George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856 into a family of Ireland’s well-established Protestant Ascendancy. His father’s alcoholism and business ineptitude caused the family’s fortunes to decline, and Shaw left school at 15 to work as a clerk in a land agent’s office. In 1876, he moved to London, where he attended public lectures, joined political and cultural organizations, and, on most days, furthered his learning in the Reading Room of the British Museum. In 1884, he became a member of the newly founded Fabian Society, which was devoted to political reform along socialist principles, and remained one of their leading pamphleteers and campaigners for much of his life. Starting in the mid-1880s, Shaw worked variously as a book, music, art, and theatre reviewer, and this cultural criticism formed the basis of his important studies The Quintessence of Ibsenism (1891) and The Perfect Wagnerite (1898). He began playwrighting in earnest in the early 1890s, with Widowers’ Houses (1892), but his early plays were largely unperformed as they did not conform with the commercial theatre’s demands for musicals, farces, and melodramas. Shaw finally found success in New York in 1898 with The Devil’s Disciple (1897). With the windfall from the production, he retired from journalism and married Irish heiress Charlotte Payne-Townshend. In the new century, Shaw embarked on forging a theatre of the future, transforming the problem and discussion play into a theatre of ideas with Man and Superman (1903), John Bull’s Other Island, and Major Barbara (1905). The popular writer of Fanny’s First Play (1911) and Pygmalion (1912) became a pariah following his condemnation of jingoistic patriotism at the outset of the First World War. His comeback was slow but he achieved worldwide acclaim as the writer of Saint Joan (1923) and was awarded the 1925 Nobel Prize for Literature. He continued to write plays, including The Apple Cart (1928) and Geneva (1936), but his output dropped off significantly in the 1940s. Shaw died at his home in Ayot St Lawrence in 1950.

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INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw was once the most widely read socialist writer in the English language, and a new collection of his major political writings presents an opportunity to reflect on the influential position he once held as a public intellectual and on the continuing legacy of his political work. The widespread popularity and high sales that some of his political writings achieved, from Fabian Essays in Socialism to The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism, remind us that he once drew a wide audience of general readers to writings that, for all their legibility, could be surprisingly technical in their economic and political grammars. How did he manage this feat? Was it his style, or the particular moment in history that he occupied, or both? The questions are worth revisiting today, as seventy years after his death we face social division and inequality that rival, in many respects, the Victorian conditions that converted Shaw to socialism in the first place. His lifelong crusade against inequality and capitalist exploitation is far from irrelevant today, and, as critic Fredric Jameson has written of Shaw, ‘in the uniquely apolitical atmosphere of Anglo-American literature . . . it is always instructive to examine the extraordinarily rich practice of one of the few great political artists of modern times’. The thorough interpenetration of Shaw’s literary and political careers is an unusual story in modern literature, and this volume offers a portrait of Shaw as a political artist in the purest possible sense: that is, as a writer of essays, articles, pamphlets, and books with explicitly and expressly political aims.

The writings featured in this collection speak to all or at least most of Shaw’s major areas of political intervention, from his consuming focus on value and rent in his early career to his emphasis on equality of income toward the end; they are also inclusive of the various venues and forms in which his political work appeared: periodical publications, pamphlets, and free-standing books. Shaw had a famously long career that was marked by relentless, non-stop labour, which, after he had

1 See Dan H. Laurence, Bernard Shaw: A Bibliography, 2 vols, for the print runs of the multiple editions of these volumes.
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achieved a certain degree of notoriety, kept him always in the public eye. Political writing was one genre that he stuck with for the whole of this career, from his earliest contributions in the socialist press to late works such as Everybody’s Political What’s What, written when he was nearing 90. Novel writing he gave up early; drama he came to after about ten years of toil as a London journalist; but political writing occupied him for the whole of his career. Even when addressing the driest of topics, Shaw’s style was never dry, and in reviewing his work as a political artist we are reminded that his political writing was deeply coloured by his experience as a public speaker and as an orator on behalf of the socialist cause. He spent decades talking to audiences about socialism, and by all accounts was quite persuasive: as literary critic Katherine E. Kelly notes, his ‘devotion to Fabian public speaking both in London and in the provinces coincided with a near tripling of London Fabian memberships’.4 He was, perhaps, accustomed to the more immediate response that a live audience was capable of offering, and one can often sense this in his prose writings, which make use of humour, self-reference, and shock effects in ways that recall his career on the stump. Shaw’s writerly persona, which was relatively consistent throughout his career, was honed in the lecture hall, and he never abandoned the particular voice of cajoling persuasion that he adopted there.

If Shaw’s persona remained relatively stable, his political beliefs did not, despite the jibes of contemporaries like Max Beerbohm who exhibited a 1913 cartoon mocking Shaw for the fixity of his opinions.5 Shaw remained a socialist for all of his days and never stopped arguing for the basic principle of equality and for nationalization as the means of achieving it; still, we can track a number of significant shifts in his positions and beliefs across his political career. His abandonment of Karl Marx’s labour theory of value was perhaps the earliest example of his capacity to change his mind, one that is evident in his earliest economic essays. Marx had been an important influence on Shaw after he read the first volume of Capital in French in 1883, and that influence remains apparent even in late work such as Everybody’s Political What’s What, yet we see throughout much of Shaw’s career an attempt to build socialism on grounds that did not require Marxism. Shaw did not like dogma, and in ‘The Jevonian Criticism of Marx’ he compared orthodox

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Marxism to Roman Catholicism: ‘A Roman Catholic impugning the infallibility of the Pope could have created no greater scandal’ (p. 5); we can only feel the full weight of this insult if we remember that Shaw was an Irish Protestant. The comment, aside from its sectarian shades, exemplifies one of Shaw’s most evident tendencies as a political thinker, a tendency that will be apparent throughout the following essays: an orientation away from theory and toward the practical, away from principle and toward the action that seems most possible. Indeed, the ‘impossibilist’ is a spectre that haunts these essays, a spectre that Shaw is always trying to ward off. As he wrote to French socialist Jules Magny in an 1890 letter, ‘the search for golden rules of conduct and fixed modes of duty is as chimerical as the search for the philosopher’s stone’. For Shaw, this included Marx as it did the Bible. This allergy to dogma did not lessen his admiration for Marx, however: as he writes in ‘Bluffing the Value Theory’, ‘I do not accuse Karl Marx of Marxism, and I think he deserved something worthier from his pupils than idolatry’ (p. 18).

Today some might argue that it was this orientation toward the practical and this suspicion of ‘golden rules of conduct and fixed modes of duty’ that led Shaw into some indefensible political positions later in life, especially in his support for imperialism, attraction to eugenics, and fascination with dictators and dictatorships during the rise of fascism and Soviet communism. Shaw’s willingness to take Oswald Mosley seriously as a ‘very interesting man’ in his 1932 essay ‘In Praise of Guy Fawkes’, for example, suggests a reckless failure of judgement that unfortunately afflicts much of his political writing after 1930. This later work often exhibits a heedless failure of forecast, too, for Shaw predicted—wrongly, fortunately—that Mosley’s fascist organization would play a far bigger role in British politics than it actually played. Shaw often speaks in the register of a prophet, but over and over again he was wrong in his prognostications, and as his career went on he was increasingly wrong in his political instincts.

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7 For a longer discussion of this topic, see Matthew Yde, Bernard Shaw and Totalitarianism: Longing for Utopia (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
8 The failure of judgement and the tolerance of violence that is displayed in some of his later works is disconcerting enough that one is tempted, in a collection like this, to ignore most of what he wrote after 1930. My rationale for not doing so is described in the Note on the Text.
In the earliest stages of Shaw’s career as a political writer, by contrast, his primary concerns were economic and his primary goal was to find an economic basis for socialism. Is socialism an economic theory or a moral position? Is it a field of political economy or a secular religion grounded in humanitarianism and universal human rights? Shaw went back and forth on these questions for the whole of his career, but certainly they fired much of his early political work, and the exciting intellectual ferment of the early socialist movement in Britain is much on display in his essays from the 1880s. Early writings such as ‘The Jevonian Criticism of Marx’ and ‘Bluffing the Value Theory’ register the on-the-ground reception of Marx among British socialists as it was happening, an encounter with ‘scientific socialism’ that presented an opportunity to reformulate the British socialist legacy of Owenism and the Chartists. Not knowing what the contents of Capital, Vol. 3 would be, Shaw exudes a sense of expectation, a hope that Marx might have anticipated some of the disputes that divided 1880s socialists: ‘without access to the unpublished volumes of that work’, he writes, it is impossible ‘to answer for the way in which so subtle a reasoner may have reconciled these contradictions’ (p. 6).

At the same time, the influence of Henry George and his widely-read book on land nationalization, Progress and Poverty (1879), is even more apparent in these early essays. George was an influence not just on Shaw himself, but on the whole Fabian organization. Fabian founders Edward R. Pease and Frank Podmore had discussed George’s book before organizing the initial October 1883 meeting of what would become the Fabian Society, and Shaw, too, had been prompted to join the Land Reform Committee after seeing George speak at the Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street on 5 September 1882. In A Manifesto, the earliest work by Shaw included in this volume, Shaw uses the phrase ‘Land and Capital’ instead of just ‘capital’—signalling his debt to George—and A Manifesto insists that ‘the Nationalization of the Land in some form is a public duty’ (p. 3).

A Manifesto also offers early evidence of Shaw’s capacity as a corporate writer, a writer capable of speaking for a large group with sometimes varied opinions that did not always exactly match his own. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing here that many of Shaw’s Fabian writings included in this volume were not published with his name on the byline; we know today that he wrote them on the evidence of letters and internal Fabian Society documents. But Shaw does not seem to be troubled by the anonymous publication. Perhaps his training in writing anonymously for the periodical press in the earliest years of his writing career had
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prepared him to write in such polyvocal tones. Perhaps anonymous publication suited, at some level, his anti-individualist politics. Or perhaps, after he had been writing for a while, he knew that he had enough of a signature style that his writerly voice would be recognized by many readers, with or without his name. A Manifesto (1884), however, was too early for that; it was just the second tract published by the Fabian Society, and Shaw’s first Fabian contribution. In it we find a distillation of Fabian socialism, one that previews the extent to which Fabian principles would shape Shaw’s thought across his whole body of work. The value of labour and the shame of idleness, for example, are an inheritance from John Ruskin and William Morris much evident in this pamphlet and across Shaw’s work for the Fabians: ‘it is the duty of each member of the State to provide for his or her wants by his or her own Labour’ (p. 3). We also find in A Manifesto, on the other hand, glints of satirical humour that reveal Shaw’s hand in the operation: ‘the established Government has no more right to call itself the State than the smoke of London has to call itself the weather’ (p. 4). The pamphlet ensured, in the words of feminist critic Sally Peters, that ‘the equal rights of women were firmly established as a Fabian principle from the outset’, but it made this point in Shaw’s characteristically Swiftian manner: ‘Men no longer need special political privileges to protect them against Women’ (p. 4). Each proposition was carefully tuned to perfect pitch, and as Michael Holroyd observes, ‘never again was Shaw so succinct’.11

If Shaw excelled as a writer speaking for a group, he could also display a tendency toward individualized ‘pugnacity and belligerence’, as J. L. Wisenthal and Daniel O’Leary have put it—socialist theory as intellectual boxing ring.12 He was willing to engage in argument, both for the sake of the point at hand and, seemingly, just for practice. Argument for Shaw was a habitus, a mental training aimed at the achievement of right thinking. ‘The Jevonian Criticism of Marx’ exhibits this tendency: it is a work of mental exercise where Shaw throws himself into an economic debate about theories of value that he

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admits he does not have the mathematical or theoretical chops to fully understand. What he proved very capable of doing was translating that debate into concrete commodities like beef and pianofortes, examples that readers could easily grasp. This was Shaw’s greatest strength as a writer about economics. He also used this debate with economist Philip Wicksteed as a starting point for an education in economics, including four years of attendance at the British Economic Association’s meetings. Nevertheless, the fact that Shaw dived into a socialist dispute over economics almost as soon as he joined the movement speaks to his overall conception of the political sphere as agonistic and combative.

The dispute about Marx’s theory of value, where value was grounded in labour, and Jevons’s theory, where value came instead from marginal utility (supply and demand), was a sticking point in British socialism, or at least in the intellectual wing of British socialism. It may not have mattered to the rank and file, but it was an early ideological division between groups like the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabians. The dispute was debated at meetings of the Hampstead Historic Club at the anarchist-Fabian Charlotte Wilson’s house, as Shaw describes in ‘Bluffing the Value Theory’, with Wilson’s vases serving as the exemplary objects of value; it was fought out, too, in the socialist press. In ‘Bluffing the Value Theory’ Shaw summarizes the dispute as it played out in the pages of To-Day: The Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism: ‘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’ (p. 11). In this essay, Shaw’s damning portrait of British Marxist Henry Mayers Hyndman is of a man lacking in intellectual capacity and curiosity, a mere paraphraser of Marx incapable of originality, ‘a baby in the value controversy, and a remarkably petulant baby too’ (p. 12–13). At times one almost feels that Shaw took a stand against Marx’s theory of value mainly out of contempt for Hyndman.

‘The Jevonian Criticism of Marx’ and ‘Bluffing the Value Theory’ both appeared in To-Day, the rather obscure socialist journal where

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13 Holroyd, Bernard Shaw, Vol. 1, p. 178. Shaw’s interest in political economy as a socialist enterprise would culminate with his involvement in the founding of the London School of Economics.
much of the early English-language reception of Marxist theory would occur. *To-Day* published the first English translation of a portion of Marx’s *Capital* in its April and June 1883 issues, and beginning in October 1885 it ran a longer translation of the first ten chapters. In terms of their place in Shaw’s oeuvre, ‘The Jevonian Criticism of Marx’ and ‘Bluffing the Value Theory’ would not be considered at all ‘major’ by virtue of readership, appearing as they did in a socialist journal with a small circulation, but they did play a major role in Shaw’s thinking and in his socialist career. They offer a picture of Shaw in the middle of what political theorist James Alexander has called ‘a conversion to economics’, one that brought Shaw to socialism as ‘the activity that sought to impose this science on society’.14

Surely the crowning achievement of this period in Shaw’s career was his work as editor of the *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, published by the Fabian Society in 1889, and especially his own chapter for the volume, titled ‘Economic’. *Fabian Essays in Socialism* was, as Alexander writes, a work that ‘attempted to make systematic sense of politics’ in a way that none of Shaw’s other political writings would do until *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928) and *Everybody’s Political What’s What* (1944).15 In the preface to *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, Shaw modestly presented the volume as primarily a record of various Fabian lectures; later he expressed surprise at how quickly the book sold out and had to be reprinted.16 Discussing the second edition, which was priced at one shilling, he marvelled: ‘20,000 of them all sold at one volley.’17 Read in the context of Shaw’s career as a political writer, ‘Economic’ marks a transition, a moment when he passes from obscurity to something like significance. The essay is pitched to a much wider audience than Shaw’s earlier work, and the success of the book, beyond Fabian expectations, was a revelation that a public existed who wanted to learn about socialism and to read serious political work. This audience would help propel Shaw, eventually, to great fame—to the extent that his Socialist writings would eventually appear in Pelican mass-market paperback form in 1937.

15 Ibid. 9.
Shaw’s peculiar political talent for translating the complex and obtuse into clear, understandable prose is much on display in ‘Economic’, which tells a parable, almost, of an Adam on a ‘vast green plain of a country virgin to the spade’ (p. 20), all in service of explaining the theory of economic rent, the historical emergence of the proletariat, the utility theory of value, and other key elements of Fabian economic thought. We see in this essay, too, a discourse of immoral luxury that Shaw had imbibed from John Ruskin and William Morris but that is not always so apparent on the surface of his work. The ‘Illth’ section of this essay, with its title taken from Ruskin’s Unto This Last, voices the pure, fiery outrage of Shaw’s friend William Morris—a departure from the more distanced, intellectual tone that Shaw was more apt to effect. Ruskin and Morris are nothing if not earnest, and earnestness is, perhaps, not Shaw’s forte, but here he proves capable of the same kind of moral denunciation of wealthy frivolity that was Ruskin’s stock-in-trade: ‘A New York lady, for instance, having a nature of exquisite sensibility, orders an elegant rosewood and silver coffin, upholstered in pink satin, for her dead dog. It is made; and meanwhile a live child is prowling barefooted and hunger-stunted in the frozen gutter outside. The exchange-value of the coffin is counted as part of the national wealth; but a nation which cannot afford food and clothing for its children cannot be allowed to pass as wealthy because it has provided a pretty coffin for a dead dog’ (p. 34–5). To many socialists in the late-Victorian movement, this encapsulated the condition of income-divided England.

Shaw’s writings for the Fabian Society were extensive and included substantial efforts such as Fabian Essays in Socialism as well as shorter pamphlets such as What Socialism Is, Fabian Tract No. 13, which was published in 1890 in a run of 30,000 copies. In this pamphlet Shaw proved capable of the most elementary instruction into the discourse of socialist politics as well as political economy: ‘Socialism means equal rights and opportunities for all. The Socialists are trying to have the land and machinery “socialized,” or made the property of the whole people, in order to do away with idle owners, and to keep the whole product for those whose labour produces it’ (p. 43). At this time Shaw still believed that electing working-class, ‘wage-earning’ men to Parliament would produce the political changes necessary for a transition to socialism: Parliament, he said, ‘will govern in the interest of the people when the members are selected from the wage-earning class’ (p. 44).

(This was a belief he would abandon in the twentieth century, after the rise of the Labour Party, and he eventually became more and more sceptical of Parliament’s ability to effect any political change at all.)

The debate over parliamentarianism and the socialist participation in electoral politics was fiercely argued in the early years of the Fabian Society, as Shaw describes in *The Fabian Society: What It Has Done; and How It Has Done It*, with Charlotte Wilson representing the anarchist, anti-parliamentary element in the early Fabian group. Midway through this pamphlet, in Shaw’s description of the founding of the Fabian Parliamentary League, we observe a crucial formative moment for the Society, one that Shaw calls ‘the first sketch of the Fabian policy of to-day’ (p. 57). Although the Parliamentary League was short-lived, its formation was a necessary growing pain for the society to become increasingly oriented toward political engagement, even while maintaining its commitment to research, theory, and intellectual debate—to being ‘the recognised bullies and swashbucklers of advanced economics’, as Shaw puts it (p. 59). *The Fabian Society: What It Has Done; and How It Has Done It* is worth revisiting today not only for its insight into the Fabians and their history, but as a highly readable narrative of the emergence of the socialist revival, that spontaneous super-bloom of socialist and anarchist groups in early-1880s Britain. It depicts Shaw, too, at the height of his career as a platform orator, lecturing every Sunday, to a variety of audiences, ‘on some subject which I wanted to teach myself’ (p. 60). Shaw read this history originally at an 1892 Fabian conference, and it was subsequently published as Fabian Tract No. 41, later to be republished in 1899 under the title *The Fabian Society: Its Early History*. While the essay includes a perhaps unnecessary degree of detail about how the Fabian Society differs from the Social Democratic Federation, one leaves it with a sense of Shaw’s hope, in 1892, for positive changes toward socialism through ‘forming a Collectivist party of those who have more to gain than to lose by Collectivism, solidly arrayed against those who have more to lose than to gain by it’ (p. 64).

*Vote! Vote!! Vote!!*, one of Shaw’s shorter Fabian writings, was published around the same time as *The Fabian Society: What It Has Done; and How It Has Done It*. It was printed in a run of 20,000 copies19 in July 1892 as Fabian Leaflet No. 43, and like *The Fabian Society* it shows Shaw in a mood of relative electoral optimism. Shaw claimed in a letter to socialist Graham Wallas that he drafted the pamphlet ‘last night in

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19 Ibid. 21.
the train’, but regardless of the minimal effort he put into it, *Vote!* *Vote!!* *Vote!!!* nicely encapsulates the Fabian policy of parliamentarian engagement and gradualism and demonstrates Shaw’s facility with attention-grabbing techniques borrowed from New Journalism, such as the use of exclamation points in the title and of bold text in the penultimate paragraph.\footnote{Letters, Vol. 1, p. 343.} *Vote! Vote!! Vote!!!* exemplifies Shaw’s explicit electioneering work during the peak years of his socialist activism. As the 1892 general election was approaching, Shaw was busy addressing audiences and meetings; when Keir Hardie and John Burns were both voted into Parliament, it was ‘a small but tangible success’.\footnote{Alexander, *Shaw’s Controversial Socialism*, 94.} Here Shaw is at his most convincingly pragmatic, offering evergreen political advice to readers: ‘There is no excuse for not voting. Even when there is no candidate worth voting for, there is always some candidate worth voting against’ (p. 75). Still, in a letter to Wallas, Shaw expressed a feeling after completing this pamphlet and *The Fabian Society* that ‘we have spent quite enough time in teaching people the A.B.C. of electioneering’. Now that ‘the fruits of our experience’ are put down ‘in black & white’, he was ready to move on.\footnote{Letters, Vol. 1, p. 109.}

But in the following year, moving on would also mean going backward: going back to the conflict between anarchism and socialism that had marked the early days of the Fabian Society, and going back to a text he had written years previously. ‘The Impossibilities of Anarchism’, first presented to the Fabian Society on 16 October 1891, was published in 1893 as Fabian Tract No. 45, and in the essay itself Shaw calls it ‘a paper which I wrote more than four years ago’ (p. 79). Here Shaw offers his definitive take-down of individualist anarchism and communist anarchism in turn, identifying himself once and for all ‘as one who regards such doctrine, however sincerely it may be put forward, as at best an encouragement to the workers to neglect doing what is possible under pretext of waiting for the impossible’ (p. 101–2). Shaw had published ‘What’s in a Name? (How an Anarchist Might Put It)’ in an anarchist journal in 1885, and though he denied even at the time that it was ‘an expression of my own convictions’, his work on ‘The Impossibilities of Anarchism’ certainly would have squashed any lingering doubts as to his feelings about anarchist doctrine.\footnote{Letters, Vol. 1, p. 343.} The pamphlet represented a retreat from the role of tactician and political strategist that Shaw had taken in the last few Fabian pamphlets, and a return to the more abstract work of socialist economics: indeed, the whole first
half of the essay is taken up with using the Fabian theory of rent to argue against anarchism.\textsuperscript{24} The essay is engaged in what we might call the big project of Shaw’s career as a political writer: the work of defining socialism and of presenting it as a necessary form of social organization in the face of ‘the eternal tyranny of Nature’ (p. 100).

As necessary as socialism was, however, Shaw also believed that certain illusions would have to attend its advance, as he argued at length in his 1896 essay ‘The Illusions of Socialism’. Originally serialized on 21 and 28 October 1896 in the New York publication \textit{The Home Journal}, a popular weekly that would be renamed \textit{Town and Country} in 1901, the essay subsequently appeared in England as part of an 1897 collection edited by Edward Carpenter titled \textit{Forecasts of the Coming Century}. The essay has been said to mark a transition in Shaw’s political career,\textsuperscript{25} one where he became less concerned with economics and with the organized socialist movement, and more interested in inhabiting a wider political arena. Certainly, the essay appeared at a moment when Shaw was withdrawing from socialism as an international movement, even as he continued to espouse socialist views: he wrote the essay after attending and reporting on the 1896 International Socialist Congress in London, but in a letter to Edward Carpenter about his promised contribution to \textit{Forecasts of the Coming Century}, Shaw complained of ‘this confounded congress’ and begged, ‘I must postpone all reflection until I get away.’\textsuperscript{26} The international socialist movement was reducing itself, in his eyes, to ‘an empty, cosmopolitan aspiration’.\textsuperscript{27} This was also the moment when Shaw was beginning to achieve wider renown as a dramatist, after the performance of \textit{Arms and the Man} and the authoring of soon-to-be-performed plays like \textit{Candida}, and it is possible to read the essay in part as a theory of political drama, an attempt to align his work as a playwright with his work as a political essayist. Socialism, Shaw writes, ‘must be popularized by being first dramatized and then theorized. It must be hidden under a veil of illusions embroidered with promises, and provided with a simple mental handle for the grasp of the common mind’ (p. 115). ‘Dramatized’ need not be literal here, but
the drama nevertheless offers one clear means of providing a ‘mental handle’ for socialist ideas.

*Fabianism and the Empire* took Shaw away from the more abstract political speculation of ‘The Illusions of Socialism’ and deep into the weeds of Fabian dispute. Influential in its day, much discussed since, and distressing for present-day readers of Shaw, *Fabianism and the Empire* was published by Grant Richards in October 1900 against the backdrop of the Boer War (1899–1902), a war that resulted from Britain’s efforts to expand into the Boer-controlled Transvaal and Orange Free State in present-day South Africa. The war was between two different white colonial regimes, but Shaw’s analysis hardly mentions the indigenous and non-white populations who were most subject to the violence of the imperial project, in South Africa and elsewhere. It is perhaps unsurprising that a man of Shaw’s era would not afford equal attention to such groups, but given Shaw’s far-reaching and anti-conventional imagination, it is disquieting nonetheless to see how little consideration they receive here. Shaw had not much tolerance for nationalism, but *Fabianism and the Empire* shows he could be surprisingly forbearing of imperialism—which is, after all, a nationalist project. This pamphlet indicates that Shaw, like most of the Fabians, was willing to go along with British imperialism if it could be brought in service of socialist reform, or even had the mere potential of rendering such service.28

Shaw’s process of composing the pamphlet has been much discussed: it emerged from a series of heated debates in the Fabian Society over whether to engage in foreign policy questions at all and whether to weigh in on the Boer situation specifically.29 Votes were held, members’ views were canvassed, and ultimately Shaw became responsible for writing a pamphlet representative of the society’s collective opinion, such as it was. Many of the Fabian members who found imperialism outright objectionable on moral grounds, including socialists Walter Crane and Henry Salt, dropped out of the society in the process, but for the most part, Shaw’s pamphlet was considered a masterpiece of consensus-making prose. He was more careful than usual in the...

28 Lauren Arrington describes Shaw’s position in the pamphlet as ‘unambiguously liberal imperialist’, which is striking given Shaw’s support for Irish Home Rule and opposition to the liberal imperialists who fought it. Arrington, ‘The Fabian Society’, *George Bernard Shaw in Context*, 17.

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pamphlet to identify himself as the ‘editor’, pointedly not the ‘author’, presenting himself as the faithful interpreter of the majority Fabian opinion; in fact he was serving as arbiter as well as editor.

Perhaps because of the rhetorical high-wire act that the task required, the original pamphlet stretched to 100 pages. In the opening paragraphs, Shaw presents ‘the partition of the greater part of the globe’ among the world’s great powers as ‘a matter of fact that must be faced, approvingly or deploringly’ and ‘now only a question of time’ (p. 132). Beginning this way allows him to bypass altogether the moral question of whether it is acceptable to annex another people’s homeland; with such considerations left to the side, Shaw focuses on how imperialism can effectively be socialized. He notes, ‘we are no longer a Commonwealth of white men and baptised Christians: the vast majority of our fellow-subjects are black, brown, or yellow’, and while he describes the need to protect vulnerable colonial populations from the most overt forms of racist abuse engaged in by ‘local white traders’—such as attempts at ‘frank black extermination’ by white Australian colonists and at the ‘slavery and extermination’ of African natives by the South African Boers—he nevertheless dismisses out of hand the idea of representative governance for native populations: ‘As for parliamentary institutions for native races, that dream has been disposed of by the American experiments after the Civil War’ (p. 134).

One of the more edifying aspects of this pamphlet today is its clear-eyed appraisal of the economic incentives for British imperial activity. There is no adventuring here, no religious mission: just resources and raw material that Britain wants to extract and that Shaw wants to socialize post-extraction. Of the South African conflict, he says, ‘what has really happened . . . is that a troublesome and poor territory, which the Empire cast off into the hands of a little community of farmer emigrants, has unexpectedly turned out to be a gold-reef; and the Empire, accordingly, takes it back again from the farmers’ (p. 136). The Boer War was a direct result of the 1867 discovery of diamonds in South Africa, followed by the 1869 discovery of gold. To the Fabians, whatever the press and the government said about the war, it was quite obviously a war about mineral resources and who would profit from them: ‘Theoretically’, Shaw admits, the wealth ‘should be internationalized, not British-Imperialized’. But lacking a viable avenue for internationalization, he finds the riches better off in British hands than in those of ‘small communities of frontiersmen’ (p. 136). From a humanitarian perspective, Shaw’s most innovative proposal in the pamphlet is that the protections for workers that exist in Britain must also exist for
workers in the colonies, and that workers in both places should be guaranteed ‘a standard of life secured by a legal minimum wage’ (p. 142). What Shaw ignores in making this proposal, however, is that labourers in South African mines received vastly different pay depending on race. In 1893, a Native Labour Department had actually been set up with the goal of ‘taking steps for the gradual reduction of native wages to reasonable level’, in part by importing more workers from other parts of Africa and by getting the mines to agree to a set, race-based pay-scale. Workers’ pay and workers’ protections in the colonies in fact varied by race in all respects, and racial capitalism was a feature of imperial capitalism that Shaw does not seem to have grasped.

Socialism for Millionaires, published as Fabian Tract No. 107 in 1901, is political writing in a much different vein: humorous and lightweight, a ‘middling specimen’ of Shaw’s talent by his own lights, the essay is a pitch-perfect example of the satirical note that touched nearly all Shaw’s political work. From its opening sentence—‘The millionaire class, a small but growing one, into which any of us may be flung to-morrow by the accidents of commerce, is perhaps the most neglected in the community’—Shaw makes hay from the conceit that the millionaire class has been neglected in political propaganda and socialist agitation. The underlying joke, of course, is that all of society is set up to cater to this class, as the pamphlet humorously reveals. Along the way, Shaw emphasizes longstanding points of socialist argument such as the inherent dignity of labour, the corrupting influence of luxury and idleness, and the superiority of publicly-funded over privately-funded welfare projects. He presents all forms of giving by the wealthy as a kind of ‘conscience money’ (p. 159), but nevertheless has suggestions, for real millionaires, as to which kinds of giving are better than others; the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, for example, counts for Shaw as an estimable destination for benevolence, as do reform societies in general, whereas organizations doing what should be the work of the state (like hospitals) must not be privately funded, in Shaw’s view.

The work of the state would become, all too soon, consumed with warfare, and Common Sense about the War, which was originally published 14 November 1914 as an 84-page supplement to the Fabian publication New Statesman, is probably Shaw’s most famous work of political writing,

and certainly his most controversial. The essay appeared about three months after Britain entered the First World War, after it had already witnessed unprecedented carnage in Europe, and publishing it was, in critic Dan H. Laurence’s view, ‘the most audacious and courageous action of [Shaw’s] life’. The response to the essay was, as critic Lagretta Tallent Lenker has recently described it, ‘swift and devastating’, and Shaw was ‘pilloried . . . as a German sympathiser’. Libraries, bookstores, theatres, and publication platforms of all sorts became closed to him for a time. Even many fellow socialists objected. But it is not as though Shaw did not realize what he was getting himself into: as he explains in the essay, ‘my inborn dramatic faculty and professional habit as a playwright prevent me from taking a one-sided view even when the most probable result of taking a many-sided one is a prompt lynching’ (p. 160).

One of Shaw’s major goals in Common Sense about the War was to advance a socialist position: to reinterpret the First World War along the axis of class rather than the axis of nation, presenting it as a conflict not so much between Germany and England, but between the wealthy landowning class of Germany (Prussian Junkers) and the wealthy landowning class of England (English Junkers). The best outcome for the war, Shaw says, would be if the soldiers on both sides shot the officers and went home to bring in the harvest; given the unlikelihood of this outcome, he looks ahead, instead, to the settlement at the end of the war and theorizes how it can be achieved on international terms. Shaw’s disdain for jingoism is at its most bracing in this essay: he rewrites the history of British nineteenth-century might not in terms of national superiority, but in terms of having the dumb luck to be sitting on a gold–mine of coal and iron during the era that saw the rise of a new phase of industrial production. The consequences of this windfall for the English character were, in Shaw’s view, adverse: ‘The general truth of the situation is, as I have spent so much of my life in trying to make the English understand, that we are cursed with a fatal intellectual laziness, an evil inheritance from the time when our monopoly of coal and iron made it possible for us to become rich and powerful without thinking or

32 For more on this pamphlet, which has been much discussed in Shaw criticism, see Nelson Ritschel, Bernard Shaw, and Stanley Weintraub, Journey to Heartbreak: The Crucible Years of Bernard Shaw, 1914–18 (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1971).
33 Letters, Vol. 3, p. 239.
knowing how: a laziness which is becoming highly dangerous to us now that our monopoly is gone or superseded by new sources of mechanical energy’ (p. 165).

Despite this masterful deflation of nationalist bluster, and his essay’s insistence that Britain is just as much to blame for the war as Germany, Shaw does not recommend withdrawing from the war. He was not a pacifist, and he thought that now that Britain was in the war, it needed to win decisively and come to fair, internationally-vetted terms afterwards. Soldiers, too, should be justly compensated, he said, ‘receiving the Trade Union rate of wages proper to a skilled worker at a dangerous trade’ (p. 168). This was a demand Shaw made to the Labour Party, for Common Sense about the War appeared after Labour’s great parliamentary success of 1906.\(^{35}\) With a critical mass of Labour representatives now in office, there was an official political body to whom to appeal. But such parliamentary success had not made Shaw any less abrasive or clamorous in his demands.

Indeed, one of Shaw’s more controversial proposals in the essay, though it is made tongue-in-cheek, seems to foreshadow some of his more outrageous, offensive writings of the 1930s. Shaw writes that if Britain really wants to prevent future German militarism, it must kill off German women, since they breed the soldiers: ‘All we have to do is to kill, say, 75 per cent of all the women in Germany under sixty. Then we may leave Germany her fleet and her money, and say “Much good may they do you!”’ (p. 173). Shaw is attempting satire here, à la Swift’s ‘A Modest Proposal’, but the absence of a coherent satiric tone reduces the effectiveness of this dissonant jibe. Instead, the passage suggests that Shaw cannot be quite serious even in the face of historically unprecedented wartime casualties. As Michael Holroyd puts it, ‘Shaw’s position in Common Sense about the War was that of the Irishman who, when asked for directions, replies that he wouldn’t start from here. It was given the Shavian dimension by the fact that England had not asked for directions.’\(^{36}\) Shaw intended in the essay, as he said, to ‘retain my Irish capacity for criticizing England with something of the detachment of a foreigner, and perhaps with a certain slightly malicious taste for taking the conceit out of her’ (p. 160), and, indeed, one way to read Common Sense about the War is in light of the rising conflict between England and Ireland over wartime conscription as well as longer-term struggles.

\(^{35}\) In the 1906 election, 29 Labour Members of Parliament would be voted in, a gain of 27 seats over what they had previously.

That Shaw identifies in Common Sense as an Irishman rather than an Englishman is significant, for he did not often make this move in his political writings, but Irish politics were heating up at the time of the First World War, and the cracks in Ireland’s union with England were spreading quickly. Shaw would take up the Irish subject directly in How to Settle the Irish Question, which originally appeared as a series of articles in London’s Daily Express in November 1916. The three-part series was syndicated so as to appear simultaneously in Dublin, Cork, and Belfast as well as London, and it was collected and printed in a single volume in 1917. Shaw intended with this essay to weigh in on the deliberations of the Irish Convention, having unsuccessfully jockeyed for an invitation to join the convention himself. Left out, he found another platform, in best Shavian fashion. The Convention in Dublin had been called to address the question of Irish self-government from the Irish point of view. But what, exactly, was the Irish point of view? In Shaw’s account, it divides into three groups: the moderate or parliamentary party who desire Home Rule in the context of a union with Britain, the Irish nationalist party (Sinn Féin) who want total separation, and the Protestant Ulster party who want complete union. Shaw’s essay presents the two nationalist groups, Sinn Féin and Ulster, as equally unreasonable and equally ridiculous, but underestimates quite spectacularly the power of Sinn Féin and the potential of the Irish nationalist movement.37 Irish nationalists would soon break from Britain and eventually establish the Republic of Ireland—though not before a painful and still-festering partition with what would become Northern Ireland.

Shaw acknowledges in the essay his own Irish Protestant roots and biases, though he also presents himself as above and outside the conflict, having left Ireland so long ago. But perhaps it was these roots and lengthy exile that prevented him from appreciating the strength of the Irish nationalist cause. What is certain is that the essay shows Shaw to have little aptitude for reading the tea leaves on questions related to Ireland. On the possibility of Irish partition, for example, he concludes, ‘Well, there is not going to be any separation. On the contrary, there is going to be much more union than ever there was before’ (p. 195). Even at this relatively late point in his career, having now passed the age of

37 As Peter Gahan says, Shaw does not seem ‘to have realized how decisive was the sudden rise in popularity of Sinn Féin, the Irish nationalist movement founded by Arthur Griffith in 1905’. Peter Gahan, ‘John Bull’s Other War: Bernard Shaw and the Anglo-Irish War, 1918–1921’, SHAW: The Annual of George Bernard Shaw Studies 28 (2008), 210.
Shaw still optimistically believed that a large public turn toward socialism would effectively override sectarian division in Ireland. Class would trump nation. At the first sign of socialism among the workers of northern Ireland, Shaw says, their Ulster employers will ‘be only too glad’ to sit in an Irish Parliament along ‘with the Catholic farmers of the south’, newly united in an effort ‘to curb the pretensions of the industrial proletariat’ (p. 193). Perhaps Shaw thought that predicting it like this would actually make it happen. But nationalism proved more deeply entrenched than Shaw realized, or perhaps capitalism did. Regardless, the answer Shaw proposed to the Irish Question was simple enough: a federalist system, in which Great Britain would have both a Federal Parliament and separate national Parliaments for England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Such a vision would never materialize, of course, and, in the view of critic Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel, the series of bad actions that Britain would take instead with respect to Ireland ‘contributed to Shaw’s growing disillusionment with the Parliamentary system’ and his sense of ‘the failure of British democracy’ in the latter years of his career.38

Shaw’s political writings from 1900 to 1920 were concerned with great issues of the day such as the Boer War, the First World War, and the Irish rebellion, but in 1924 Shaw would begin working on a book unlike any he had ever written—one that turned into a textbook of socialism in excess of 200,000 words, a 400-page monument to Shaw’s decades-long study of economic, social, and political doctrine, all poured into one big accessible text. The project is crucial to understanding Shaw’s career as an author, for during the four years that he toiled on this massive project, he did not work on a major play. It was ultimately published in 1928 as *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, a title that would be revised in a later edition to *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism*. Shaw famously wrote it in response to a query from his sister-in-law, Mary Cholmondeley, but this origin story is often treated as almost incidental except in its effect on the book’s title. I would suggest, however, that it is far more significant and is indeed responsible for one of the most important things about *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*: that it is addressed, in its origin and in its very title, to a woman. This is surprising because the book has been regularly construed by Shaw and his critics as his magnum opus, his great work that lays out his most extended political argument in

favour of socialist equality. As Shaw wrote to Graham Wallas about this project, ‘it is necessary to plank something definite down and say “Let that be Socialism,” very much as Queen Elizabeth planked down the prayer book.’ That Shaw directed such an ambitious, definitive project to women readers signals the depth of his feminism and his profound respect for women as a serious, intellectual audience.

Feminist advocacy was not new for Shaw. His short pamphlet ‘Women as Councillors’, for example, which appeared in 1900 as Fabian Tract No. 93, exemplifies Shaw’s feminist work within the socialist movement as well as his attention to matters of so-called ‘gas and water socialism’. That no public provision was below Shaw’s sphere of concern is evident from this pamphlet’s extended argument for free public lavatories for women. The point is made in service of the pamphlet’s broader argument: that women must be represented on boards of public governance, responsible for inspection and oversight in areas where it is unsuitable to have men (such as the inspectors responsible for monitoring the sanitary conditions for female employees in London workshops). Shaw does not make a radical case for women’s public roles in this pamphlet, but instead argues that women must govern where public work touched their personal concerns. The larger game, of course, was to prop open the door for women’s full political participation, including suffrage, through gradualist means such as local offices.

By the time Shaw published *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* in 1928, the conditions of women’s political participation had changed: the 1918 Representation of the People Act gave the vote to women over 30, subject to property qualifications, and the 1928 Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act enfranchised all women over 21 regardless of property. Published just in time to speak to a population of women who would benefit from a newly expanded franchise, Shaw’s book is a crowning triumph of first-wave feminism, one that welcomes women to full citizenship by taking them seriously as thinking citizens. That the book speaks almost exclusively to middle- and upper-class women suggests how far feminism—not just Shaw—had yet to go.

Shaw’s letters, in advance of the book’s publication, might lead one to view the massive volume as one of the world’s great achievements in

40 For more on Shaw and feminism, see, for example, Philip Graham, ‘Bernard Shaw’s Neglected Role in English Feminism 1880–1914’, *Journal of Gender Studies* (2013), 1–17.
mansplaining. As Shaw writes of the project in 1925, ‘Capitalism has not been explained; and I am, so far, the only person who knows what it really is.’ But despite Shaw’s arrogant tone, reading the book in this way would be a mistake. He does make appeals throughout the book to examples and topics of particular interest to women, and he attends, in chapters like ‘Socialism and Marriage’, to the particular ways that women are uniquely victimized under capitalist social and labour arrangements. But there are also revolutionary moments in the text when he presents the female position as the universal subject position in a way that is quite unusual for a writer of his day: ‘A plan which has often been proposed, and which seems very plausible to the working classes, is to let every person have that part of the wealth of the country which she has herself produced by her work (the feminine pronoun here includes the masculine)’ (p. 205). In such moments, it is not just the extensive gamut of the book’s project that surprises, but Shaw’s vision of a woman reader as the ideal reader for this extensive gamut.

If the volume was perfectly timed to speak to this emerging female electorate, in other ways it was belated, and Shaw himself felt that he should have written such a comprehensive account of socialism much earlier. But the book would have a long life, nevertheless, and appeared in two sixpenny paperbacks in Penguin’s ‘Pelican’ series in 1937. The book’s influence was wide, extending to figures as significant as Albert Einstein, who called the book ‘so excellent and so important for my political enlightenment’. In a letter written shortly before the book appeared, Shaw noted that 50,000 copies were already sold in the United States in advance of its publication, and that the first British printing had sold out.

The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism resembles, in some respects, an encyclopedia of socialism, with much of the volume repeating ideas about socialism that Shaw had expanded on at length elsewhere, but in ‘Socialism: Principles and Outlook’ Shaw tried his hand at writing for an actual encyclopedia: the thirteenth edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, published in 1926. The essay, which was later reprinted as Fabian Tract No. 233, represents Shaw at his most lucid and most legible, explaining socialism to a wide audience who may never have considered the subject. If one might expect Shaw to soft-pedal socialism under these discursive circumstances, one would be wrong. In fact, the first sentence of this essay presents a far more

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43 Letters, Vol. 4, p. 98.
uncompromising statement of the division between public and private property than one finds in most of Shaw’s other political writings: ‘Socialism, reduced to its simplest legal and practical expression, means the complete discarding of the institution of private property by transforming it into public property and the division of the resultant public income equally and indiscriminately among the entire population’ (p. 212). Elsewhere he describes a gradual transition to socialism, and lays emphasis on the persistence of personal property under the new system, but here he presents the change in starker terms: ‘a complete moral volte-face’ (p. 212).

Viewed in the context of Shaw’s career as a political writer, ‘Socialism: Principles and Outlook’ demonstrates the consistency of his socialist beliefs over the years, but also how much the ground around Shaw had shifted. We see in this essay, on the one hand, the successes of British socialism in the forty years since Shaw began his work as a political writer and agitator. Remarking on the advances made in taxation, such as income tax and estate duties; in state provision of the general welfare, through programmes like unemployment insurance; and in worker protection, through the expansion of the factory code, Shaw finds evidence that Britain is already on its way to socialist arrangements: the ‘confiscation of private property incomes for public purposes’, he says, ‘is now proceeding on a scale inconceivable by Victorian ministers’ (p. 213–14). We also see, on the other hand, how elsewhere in public life the picture is less rosy. In part, this is the apparent result of the First World War, as in Shaw’s reflections on a changed psychic state among the working classes. Speaking in general terms about wars over ‘exploitable foreign territories’, Shaw says, ‘the emotional reaction after such wars takes the form of acute disillusion, which further accelerates the moral revolt against Capitalism without, unfortunately, producing any workable conception of an alternative’ (p. 216). In other words, the existing system has lost its moral authority in the modern era, but socialism is not yet understood as its clear alternative. We also see in this essay Shaw’s growing sense of the failed project of democracy, of compulsory education, and of the extension of the franchise to effect positive social change. In his earlier political writings Shaw had expressed hope from such developments, but he now registers a ‘despair of parliamentary institutions’ which is ‘a striking novelty in the present century’ (p. 217) and is related to the rise of dictatorship. Shaw’s increased pessimism is evident in this essay, as are his growing fears of civilization’s unwinding: ‘It is a historic fact, recurrent enough to be called an economic law, that Capitalism, which builds up great civilisations, also wrecks them if
persisted in beyond a certain point’ (p. 218). Changing the system of political representation, which Shaw and the Fabians had helped achieve with the rise of the Labour Party, means nothing, he suggests, in the face of an intractable and unimaginative electorate: in fact, ‘democracy becomes a more effective bar to Socialism than the pliant and bewildered conservatism of the plutocracy’ (p. 219). While absent of some of the more appalling sentiments that would be voiced in his later writings, the essay nonetheless gives a sense of a more hopeless Shaw, his optimism wrecked on the rocks of the twentieth century.

The consequences of this wreckage are evident in some of Shaw’s later writings, which display a noxious tolerance for fascist dictators—or at least a willingness to suspend judgement on them. ‘In Praise of Guy Fawkes’, which was originally presented as a 1932 lecture to the Fabian Society and was subsequently published in the socialist paper *New Clarion* in 1932, is one such work that represents a change in Shaw’s perspective as a political thinker. The essay begins with the reflection that while he has spent forty-eight years lecturing to the Fabian Society and other venues about socialism, ‘So far as I can make out those speeches have not produced any effect whatever’ (p. 220). One might conclude from this opening and from the essay as a whole that Shaw has lost faith in what Jürgen Habermas calls communicative rationality, the potential to achieve rational consensus through speech and debate—a particularly jarring transformation for a man who argued so vociferously for free speech and right of assembly in the early days of the Fabian movement.44 In this essay, though speaking in a flippant tone, Shaw presents speech as a delay to action, a safety-valve against real change. Guy Fawkes serves as the figure for action as opposed to talk: ‘Guy Fawkes wanted the Government to do something, and saw that the first thing to enable the Government to do anything was to blow up Parliament’ (p. 222).

Who is the Guy Fawkes of the early twentieth century? Disturbingly, at one point in the article, Shaw seems to find his latter-day echo in Britain’s fascist leader, Oswald Mosley, whose wedding had been attended by Adolf Hitler as guest of honour.45 Shaw writes of Mosley, ‘I know you dislike him, because he looks like a man who has some physical courage and is going to do something’ (p. 223). Shaw’s displaced

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admiration for the ‘messianic man of action’, as Dan H. Laurence phrases it, conveys the breakdown of the principles of rational persuasion on which his career, as dramatist and as political writer, had long been based.46 His claim in the conclusion of the essay that ‘a genuine transfer of political power in this country’ (p. 229) will likely only come through violent means is clearly a break from the theories of permeation and gradualism that had heretofore been his mainstay. With the new sense of his political irrelevance that he professed in the opening lines of the essay—which ironically corresponded with the years of his greatest fame—Shaw became more irresponsible in his wielding of ideas.

The final essay in this volume is ‘The Unavoidable Subject’, which was written originally for a 1940 BBC broadcast, but which the Minister of Information rejected, coolly saying of Shaw, ‘I won’t have that man on the air.’47 As writer Anthony Weymouth (pseudonym for Ivo Geikie-Cobb) recounted, after the broadcast was cancelled for inflammatory content, Weymouth would finally publish the essay for the first time in 1948.48 As with ‘In Praise of Guy Fawkes’, here Shaw again shows his ill-judged propensity for praising fascists, though in this essay he at least makes a point of acknowledging and decrying the genocidal regime of ethnic cleansing on which Hitler rose to power and to admit it as the moral centre of the wartime conflict: ‘We ought to have declared war on Germany the moment his police stole Einstein’s violin’ (p. 239). Still, the compliments Shaw offers before coming round to the denunciation, while clearly intended to be provocative, reveal the lingering strains of what John R. Pfeiffer calls Shaw’s ‘bizarre salute, eventually withdrawn, of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini’.49

As this chronologically-arranged collection of writings suggests, Shaw’s political thought was by no means one-dimensional, fixed, or even fully consistent across the sixty-four years of published work that this volume documents. His commitment to socialism and to social equality was the starting point for all of his political engagements, but his beliefs about how to achieve such ends, and about the human capacity for

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47 On this essay within the context of Shaw’s views of the Second World War, see A. M. Gibbs, *Shaw: Interviews and Recollections* (Macmillan, 1990), 455–6.
democratic socialist governance, changed dramatically over the course of his career. So did his political mood. In the early twentieth century, Shaw’s psychic needle moved from optimistic to pessimistic against the backdrop of two horrific world wars, despite the gains of the Labour Party who built the social welfare safety net for which the Fabians had long campaigned.

Much of what Shaw wrote was far-seeing in its social vision. Much of it was prophetic. Much of it was clever and admirable. And much of it was wrong. Considering his political writings together as one body of work makes it easier to see the unevenness and the inconsistencies of his oeuvre. What can we learn from this body of work today? On the one hand, I would suggest, Shaw’s political writing now has the capacity to reframe income inequality and the distribution of wealth in a salutary way, allowing us to see that one hundred years ago these did not seem like intractable or inevitable problems. They seemed fixable. Shaw’s wonky optimism for engineering equality of income is a reminder of how constrained our political and economic imaginations have become in the neoliberal era. At the same time, Shaw’s work is also instructive for what he leaves out: two of the major political fault-lines of today, race and the environment, are virtually ignored across Shaw’s work. He advanced no critique of global capitalism that acknowledged its fundamental reliance on racial exploitation, and he tended, like many socialists of his era, to underestimate the limits of the natural world and what it could bear in the way of growth and development. Shaw was a man of his time in these respects, though it is also the case that he had plenty of interlocutors whose example he could have followed on these issues: Henry Salt on imperialism, for example, and William Morris on the environment. Race and environment are not the only two areas of political thought that Shaw overlooked, but today they are particularly striking for their absence.

Understanding Shaw’s political legacy is essential for anyone who wants to understand the progress of socialist thought in the Anglo-American sphere from the 1880s to the 1950s. Widely read in mass-market editions and built to permeate discourse at many registers, Shaw’s political writings reached an audience of enviable breadth and proportions. Not everyone agreed with him, and even within British socialism he could be a controversial figure. His propensity for irony was a perpetual hamper in his relations with the editors of the Clarion, for example, Britain’s most popular and widely-circulated socialist newspaper; in one 1897 issue, Clarion’s editor reflects, ‘There seems to be two theories about Bernard Shaw; one that he never means what he says, and the
other that under cover of the general belief that he never means what he says he sometimes says what he means.\textsuperscript{50} Certainly Shaw at times wanted to have it both ways, both to mean something and not to mean something at once.\textsuperscript{51} Zeroing in on these issues of irony and performa-
tivity, we might say that Shaw’s rise tracks with something like the rise of a distinctively modern approach to politics. Like many political writers of the early twentieth century, Shaw’s irony, semi-seriousness, and semi-earnestness did not signal a ‘withdrawal from praxis’—far from it—but rather an attempt to inculcate a democratic form of reasoning capable of accounting for multiple points of view.\textsuperscript{52} In this sense, Shaw’s deepest political legacy might have less to do with what he said than with how he said it.


\textsuperscript{51} L. W. Conolly argues that we should think of Shaw’s political contributions as the work of a great public intellectual, notable less for the originality of their ideas than for their capacity of engaging an audience in political debate. L. W. Conolly, ‘Introduction’, \textit{The Critical Shaw: Bernard Shaw on Politics} (New York: Rosetta Books, 2016).

NOTE ON THE TEXT

This volume’s title, *Major Political Writings*, raises two questions: which of Shaw’s many writings can be classified as ‘political’, and which of his political writings can be classified as ‘major’? The first question is somewhat simpler to answer: of course everything Shaw wrote in the whole of his long career was political writing, often quite overtly so—but this volume includes those writings whose stated purpose was to pursue a political question or make a political argument, one that was not routed through artistic or literary means. There is no easy answer to the second question, however, as to which political writings are ‘major’, especially since popularity and staying power were not the only categories for inclusion considered in the selection of these essays. I intend the volume to showcase Shaw’s most influential and most accomplished political writings, but also to provide a cross-section representative of the whole of his career, which necessitates the inclusion of some works that did not circulate particularly widely and several that have never been reprinted. I have taken the designator ‘major’ as an opportunity to assemble a broad and comprehensive canon of Shaw’s political prose, not merely a catalogue of his most popular and widely circulated writings.

The nineteen writings included in this volume were published across a span of sixty-four years in a wide range of outlets, from obscure socialist journals to top-shelf presses, and those from Shaw’s early career were produced under very different circumstances than those produced later on. As discussed in the Introduction, Shaw’s writings after 1930 exhibit some revolting political turns, which might lead one, in a collection like this, to ignore them altogether, especially given their minor influence in comparison to his other work. Charles A. Carpenter, in a discussion of Shaw’s political work, argues that ‘Shaw’s early contributions are those that deserve the final word’.¹ In his collection of Shaw’s selected non-dramatic writings, Dan H. Laurence likewise opts to create a Shaw volume ‘free from the grandiose delusions of his later years’.² This is a reasonable strategy, but I have instead made a point to

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