovering the real Shaw, for it must be realized that Shaw is an extremely paradoxical figure who seems to contradict himself in many ways. Before any attempt is made to fit him into the fabric of literary history, then, we must first of all solve the paradox. The paradox in this case seems to be primarily evident between the conscious attention-getting poses and utterances of the man and the sincere expressions of intellectual and temperamental belief found in his writing. A close examination of the works reveals certain apparent inconsistencies between the real Shaw and the prefabricated public myth that call for, but almost defy, resolution.

The purpose here will be to attempt a resolution of the apparent inconsistencies that are characteristic of the man and his work. Since these inconsistencies are primarily concerned with political and economic matters, the central
paradox confronting the student of Shaw is to decide which is the real Shaw—the Socialist or the Aristocrat. This ambivalence may be more clearly suggested at the outset of this consideration by two contradictory comments from his writings made at widely separated times.

In 1906, in the "Preface" to Major Barbara, Shaw was concerned, among other things, with "the scientific fact of human equality, expressed by Barbara in the Christian formula that all men are children of one father."¹ He suggests here the natural necessity for a moral, social, and political equality and he points out that the revolutionary explosions of the past have resulted because of "our persistent attempts to found political institutions on a basis of social inequality."² The suggestion then, is that there should be a condition of moral, social, and political equality in the institutions of our society and yet in his "Postscript to the Jubilee Edition" of the Fabian Essays, written in 1946, which may be taken as one of his last statements on the matter of social and political equality, Shaw seems to arrive at entirely different conclusions concerning this "natural equality" of man. After approximately forty years of observation he seems somewhat distrustful of "human equality". "This haphazard Mobocracy (votes for everyone, contemporary Democracy) must be replaced by democratic

²Ibid., p. 326.
aristocracy; that is, by the dictatorship, not of the whole proletariat, but of that five per cent of it capable of conceiving the job and pioneering in the drive toward its divine goal. Where in 1906 he had lauded Caesar, Louis XI, and Napoleon for recognizing a "natural equality" by picking men at random for important political positions, now he proclaims that the rulers of society must come, not from the political "windbags and blatherskites, but ... candidates from the naturally qualified five per cent."4

Now, since the concept of "a natural equality of man" is essentially a Socialist doctrine and the concept of "a naturally qualified five per cent" is essentially an Aristocratic doctrine, the paradox in Shaw's thinking must be evident.

Since there is a sense of contradiction between the Socialist and the Aristocrat, it will be necessary to reconcile the implied Aristocratic tendencies of the man with the Socialist ideas so commonly expressed in his writing. The end result of this will be to indicate that Shaw, like many another man of extreme sensibility and intellectual temperament, was attracted to Socialism primarily by a critical affinity. Both Shaw and the Socialists were critical of the essentially conservative society of their time and they similarly agreed on the basic economic faults in society and the

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4 Ibid., p. 224.
general remedies necessary to correct these faults, but they did not agree as to the end result of this reorganization of society. Shaw was attracted to Socialism as a means to an end, while the general body of Socialists saw it as an end in itself.

Shaw viewed the non-Shavian Socialists as a naive group who attributed more good qualities to the common man than actually existed in his person.

Under Marx and Engels, Morris and Hyndman, Socialism was a middle class movement caused by the revolt of the consciences of educated and humane men and women against the injustice and cruelty of Capitalism and also against its brutal disregard of beauty and the daily human happiness of doing fine work for its own sake. Now the strongest and noblest feelings of this kind were quite compatible with the most complete detachment from and ignorance of proletarian life and history in the class that worked for weekly wages. Whenever your sympathies are strongly stirred on behalf of some cruelly ill used person or persons of whom you know nothing except that they are ill used, your generous indignation attributes all sorts of virtues to them . . . . But the blunt truth is that ill used people are worse than well used people; indeed this is at bottom the only good reason why we should not allow anyone to be ill used. We should refuse to tolerate poverty as a social institution not because the poor are the salt of the earth, but because "the poor in a lump are bad." 5

Shaw himself did not share the humanitarian belief in the efficacy of the common man and he did not believe in sympathizing with them as a class. "Both rich and poor are hateful in themselves. For my part I hate the poor and look forward eagerly to their extermination." 6 As will be pointed


6 Ibid., p. 456.
out later in this paper, Shaw did not believe in the ability of the common man to improve short of a fundamental biological change. The other Socialists might desire a greater share for the common man; Shaw wanted to eliminate the common man.

The obvious difference between Shaw and the Socialists. was that Shaw was convinced of the necessity of changing Man himself, and not so much concerned with changing political and social institutions, except insofar as these changes might affect the fundamental human sensibility itself. It is true that early in his writings he seems to have held some hope that political and social change might have a lasting effect on Man, but later he seems to have concluded that nothing short of biological change would have the desired effect on the human race. He seemed to feel that the political and social factors which affect Man at the moment are important only in relation to the long range ennobling effects that they may have on mankind.

It is true, also, that Shaw accepted the designation of himself as a Socialist and even called himself a Socialist, but to a man of his intellectual temperament names and organizations were important only as a fundamental position from which ideas could be projected. It is important to note in this connection, that he considered himself to be a specific type of Socialist—a Fabian Socialist; and he goes to great lengths to point out the superior position of the Fabian in comparison to "the many little societies locally known as 'the Socialists'".7 Even here, in his fundamental

7Shaw, Fabian Essays, p. xxxvi.
relationship with Socialism, he sets up conditions and establishes intellectual quality as the basis of judgment. This is typical of Shaw's Socialism, he is more interested in improving the quality of society than he is in broadening the base of society. His social aims are qualitative rather than quantitative.

A number of critics have commented on the inconsistency of Shaw's views, but in general they seem to have accepted the inconsistency without attempting to resolve it or they have gloried in it without trying to measure and understand the degree of inconsistency.

One of the critics has suggested that anyone who attempts to point out and examine the inconsistencies of Shaw will only "present the sorry picture of Lilliputians trying to take the measurements of a Brobdingnagian." It might be pointed out that the Lilliputians' attempts to measure and examine Lemuel Gulliver led to an understanding of him and a control of sorts that enabled them to profit by his powers. The same may be true in regard to Shaw unless we allow this blind idolatry, or better still, this blind Bernardolatry, to befoul our critical ability and indulge in literary inanities while we scamper fearfully into the woods of ignorance. This is the sort of criticism that fails to consider the questions posed by the man and his works. If Shaw's ideas have any value, we must deal with them critically in an

attempt to understand them. If he is worthy of the praise accorded to him then his ideas demand examination and understanding, otherwise, we waste our time in idle praise. It is the thoughts and ideas of men, not the empty praise of individuals, that contributes to the development of mankind.

This paper will be a critical attempt to examine the contradiction of Shaw's expressed Socialism by his implied Aristocratic ideas and temperament. Either position can be justified, but which is the more justifiable—which is the truer picture of Shaw? In such an evaluation it will be necessary to examine the basis of each of these positions. It is hoped that an answer to this question may lead to a better understanding of what Shaw actually means in his contradictions.
CHAPTER I

THE APPARENT SOCIALIST

In order to comprehend the Shavian paradox it will be necessary to understand the basis of the Socialism that has been attributed to Shaw. Our purpose here will be to reconstruct, as clearly as possible, the picture of his flirtation with Socialism and the practical reasons that led him to consider it as an ideal. His obvious deviations and differences, and the fact that the flirtation was never consummated, will be considered separately. The only question here is, why was he considered a Socialist? In what way does his thinking coincide with that of the Socialist?

At the outset it would be wise to be aware of the fact that in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century there were many people who called themselves Socialists and formed Socialist groups, but there was a curious lack of agreement as to a hard core of Socialist philosophy. The only thing they all agreed on was that the existing form of Capitalism must go. This lack of agreement led to various degrees and types of Socialism. Shaw complains that it is difficult to "distinguish between the genuine Socialists, and the curious collection of Anarchists, Syndicalists, Nationalists,
The condition of class inequality. Many of the societies

sufferable condition in society which created these elites was

society of the time considered many elites and that the one op-

held in common with the various socialist groups, that the

general socialist position, led him to the conclusion, also

position as a utopia, which was of course common with the

the latter part of the nineteenth century. There's sort thereof

all social problems, from vastly held by the socialist men during

The assumption here, that equality was the answer to

For higher functions?

supervision of persons, and selection of the persons

possible permanent bases of social organization, development.

screemable for money, and battling in equality as the only

a socialist, he says in 1922, "because our understand-

age of it as an aspect of equality in all things. I'm
ted to the socialist cause and died in about 1870. He could

show itself in many phases where we most often

and however has not reached it is no socialist us

wherever has reached this conclusion, by whatever path, is a

The other things are only the conditions of the consequences.

'law' they say, 'means equality of income and nothing else.

ference between the so-called and the non-socialist:

"state of things," and what then is the state

radicals, and malcontents of all sorts, who are not

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like William Morris, were idealists who were willing to apply equality to all and to bring about the change violently and suddenly. Morris expressed complete faith in the common man and he refused to place his faith in either an intellectual or aristocratic elite. "Not only did Morris accept the principle of democratic equality, but he even went far beyond it, advocating . . . not only equality of political condition, but also equality of social and economic condition among free citizens of free communities. There came also a time when he was willing to fight for these ideals." Shaw and his Fabians were more realistic. They saw the necessity of change, but were more hesitant about an unlimited broadening of the base of society and they were convinced that the necessary change should be achieved through evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, means. In general, though, there was a critical agreement on the faults of society that linked Shaw with the overall Socialist movement and he felt himself to be a part of it.

In speaking of the reform attitude, J. A. Hobson says "Often it is the personal experience of some concrete evil that first awakens a sense of social wrong, and a desire for redress; reform energy once generated is fed by a natural flow from various neighboring channels of activity, the stream broadening as it goes, until the man whose early activity was stimulated by the desire to break down some

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little barrier . . . finds himself breasting the tide of some oceanic movement."5 This is true of Shaw's early recognition of evil. His earliest acceptance of the necessity of social equality can be traced to his abhorrence of poverty. Even in his early writings he seems to have conceived of the necessity of improving the human species, not in terms of the Superman that comes later, but in terms of making the lesser man a better man in society. His condemnation of poverty and the fear of poverty as the conditions that cause all other evil conditions may be found in most all of his writing. In Major Barbara, for instance, he shows how the fear of poverty creates not only the class society but the institution of war as well. He explains in the "Preface" that Andrew Undershawt "is simply a man who, having grasped the fact that poverty is a crime, knows that when society offered him the alternative of poverty or a lucrative trade in death and destruction, it offered him, not a choice between opulent villainy and humble virtue, but between energetic enterprise and cowardly infamy."6 Therefore Undershawt's attempts to gain wealth are, under the conditions of our capitalist system, the only admirable way out. It is not so much that Shaw accepted the millionaire, but it is a matter of choosing the lesser of two obvious evils. The struggle to obtain "an independent income" is simply an attempt to

escape the ever present fear of poverty. It is the attempt
to escape "the seven deadly sins," which Shaw lists as food,
clothing, firing, rent, taxes, respectability, and children.
"Nothing can lift those seven millstones from Man's neck but
money; and the spirit cannot soar until the millstones are
lifted."7

Thus, under the capitalist system, the pursuit of
money became a virtuous undertaking and the man who was able
to acquire money and could only do it at the expense of
others found a justification for his position. The inability
of the less fortunate to lift those seven millstones, in
other words their inability to cope with the economic condi-
tions of the existing capitalist system, led to poverty.
Now, if Shaw was not wholehearted and sincere about anything
else, he was wholehearted and sincere in his hatred of pov-
erty and the conditions that produced it. There may be some
question whether his intense feeling was the result of a hu-
manitarian compassion for his fellow creature or whether it
was the result of a certain niceness, a certain fastidious-
ness, in his nature that made him draw back from anything
dirty or evil. Shaw does have this instinctive distaste for
anything coarse, anything common, anything, infact, that de-
tracts from the spiritual nobility of man. His vegetarianism
was the result of this distaste. G. K. Chesterton says,
"Bernard Shaw is a vegetarian more because he dislikes dead

7Ibid., p. 434.
beasts than because he likes live ones. The same fastidious spirit seems to be present in his feeling toward poverty. To paraphrase this comment, "Shaw is a Socialist more because he dislikes poverty than because he likes the poor people."

It is wise to notice that Shaw does not necessarily condemn the millionaires, who have simply refused to accept the disease of poverty and have been spurred on by the fear of poverty. He blames the poor themselves, who have allowed this inequality to gain complete legal and moral sanction. In the "Preface" to *Major Barbara*, Shaw tells us that "the misery of the world is due to the fact that the great mass of men act and believe as Peter Shirley (the poor man) acts and believes. If they acted and believed as Undershaft (the rich man) acts and believes, the immediate result would be a revolution of incalculable beneficence." The suggestion is that anyone with any sense will aim as Undershaft has instead of being poor because others are inflicted with poverty. After all, if the patient is down with the measles, he does not get well by infecting the doctor and everyone else with the disease. Those who are well should maintain their health and help the patient to get well, and this is true in social economics also. In the words of Undershaft, poverty is a disease and a crime and

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all other crimes are virtues beside it: all other
dishonors are chivalry itself by comparison. Pov-
erty blights whole cities; spreads horrible pesti-
lences; strikes dead the very souls of all who come
within sight, sound, or smell of it. There are
millions of poor people, abject people, dirty peo-
ples, ill-fed, ill-clothed people. They poison us
morally and physically: they kill the happiness
of society. Only fools fear crime; we all
fear poverty.\(^{10}\)

Shaw also found himself in general agreement with the
Socialists regarding the cause of poverty. If poverty was a
disease, it was necessary to discover the cause of it. The
obvious answer was to be found in a study of economics and
this study resulted in the discovery that the inequality of
distribution under the Capitalist system was the major fault
in that system. The Capitalist achievements in production
and finance

have been accompanied by a failure in distribution
so grotesquely inequitable and socially disastrous
that its continuance is out of the question. Des-
perate attempts are made everywhere by redistribu-
tive taxation, state regulation of wages, and fac-
tory regulation, to remedy it within the limits of
the Capitalist system. But redistributive taxation
within Capitalist limits means dole for idleness
instead of wages for productive work; and regula-
tion of wages and factories does not help the un-
employed. No other remedy than the transforma-
tion of Capitalistic society into Socialistic society
has so far been able to stand examination.\(^{11}\)

Shaw traced this problem of unequal distribution to
what he called "economic rent", which he defined as "that
part of the produce which is individually unearned".\(^ {12}\)

\(^{11}\)Bernard Shaw, \textit{Fabian Essays}, p. viii.
\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 167.
he means here is that there is an inequality in the random
distribution of the bounties of Nature. Since the natural
fertility of land varies from acre to acre, then the returns
to farmers of equal ability and industry will vary in accor-
dance with the excellence of their land and not due to their
own efforts. Therefore, the farmer on the better land will
receive an excess of income, a natural excess, over his less
fortunate counterpart. If these lands are owned by a non-
resident landlord, then he will collect the excess for his
own uses without expending any effort or ability for it. It
was the expropriation of this unearned excess to be used for
the benefit of the whole people that Shaw saw as the ultimate
economic aim of Socialism. As a result of this aim he also
saw the necessity of the establishment of a government that
could be trusted with the rent of the country and with the
welfare of the people. He believed that we should "hold the
right to an income as sacred and equal, just as we now hold
the right to life as sacred and equal."13

The question then remains—how will the economic ba-
sis of this Socialism be worked out? The primary economic
fact that Shaw recognized was that every citizen owed enough
work to replace what his living had cost, plus a contribution
to the national capital. He proposed as one of his prin-
ciples of economic reform that the division of the wealth of
the country shall be handled so that "no crumb shall go to
any able-bodied adults who are not producing by their personal

exertions not only a full equivalent for what they take, but a surplus sufficient to provide for their superannuation and pay back the debt due for their nurture." The State was to have the responsibility of providing enough employment to make this possible. Laws and penalties would be devised to cope with those who did not contribute. This entire scheme was to be based on a standard basic income. The supposed advantage here seemed to be that the incentive for hard work would still be present since the more able, energetic people would be able to repay their total cost at an earlier age and would then be free of economic obligation for the rest of their lives. This would supposedly create a more numerous leisured class than we have under Capitalism, but would not allow the economic inequality of Capitalism.

This then, was the economic Socialism proposed by Shaw, and, thus far, it is safe to say that Shaw and the various other Socialists would agree in essence, at least, as to the faults in the economic basis of the existing social system and the general economic equality necessary to correct these faults.

The two key words in evaluating Shaw's Socialism are "economic" and "equality". His early Socialism was based on a belief in "equality as the only possible permanent basis of social organization, discipline, subordination, good manners, and selection of fit persons for higher functions." The

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emphasis on alleviating the condition and cause of poverty and the reiterated criticism of the "inequality of distribution" in the Fabian Essays suggests that the "equality" he was concerned with was "economic equality" and nothing more than this. The truth of the matter is that Shaw's social equality from the first was an "economic equality" and his social consciousness never developed any farther than this in the area of Socialism.

It is significant that there is no evidence to show that Shaw ever accepted the moral or ethical terms of the Socialist philosophy. That is, he never accepted the Rousseau ideal of the nobility and rightness of the common man as Morris and some of the other Socialists apparently did. Examine the early plays and the truth of this statement is immediately apparent. The subjects of the dramas are practical economic matters considered in a calm, business-like way. In this way, Widower's House is an expose of the economic effects of the matter of property rights, Mrs. Warren's Profession is a consideration of laissez-faire economic factors that force women to starve or assert their independence by dealing in the one exclusively feminine commodity, Major Barbara declares a economic morality that is more effective than spiritual morality, and Getting Married exposes the practical economic basis of the social institution of marriage and the family. In all of these cases popular morality and ethics are rejected for a practical explanation of social factors. It is true that right and wrong enter into
the consideration of these subjects, but the resolution of right and wrong must always face up to the practical economic factors of society. Thus Major Barbara is torn between her belief in spiritual salvation and her eventual recognition that the need for salvation is an economic need that can be relieved only with money and that the prayer for salvation is essentially only a prayer for money. In this same play, Shaw points out that the only person that can afford to concern himself with morals is the person who is relieved of the answer to the fundamental demand—"give us this day our daily bread". Only with a full stomach can the individual give constructive thought to the state of his soul. He points out the inconsistency involved in the statement "poor but honest", suggesting that the condition of poverty negates the possibility of honesty. How can the individual be concerned with honesty when faced with the possibility of starvation? Remember, Shaw insisted that "our first duty, to which every other consideration should be sacrificed, is not to be poor." In the face of this practical economic truth, can the poverty-stricken householder concern himself with honesty? Is it possible that the moralizing Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal", must be superseded by the practical Commandment, "Thou shalt not starve"?

It must be very evident then, that Shaw was convinced that social problems were primarily economic problems and that the only social equality of any consequence was economic equality. It should also be apparent that Shaw's
thinking seems to operate on two separate planes—one economic and the other social and political. On the one plane, he agrees with the Socialist economic evaluation, but on the other plane we will see that he never accepts the social and political equality of the Socialists. It is this social double standard that makes Shaw hard to deal with on concrete terms, but it is clear that the apparent Socialism professed by Shaw himself and attributed to him by society as a whole, is apparent only by its insistence on economic equality. This is the basis of any agreement of Shaw with the general body of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Socialism. The remaining question is whether Shaw was prepared to accept equality as the basis for social and political considerations as he did for economic considerations.
CHAPTER II

THE IMPLIED ARISTOCRACY

Since it is quite obvious that Bernard Shaw's social philosophy has developed on two separate planes—one economic and the other social and political—and since we have previously established the framework and basis of his social economics, it would be well now to examine his social and political thinking in order to discover and resolve the inconsistencies in his overall philosophy. That such inconsistencies exist will be pointed out in the following pages and it will be shown that these inconsistencies are so great as to negate the possibility of agreement with the generally accepted Socialist doctrine of equality in all things, even though in 1902, Shaw himself, apparently accepted the Socialist ideal of equality as a basis for all "social organization, discipline, subordination, good manners, and selection of fit persons for high function." 1 He also maintained this same general position in 1927 in The Intelligent Woman's Guide. And yet much of what he said in his Prefaces and in his later writings contradicts this expression of equality.

It might be noted in passing, that there are certain inconsistencies in the foregoing statement that leave some

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doubt as to the kind of equality it is concerned with. This statement suggests "equality" in "social organization" and yet by implying the necessity of "subordination" it indicates social and political limits to that "equality". "Equality", as a social factor, is generally taken to mean a process of standardization or a leveling, which is compatible with the Socialist position of a man like Morris, for instance, who pictured a society where "equality of condition would be guaranteed to all persons by the community will", whereas "subordination" suggests an inferior position, which indicates degrees of standing. This statement also expresses the thought that "equality" is the only basis for the "selection of fit persons for high functions." Now, the very process of "selection" would seem to contradict the idea of "equality". "Selection of fit persons" is certainly inconsistent with "equality". The existence of "fit persons" suggests the existence of "unfit persons" and this establishment of degrees of political ability certainly contradicts the idea of political and social equality.

This statement, then, does not seem to express as complete an agreement with Socialist ideals as might appear at first glance, and yet this is the type of statement that has been taken as evidence of Shaw's Socialism. Most of the so-called Socialist ideas attributed to Shaw can be proved to be matters of economic dissatisfaction. His one point of consistent agreement with the Socialists is on the matter of

\[2\text{Eshleman, op. cit., p. 317.}\]
distribution. To Shaw, these are "the two main problems of organized society: how to produce subsistence enough for all its members, and how to prevent the theft of what subsistence by idlers, and they should be carefully dissociated; for the triumphant solution of the first by our inventors and chemists has been offset by the disastrous failure of our rulers to solve the other." He agrees that inequality of distribution is the chief evil in our economic system, and he agrees that the Capitalist system and its corrupt democratic government is at fault. This condemnation of English democracy of the Nineteenth Century has been taken as an indication that Shaw would supplant it with a Socialist government and yet, what he calls "Social Democracy" is once again aimed at economic, rather than social and political considerations.

In the *Fabian Essays*, he discusses the governmental aim of the Socialists and introduces the term "Social Democrat", "indicating the man or woman who desires through Democracy to gather the whole people into the State, so that the State may be trusted with the rent of the country, and finally with the land, the capital, and the organization of the national industry—with all the sources of production, in short, which are now abandoned to the cupidity of irresponsible private individuals."²

Now, the concept of Social Democracy as a more perfect form of government presupposes the development of the Social Democrat as a more perfect form of political man and this, of course, was one of the ideas behind the Fabian movement in its early development. After all, a government is only as good as the individuals that exercise its powers, and if Social Democracy is to be entrusted with, not only the sources of production and the agencies of distribution, but also with the welfare of the people as a whole, then the answer to the possibility of such government depends on the possibility of the perfection of the political individual. Evidently the Social Democrat must be conceived of as an individual completely free of personal ambitions and aspirations. To conceive of such a creature, completely free of self and dedicated to the welfare of all without class, group, or personal prejudice, is to conceive of either a God or a machine and it is precisely the God-like Superman that Shaw has in mind.

In recognition of this need for more perfect political individuals, the Fabians established an educational program which aimed at perfecting individuals through economic and political education. This educational program accepted the doctrine of the perfectibility of man as its basic doctrine. Their belief was that if the institutions of man were to be improved, man, the basic unit in those institutions, must be improved. In his early days with the Fabians, Shaw seems to have accepted this fundamental belief and
seems to have believed in the perfectibility of man as a possibility. The fact that he participated in this educational program would seem to indicate that he believed in it. Indeed, even in his later pronouncements he maintained the necessity of changing man as a necessary condition to changing political and social institutions. His final conclusion as to the form of change was different, however, and his opinion as to the impossibility of improving man showed a final rejection of man's ability to change. "We must either breed political capacity or be ruined by Democracy, which was forced on us by the failure of the older alternatives." In other words, his practical political experience seemed to convince him that the only way man could be perfected was through the biological creation of a more perfect man. He did not believe, with Morris, in the "creation of an educated opinion" then, but rather in the biological creation of an educable man.

It has been pointed out that even in his fundamental agreement with the ideal of equality, Shaw had some reservations. Whether these reservations were consciously realized or not, cannot be known; we can only conjecture. It is entirely possible that his distaste for poverty and his recognition of the crying need for more equal economic distribution to alleviate the conditions of poverty, led him to eschew the certain that he was not completely and consciously

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5Bernard Shaw, Selected Plays, Vol. III, p. 503.
6Eshleman, op. cit., p. 319.
prepared to accept. In other words, his distaste for poverty may have been so strong as to blind him to the social and political consequences that equality in all things might bring. Thus, his distaste for the immediate and apparent evil was so great as to discourage any consideration of the consequent developments. At any rate, it is impossible to say exactly when his agreement with the economic emphasis of the Socialist philosophy broke down and his natural aristocratic temperament began to assert itself, but it is true that Shaw came to find himself at variance with the Socialists in the fields of political and social thinking.

At least it is evident that his Socialism has undergone a great change during his active life. "Dogmatic at first and leaning to radical solutions, it was mitigated, in his early manhood, under the influence of a realism more keenly aware of facts; it has gradually drifted away from Marxian orthodoxy, and has even ceased to harmonize with the average thought of the Fabian group."⁷ There is definite evidence that Shaw, although he maintained his basic ideal of economic equality, modified his thinking in the light of his practical and realistic recognition of the true nature of man. As he says in the person of Don Juan, "as long as I can conceive something better than myself I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing

the way for it."\(^3\) There is also evidence to indicate that his own aristocratic temperament led him to view some of the consequences of Socialism as repugnant. Whether there is actually a change in his thinking that can be traced through his writings or whether the differences simply illustrate two different sides of his nature, is relatively unimportant.

The fact that he continued to express radical economic ideas concerning the matter of distribution throughout his life, while at the same time throwing intellectual bombshells that give evidence of an aristocratic sensibility which contains what G. K. Chesterton calls, "a touch of delicate inhumanity", would seem to suggest that these were co-existing, but contradictory sides of his nature. And it is entirely understandable that the critical mind, concerned as it is with all the actions and terms of life, when confronted by the inconsistencies of life, may contradict itself. The fault lies not with the critic, but with life; for life itself is inconsistent, containing the best and the worst in specific contradictions. The critic, who sees the evil of poverty contradicting the goodness that is in the poor and the inhumanity of wealth contradicting the enlightened life of the wealthy, can see nothing inconsistent in condemning the evil of both and accepting the good of both.

Edmund Wilson sees Shaw functioning on three distinct planes and shifting from one to the other. "The

\(^3\)Bernard Shaw, Selected Plays, Vol. III, p. 641.
mechanics seem to be somewhat as follows: at the bottom of Shaw is a commonsense sphere of practical consideration; above this is a plane of socialism, of the anticipated reorganization of society in the interest of ideal values; and above this, a poet-philosopher's ether from which he commands a longer view of life—and where the poet allows himself many doubts which neither the socialist nor the bourgeois citizen can admit.  

This seems to be a reasonable way of considering Shaw, for it is certainly not inconsistent for the individual to think in terms of both the ideal and the real—what ought to be and what actually is or can be; nor is it unusual for the two positions to be contradictory, for the ideal quite often does not lend itself to practical considerations. There may be a desire for the ideal coupled with a recognition of the impracticality and the impossibility of the ideal, and some of the consequences of that ideal may conflict with real needs and desires. This is the difference between aspiration and attainment.

Shaw did agree, then, with the general Socialist aim of economic equality and yet, as has been pointed out, he had grave reservations concerning political and social equality. Since it is difficult to conceive of having equality only in an economic sense and not in a political and social sense, there are still inconsistencies here that need resolution for a practical consideration.

In order to resolve this paradox we must return to a consideration of the term "equality". What did Shaw mean by "equality" in social and political organization? We have discovered that, in an economic sense, he meant the establishment of a basic income—an income sufficient to ensure the fundamental needs and desires of the individual with no one receiving an excess of income. The remaining question facing us then, would be whether he wanted the same sort of standard established in political and social organization, as well. It is here that we find the fundamental difference between Shaw and the general Socialist position, and while Shaw may appear a Socialist in economic matters, he appears as too much of an Aristocrat in political and social matters to agree with the Socialists; for while the Socialist might accept the concept of a political and social standard, Shaw would not. William Morris was one of the Socialists that did believe in a social and political standard of equality. He saw "a society of fellowship, of mutual aid and co-operation; one in which equality of condition would be guaranteed to all persons by the community will, by the social conscience and hence by the framework and laws upon which the true society of that distant future should rest."\textsuperscript{10} Shaw, on the other hand, did not recognize this standard of social equality. He did not share Morris' faith in the common man.

\textsuperscript{10}Eshleman, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 317.
of the electorate or of the bodies it elects. The overthrow
of the aristocrat has created the necessity for the Super-
man.\textsuperscript{11} And once again in the same tone of distrust, "We
shall never march a step forward except at the heels of the
strongest man, he who is able to stand alone."\textsuperscript{12}

It might be well to examine the aristocratic ideal
in order to attempt to apply it to Shaw. Melvin Rader, in
his book \textit{Ethics and Society}, says the aristocrat is "one who
habitually prefers the choice goods as opposed to the common
goods. The essence of the aristocratic ideal is the empha-
sis upon quality rather than upon quantity."\textsuperscript{13} In general,
it would seem safe to say that the Socialist ideal is quan-
titative rather than qualitative. The Socialists desired
to expand the base of society to include the common man on
a basis of equality. After all, the aim of equality is a
quantitative aim. It aims to open up, rather than to limit,
participation in all the phases of society.

In the matter of quantity and quality, Shaw and the
Fabians in their early programs, did not see any inconsis-
tency in the two. Their assumption of the perfectibility
of man apparently led them to believe that man could be per-
fected qualitatively and the base of society could thus be
expanded quantitatively. The very fact that their main


\textsuperscript{12}G. Bernard Shaw, \textit{The Quintessence of Ibsenism}, (New
York: Brentano's, 1912), p. 98.

\textsuperscript{13}Melvin Rader, \textit{Ethics and Society}, (New York: Henry
program was educational and informational indicates that they had no desire to embrace the idea of the infinite wisdom of the common man. Their aim was to raise the common man, through education, to a station more nearly commensurate with their own. They were truly interested in what we might call progressive equality, and they aimed at raising the standard, rather than broadening the base, of society. Essentially, this indicates a belief in the perfectibility of man, and when Shaw finally rejected this concept of perfectibility, his true aristocratic temperament was revealed.

Whether or not he actually ever accepted the idea of the perfectibility of man, it is demonstrable that he did not continue to accept the idea of progressive equality. For instance, in the "Epistle Dedicatory" to *Man and Superman*, he says, "Progress can do nothing but make the most of us all as we are, and that most would clearly not be enough even if those who are already raised out of the lowest abysses would allow the others a chance." In the "Revolutionists' Handbook" he speaks of the "Illusion" of progress, proclaiming that "we must frankly give up the notion that Man as he exists is capable of net progress . . . whilst Man remains what he is, there can be no progress beyond the point already attained."

Actually his desire to eliminate Capitalism would seem to indicate a fundamental lack of belief in the

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perfectibility of man. When he proclaims the faults in Capitalism he is actually accusing the human animal of being base and weak. His desire to destroy Capitalism is a desire to remove the possibility of temptation so there will be no chance for the natural wickedness of man to assert itself. If man is perfectible, then he can cope with the imperfect conditions of any system and can rise above the system. Shaw's expressed desire to tamper with the institutions of man is a recognition of the weakness and imperfection of man's nature. This recognition of the essentially base and depraved nature of man marks Shaw as not only a realist, but as a Puritan as well. The Puritan strain in Shaw is as evident as the aristocratic strain, and the two are not contradictory but complementary. The Puritan sees the faults and weaknesses in man; and the Aristocrat, recognizing these faults, desires to curb them. It is the Aristocrat that has the desire to govern.

Now Shaw did not feel that progress was impossible; he always qualified this gloomy prospect by the statement that progress was impossible "while man remains what he is". He had faith in the divine necessity of progress, but felt that man, as he exists, was incapable of this great step. The institutions of society, being man-made institutions and subject to the same fallibility as man, do not contribute toward the attainment of the divinely inspired goal of perfection, and since he felt the pull of a divine force in the Universe that aimed inexorably to express itself in
perfection, then imperfect man and his institutions could never be the tools of that force. He felt that this will to perfection was one of the first truths in the Universe and that Nature would express itself thus, through whatever means lay to hand. If mankind was incapable of serving as the expression of this will, then Man as an experiment would be dropped to be superseded by a more perfect form. "The power that produced Man when the monkey was not up to the mark, can produce a higher creature than Man if Man does not come up to the mark . . . Nature holds no brief for the human experiment: it must stand or fall by its results. If Man will not serve, Nature will try another experiment." 16

The fundamental difference between "perfectibility" as we generally consider it, and "perfectibility" as Shaw explained it in his two most sincerely philosophical plays, Man and Superman and Back to Methuselah, should be made clear in order to indicate his lack of faith in Man as he is. The general concept of "perfectibility" anticipates the development of Man within his physical and mental limits. Shaw's idea of "Creative Evolution" refuses to accept physical and mental limits. He believes that the "Life Force" behind evolution is a creative force and it is simply the vitality of life directed to a certain end and in response to a conviction of necessity, willing itself to create and organize new tissue if necessary, to accomplish its will. "If the weight lifter, under the trivial stimulus of

an athletic competition, can 'put up a muscle', it seems reasonable to believe that an equally earnest and convinced philosopher could 'put up a brain'."17

In a like manner, in Man and Superman, Don Juan claims that the Life Force is working through evolution toward the development of the ideal individual, "the ideal individual being omnipotent, omniscient, infallible, and completely self-conscious,"18 and Nature's object for attaining this self-consciousness and self-understanding is the brain. This is the "new tissue" that is to be created in response to the will of the "Life Force" and this development of the intellect in its drive to understand, presages the coming of the Superman—"the philosophic man: he who seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will by the so-discovered means."19

While this concept may sound somewhat naive, it should be remembered that Shaw's position was that of the critic, pointing out the faults of society and life. Since he rejected the possibility of improving Man as he exists, then he could only hope for a change in the nature and character of Man by a complete transformation of Man into a higher form. Faced with the choice between an obvious failure

17Ibid., p. xviii.
18Ibid., Vol. III, p. 626.
19Ibid., p. 628.
of life's attempt to express itself and a hypothetically superior attempt at this expression, he chose the hypothetical alternative to show his contempt for the puny efforts of Man.

Now to return to Shaw's lack of belief in social and political equality, which is essentially an aristocratic disdain for the vulgar—the common, it becomes increasingly clear that he held none of the usual concern for the social and political rights of the common man. His natural desire for a civilization of philosophers, and his recognition of the present impossibility of such an eventuality, coupled with his aristocratic distaste for the conditions of poverty and ignorance, led him to look on the common man with distaste as an object of unrealized and unrealizable potentiality. In The Intelligent Woman's Guide he tells us that people "often conceive Socialism as a charitable enterprise for the benefit of the poor. Nothing could be further from the truth. Socialism abhors poverty, and would abolish the poor. A hearty dislike and disapproval of poor people as such is the first qualification of a good Equalizer."20 His only interest in the common man then, was the interest of the exterminator viewing something repulsive that needs to be destroyed because of its inability to adjust itself to our lives. The cockroach cannot be blamed for its offenses to man, nor can the rat, but that does not make us any more amenable to their existence in our midst, and thus it was

with Shaw. This is not to say that Shaw considered the common man to be worth no more than the rat, but he would very likely have agreed that there was as much chance of improving the rat as the man; short of the creation of a superior rat or a superior man, that is. To the Life Force, the man is of no more consequence than the rat is to man. The point he did make, was that the poor were polluting and poisoning our life and that the common man was apparently incapable of being educated to a responsible understanding of right and wrong. To him, the poor were no good because they were poor and the middle class abhorrent because they lived on the poor, on the fruits of poverty, as it were. Who is left to attempt to redeem society as it exists then? Obviously, the only group left that can hope to redeem society is the intellectual aristocracy made up of men who approach the position of the Superman-philosopher.

Politically Shaw seemed to be contemptuous of the efforts to give the common man a voice in matters of import. "It is a scientific fact that the majority, however eager it may be for the reform of old abuses, is always wrong in its opinion of new developments, or rather is always unfit for them. We shall never march a step forward except at the heels of the strongest man, he who is able to stand alone."21 This is a typical statement of the inability of the common man in political matters and suggests the necessity of a superior political man who is capable of considering the value

21Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism, p. 98.
of new developments. His major point seems to be that even when the common man desires something that is right in the way of political change, he is not willing to put forth the effort necessary to attain this end. He speaks of the "damned wantlessness" of the common man—the Peter Shirleys who were dissatisfied, but not enough so to do anything about it.\(^{22}\) The common man's desire is simply an expressed desire lacking the will that is necessary for attainment. And even here, it is a matter of selfish desires without concern for the general welfare.

In the meantime, while we await the arrival of the Superman, this Mobocracy

must be replaced by democratic aristocracy: that is by the dictatorship, not of the whole proletariat, but of that five per cent of it capable of conceiving the job and pioneering in the drive towards its divine goal. This does not mean that the people shall have no choice of their rulers. What it does mean is that their choice shall not be between windbags and blatherskites, but between candidates from the naturally qualified five per cent.\(^{23}\)

It is quite obvious that this small group that Shaw would choose to direct our destinies—this minority intellectually capable of conceiving the job and, presumably capable of seeing it through, is once again, the intellectual aristocracy. It is this group that Shaw sees leading society on the difficult road to perfection and it is through their recognition of the principle of Creative Evolution and the necessity of selective breeding and any other practice that

\(^{22}\text{Shaw, Selected Plays, Vol. I, p. 311.}\)

\(^{23}\text{Shaw, Fabian Essays, p. 223.}\)
leads to the development of the Superman, that society will gradually evolve into an ideal Democracy of Supermen.

You may say that the end result of Shaw's aristocracy then, would be a Socialist Society of Supermen and so his aim is truly socialist, but, even so, since the theoretical end result is purely hypothetical socialism, and since the present practical means of working toward that end deny the value of human rights and equality—since these means are, in fact, aristocratic means, then isn't it apparent that the philosophy of Shaw, in all but his one touch of economic sentiment and delicacy which is shared by the other Socialists, is an aristocratic philosophy? After all, it is the application of his ideas to society as it exists, no matter how imperfect, that establishes his philosophical position. We can project hypothetical societies to fit any system, for that matter, but it is the effect of the system on society and life as we know it that identifies the system, in this case, as an aristocratic system, because it employs aristocratic means.

Shaw's insistence on "an elite five per cent", a "Democratic Aristocracy", an "aristocracy of talent", his pronouncement that the Fabians must not think of vast numbers and huge subscription lists, but must remain "a minority of cultural snobs" working toward the general welfare; all of this gives evidence of a thoroughly aristocratic temperament—a temperament too critical and too fine in its instinctive tastes to accept the idea of "equality" as we
know it. Shaw might accept the idea of equality for future society—the society of Superman; he would never accept the idea of social and political equality for present society—the society of people as they are.

If there is the suggestion here of a similarity between the Philosopher-King of Plato and the Intellectual-Aristocrat of Shaw, it is a similarity well founded. Shaw's Aristocrat is the product of the same type of selective breeding, is possessed of the same educational background, the same dedication, the same omnipotence, and the same selfless concern with the general welfare as Plato's Philosopher-King. In short, Shaw follows Plato in accepting the rule of the wise as a political ideal. C. K. Chesterton has noted this affinity of Shaw for Plato, and E. Strauss in his work Bernard Shaw: Art and Socialism, has commented that Shaw has followed Plato in his theoretical criticism of popular government. For both Plato and Shaw "real government is possible only if its members have an expert knowledge of everything on which they have to decide; otherwise it is either a tool in the hands of irresponsible persons who have such an expert knowledge—the permanent civil service—or a public danger."²⁴ Both men distrust human nature too much to accept the ideal of democracy, but yet, both possess too much faith in the value of man to accept a thoroughly despotic form of government. The similarity between

the two men is considerably more than a surface likeness. Both looked to an extreme ideal as a model for society and yet they both gave evidence of a practical sense of reality in their concern with the character of Man. Both envisioned a superior being who would rule with the best interests of the people at heart.
CHAPTER III

RESOLUTION

The purpose of this paper, as stated earlier, has been to examine the challenging and provocative ideas of Shaw to attempt to resolve the contradictions that are apparent in his thinking. The two sides of Shaw's nature that are obviously at variance have been pointed out and seem to be matters of belief. The question that seems to demand resolution is whether a man can accept two contradictory beliefs and if these beliefs are, indeed contradictory, which of the two is the more real—the more fundamental, to the nature of the man.

The apparent contradiction in Shaw is between the Socialist and the Aristocrat. This appears as a conflict between economic belief and social-political belief, but actually it goes much deeper than this. If Shaw sincerely believed in economic distribution as a means of attaining equality, then the contradiction would be much simpler. However, since it has been shown that his belief in economic distribution, which is the basis of the Socialism attributed to him, is aimed at the fact of poverty rather than at elevating the poor; then the understanding of the
contradiction becomes more difficult. His belief here is an instinctive distaste directed against the filth and ignorance of poverty rather than a humanitarian feeling for the poor. Shaw was not so much moved by the plight of the poor people as he was repulsed by the sight and sound and smell of the conditions of their lives. He had the instinctive elevation of thought that shrank from anything that was not fine and delicate and elevated. His feelings for animals were strangely similar to his feelings for the poor. He was against violence, cruelty, oppression of any kind, animal or human; not so much because he valued animals and men so highly, but primarily because he had the poet's belief in beauty and perfection in life.

His desire to find the way to this ideal of beauty and perfection led him to reject the concept of perfectibility in Man and to accept the almost mystical principle of a Creative Evolution driven on by the Life Force. This Life Force is important in Shaw's social thinking because the concept of a Force behind Life suggests a universal drive, or will, toward perfection and this universal will is disdainful of men as individuals and is only concerned with the conditions of life. Any ugliness then, whether it be the dingy filthiness of a tenement dwelling or the blood on a butcher's block, is a denial of the universal perfection of life.

Accepting this, it is easy to see that Shaw's concern with a more equal distribution was primarily aimed at
cleaning up the ugly conditions of life and not so much concerned with making people equal. Any tendency toward a levelling that occurred would be incidental rather than purposeful.

The same thing is true of Shaw's condemnation of the wealthy middle class. It was not so much their wealth or their social position that Shaw was against as it was the ugliness of their lives and their cramped and sordid spirit that refused to recognize the will to perfection—the insignificance of the individual as against the universal. His Boss Mangan, for instance, in Heartbreak House, becomes an object of contempt, not because of his position and his treatment of the poor, but because of his sordid, dishonest spirit that represented something dirty. A man's spirit can be as dirty as his house and can become therefore, an ugly denial of universal perfection. This should not be taken as a general condemnation of all wealthy people. Andrew Undershaft, in Major Barbara, is an admirable example of the rich man who has a "developed sense of life". This seems to mean that he is aware of the universal will toward perfection. He is concerned with improving the conditions of life and refuses to accept ugliness in anything. He is honest, just, and above petty human passions. The fact that he is wealthy is the fault of the Capitalist system and not because of any desire to use others for power. There is the feeling that Undershaft would be a leader under any system. He seems to be one of the "select five per cent."
Therefore, Shaw's complaint against economic, social and political inequality was not the Socialist complaint against the unequal position of individuals, but was against the evils and ugliness that went with it. It was not the subordination of individual to individual that bothered him, it was the fact that the so-called superior individual allowed ugliness to exist in life. If the aristocracy would erase the blot of ugliness, Shaw would accept them.

In social-political matters Shaw quite obviously accepted the aristocratic principle. It has been pointed out that he accepted the idea of an elite aristocracy of leaders. Recognizing the baseness of man, he felt that the unenlightened must be led by the small minority whose position should be based on an intellectual self-consciousness and an awareness of universal principles. It is not necessary to argue whether or not this intellectual aristocrat is possible; it is only the belief and the principle we are concerned with here. It is quite obvious that in Shaw's works the Caesars, the Don Juans, the General Burgoynes, and the Undershants are the men with the largeness of spirit and view and the recognition of universal principles. Selfishness and personal concern are not in their make-up; a concern for the universal principles of life is. They recognize that they serve a greater purpose than their own and they see themselves as instruments to be used in the fulfillment of that purpose. As Shaw himself best expresses it, "this is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose
recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feeble, selfish, little child.

"Live brave and sure, without reserve experience. Care not your health.

Not devote itself to making yourself a saint.

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