Toward a Provident Working Class: French and English Social Reform Rhetoric, 1880-1914

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TOWARD A PROVIDENT WORKING CLASS: FRENCH AND ENGLISH SOCIAL REFORM RHETORIC, 1880-1914

By

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James R. Gavan
This research examines the rhetoric of *belle époque* English and French middle class social observers. Addressing the "social question," they engaged in a debate on how best to appease an impoverished, alienated, and increasingly militant working class. Historians cite this discourse, and the meager legislation it fostered, as a transition from the unbridled nineteenth century *laissez-faire* to the welfare democracy characteristic of the twentieth century.

Central to the "social question" was the issue of improving social relations without altering existing class hierarchies (which favored the middle classes). Many social commentators shunned the passage of legislative safety nets in favor of private philanthropy and education. The working class, they assumed, simply needed to behave more "providently"—in other words, more like the respectable middle class.

In short, perusal of the sources on the "social question" highlights pervasive attitudes toward poverty and toward the poor, such as the notion that poor workers were at fault for their poverty because they lacked economic foresight. Though addressing rhetoric rather than politics, this conclusion clarifies that the "transition" to post-war welfare democracy was not as smooth as historians have assumed.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the discourse surrounding the "social question" in England and France during the period 1880-1914, exploring how the European middle class weathered the transition from the liberal mid-nineteenth century to the early-twentieth century welfare state. In particular, this study examines a portion of the rhetoric with which reformers and social commentators of that age articulated their attitudes toward poverty and the working poor.\(^1\) After initially investigating the "social question" in France and England in separate chapters, it then returns to a comparative analysis of reform rhetoric and offers a number of conclusions. The primary aim of this thesis is to determine how and why middle class social reformers attempted to define for the lower class an ideal of respectability, often articulated as "providence," that could exist within the hierarchical social organization of nineteenth century Europe.\(^2\) In other

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\(^1\) A number of social historians have addressed and described the "working class," distinguishing between a labor aristocracy and a larger, poorer unskilled workforce. Generally I use the terms "working poor" and "poor" broadly to describe the latter group of working class men and women, those for whom work was ill-paid and irregular and for whom insecurity and poverty were endemic prior to the introduction of broad welfare measures after World War I. See Ira Katznelson and Astiride Zolberg, eds. *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

\(^2\) "Providence" is here used broadly to signify the effective use of available resources by the poor, economic "foresight" in terms of planning for the future through saving, thrift, and household management, and a host of moral and religious connotations.
words, how did those who joined the debate on the “social question” attempt to convince poor workers to adopt a creed of improvement and to strive to lead more productive lives—without necessarily acquiring social equality? More importantly, how did the middle class hope to convince poor workers to abandon their agitation and unionization in exchange for piecemeal gradualism?

Myriad rhetorical themes existed within the social reform discourse, several of which are explored in Chapter Four. First, participants in the social reform discourse generally came from a paternalistic middle class that outlined its stereotype of the working poor as an improvident “other.” Social reformers and social commentators in both England and France often shared educational backgrounds, economic means, and what historian John Merriman has called the “psychological attitudes” of the bourgeoisie. From politicians to professionals and from intellectuals to patricians, members of the bourgeoisie enjoyed class advantages that allowed them to adjust to certain standards of respectability, particularly economic ones. These were often beyond the grasp of the working poor. Moreover, in their rhetoric, the middle class often characterized the poor as comparatively less civilized and less able to contribute to society in a positive manner aside from their labor. Many reformers accepted the associated with “respectability.” The best discussion of the term in its English historical context appears in George Finlayson’s *Citizen, State, and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 19-45. See Jacques Derrida’s concept of difference and the “other” discussed in Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 336-7. John M. Merrimen, ed., *Consciousness and Class Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishing, 1979), 2.
assumption that in order to gain social and economic respectability, the working poor needed to first put on the trappings of and learn the values of the middle class. Middle class social reformers came to define workers as respectable or improvident based on their degree of acculturation, their adaptation or resistance to reformers’ prescriptions. Simultaneously, the middle class defined itself as an antithesis of that working class “other.” The success of social reform posed a threat to the elite status of the bourgeoisie, a paradox that may account for the complacency with which the middle class approached social democratization.

This thesis also addresses by extension the notion of superiority that led middle class reformers to attempt to alter the working class cultural landscape (literally, in the case of the garden city movement). This can be traced to the core beliefs of traditional nineteenth century liberals, beliefs succinctly outlined by Samuel Smiles in the mid-nineteenth century in his highly successful *Self Help* (1859). Smiles understood levels of thrift, morality, and sobriety to be the primary causes of economic and social success or failure. Reformers concerned themselves with solving the conundrum of how best to create a respectable working class that would reflect Smiles’ middle class values; at the same time, they set out to construct a docile work force that would remain content with its inferiority within the laissez-faire economy.

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6 The “hostile reaction of certain voluntarists to the ‘Social Service State’” is described in Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State, and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 199; A similar conclusion drawn for pre-war
Reform rhetoric from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century also suggests that nervousness about the unpredictability of organized workers was a primary motivation for the middle class to take the “social question” seriously. Concern for the living and working conditions of the poor may have stemmed more from the desire on the part of the wealthy and politically powerful to retain privileges and prevent social violence than from philanthropic zeal. Another factor that clarifies the growing importance of the “social question” to the middle class is that by the end of the nineteenth century high levels of poverty were threatening to undermine the established social, economic, and political canon of Liberalism. Increasingly, middle class politicians sensed that they would lose the support of workers if they continued to allow individualism and unbridled capitalism to perpetuate sharp class divides and discouraging poverty. J. T. Hobhouse in 1911 claimed that late-nineteenth century Liberalism had failed “to acknowledge the fact that it [had] not solved the problems of unemployment, underpayment, and overcrowding.”7 Poverty posed an immediate danger to the middle classes vis-à-vis class antagonism, revolution, and social biology. Fearing the potential political—as well as physical—repercussions of complacency, reformers brought the “social question” to prominence in the political debates of the age. As they did so, their prescriptions for social reform began to exceed traditional notions of social assistance, such as philanthropy, clerical charity, and Poor Laws.

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A comparison of this nature is useful on several levels. First, it highlights the similar intellectual and cultural assumptions held by the burgeoning middle classes in England and France, a segment of society that included civil servants, academics, politicians, professionals, and businessmen. Such similarities are demonstrated by reformers' understanding of the improvident poor and the language with which they discussed the "social question." Simultaneously, by embracing a variety of social commentators, the study introduces more general differences in the French and English middle class mentalité, in terms of the motivations that propelled reformers to action, historical differences underlying those actions, and the contexts in which such rhetoric was presented. If the problems and solutions for poverty were similar in both countries, the manner in which they came to dominate domestic political concerns in each was unique.

The sources bearing on the social question are numerous. During the period 1880-1914 reformers and observers of social conditions published their findings and philosophies in tracts and letters that made up a major component of what can be termed the social reform "discourse." These form the core of this study. In England, Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, George Sims, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and Maud Pember Reeves among others presented lengthy observations of conditions, proposing legislative as well as non-interventionist strategies for the alleviation of poverty. French observers like journalist Henry Leyret, hygienist Octave Du Mesnil, and politician Léon Bourgeois presented similar studies. The "social question" was also debated in contemporary scientific, sociological, and statistical journals.
newspapers, parliamentary papers and débats. These sources have been supplemented by examples of contemporary fiction, an important medium within which popular representations of and criticisms of social conditions were voiced.

In addition to the writings and language that characterized the social reform discourse, a mountain of secondary research supplies the framework for this thesis. Many historians studied pre-war social conditions over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly as social history became the disciplinary paradigm. If E. P. Thompson is the historian for the emergence of the English working class in the early part of the nineteenth century, Standish Meacham is their historian for the latter part. In *A Life Apart* Meacham identifies the existence of a culture of poverty, a continuing working class traditionalism that defied middle class prescriptions, and a mass of poor English men and women for whom "pursuit of respectability was not pursuit of the middle class."⁸ Lenard Berlanstein, historian of industrialization and author of *The Working People of Paris*, shares Meacham’s breadth, though his work focuses only on the urban surroundings of the French capital. Like Meacham, Berlanstein remains consistent in presenting the poor in terms of their own cultural values and traits rather than from the point of view of middle class social commentators. Berlanstein takes as a major thesis the notion that, rather than blindly following without agency the path prescribed by middle class reformers, poor workers "seemed to build on traditional solidarities" and continued to "resist transformations

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until levels of security were a good deal higher." Berlanstein and Meacham identify “security” as fundamental to stability in poor households; its elusive nature was vital to the perpetuation of class differences, and understanding what it meant to a poor family is a significant component in the historical understanding of the “social question.”

That the lower classes were not wholly appreciative of the efforts of their middle class benefactors is an important theme explored in the secondary literature. A number of historians have expanded Meacham’s commentary in this area. Gareth Stedman Jones has done so in his research on English working class culture, as have Marilyn Boxer in her essay on home industry, Donald Reid in his survey of industrial paternalism, and Alain Cottereau in a discussion on the distinctiveness of French working class culture. Several works address more minute aspects of poverty and the interplay between poverty and social reformers. These include Anna Davin’s study of childhood poverty in Britain, Meacham’s work on Toynbee Hall and garden cities, Rachel Fuch’s survey on pregnancy in Paris, and Andrew Aisenberg’s recent perusal of the nineteenth century fear of contagion in France.

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Peter Stearns, in a 1980 essay on working class traditionalism, reminded his readers that workers were "to an important extent inarticulate" and "left a host of basic views unspoken."\(^{12}\) The trend among historians of the subsequent two decades has largely been to re-examine earlier conclusions regarding class formation and class consciousness with closer attention to the voice of workers. Alain Cottereau criticized those social scientists—Foucault in particular—who were plagued by a wont to "uncritically adopt the perspectives of industrialists, philanthropists, and government officials without taking into consideration those of the workers."\(^{13}\) Meacham and Berlanstein, as well as a number of historians who have examined working class literature and autobiographies—most notably Mary Jo Maynes, Mark Traugott, and John Burnett—have attempted to supply poor workers, the subjects of the reform discourse, with a voice regarding their own poverty.\(^{14}\) Jacques Rancière has examined working class literature from earlier in the nineteenth century and discovered that

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\(^{13}\) Cottereau, 112.

literature and literary societies were indeed places where poor workers could escape the prescriptions of the middle class paternalism.¹⁵

Historians have also addressed social reform politics by illuminating the gradual transition from political rhetoric to legislation. Ann-Louise Shapiro's examination of housing reform in Paris joins Roger McGraw's massive survey of French workers in illustrating how the "social question" came to rival anticlericalism as the predominant domestic political issue for the French bourgeoisie.¹⁶ France in particular has been the focus of historians' attention owing to the existence of a paradigm that places it socially and economically backward in relation to other industrialized nations.¹⁷ Phil Nord criticized this paradigm in a 1994 review essay, where he cited new literature supporting the growth of a republican and familist welfare state in the years before 1914.¹⁸ This argument counters Sanford Elwitt's defense of the Third Republic. Whereas political ideology was vital to ministerial elections and the Dreyfus Affair, Elwitt argued, on the issue of social politics traditional labels like "Opportunist" and "Radical" were rendered meaningless by the

desire of the middle class to thwart effective social legislation. Judith Stone’s survey of French reform legislation, like Nord, demonstrates that political debates among the French bourgeoisie occurred between supporters of state intervention and those who supported non-interventionist and private measures like mutual aid and Friendly Societies. She argues that members of the bourgeoisie, while sharing many republican values, were hampered by differing economic and political goals. In that sense, they did not unite to thwart effective legislation as Elwitt suggested.

In her 1989 study of the history of women and work in the Third Republic, Mary Lynn Stewart demonstrated that social reform and power politics in France were profoundly influenced by gender, which echoed the dominant theme of republicanism within the French discourse. “Republican motherhood” fueled paternalistic legislative action aimed at returning women and children to the home, where they could tend to the more serious tasks of re-population and republican education. Gender and social reform politics in France were further analyzed in a 1995 collection of essays in which the authors determined that, at least in France, an early welfare state did exist for women, children, and the aged long before it did for men.

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Geoffrey Finlayson, Brian Rodgers, and James H. Treble among others have presented the politics of social reform in England in broad, informative works. While assuring his audience that social welfare was in fact an important political issue, Finlayson rejects the overemphasizing of the decades from 1880-1914 and denies that this period signified the birth of the British Welfare State.\(^{23}\) Rodgers’ brief 1968 sociological survey of the shift from the notion of “pauperism” to that of “human rights” compliments Treble’s massive 1979 monograph on the elements of urban poverty and the British government’s attempts to deal with such a complex issue.\(^ {24}\) A more recent study and a good discussion of social reform at the municipal level is Susan Pennybacker’s documentation of the work of the London County Council.\(^ {25}\)

By necessity, some elements of the social reform discourse have been excluded from this brief study. Particularly in France, primary sources from politicians, as well as debates surrounding the passage of legislation, contain discursive riches. The more sparse writings, speeches, and autobiographies of poor, yet educated, laborers are also rich sources for study of the “social question.” Future perusal of these sources will supplement the present thesis and provide a more nuanced understanding of social reform discourse. Other elements in the general social reform discourse—such as popular culture, labor wars, and mass media—are conspicuous in their relative absence

\(^{23}\) Finlayson, 125.
from the following discussion. Yet the wide array of relevant reform rhetoric here
examined paints an intellectual portrait of how educated, middle class social reformers
and social commentators understood poverty and the culture of the working poor.

Finally, this comparison attempts to illuminate how a close analysis of reform
language in a broad historical context exposes a problematic historical generalization
about the nature of the development of the welfare state in England and France. In
particular, it re-examines the equation of increased social reform discourse and
legislation in the years before World War I with a perceived decline in traditional mid-
nineteenth century liberal philosophy. The years from 1880-1914 were a transitional
period from liberalism to welfare democracy. However, the rhetoric of the reformers
who apparently propelled this transition does not readily conform to the conclusion
that the middle class was loosening its economic stranglehold on the working class or
altering its basic assumptions about the cultural value of the poor. Middle class social
commentators in England and France, though they perhaps recognized the limitations
and injustices of laissez-faire capitalism, more often demonstrated in their rhetoric a
reluctance to take the lead in reform, particularly if it involved ceding political power
to a working class whom they continued to classify as “improvident.”

26 The general “decline of liberalism” theory is discussed in Keith Robbins, Great
Britain: Identities, Institutions, and the Idea of Britishness (New York: Longman,
1998), 197-199; Also see Hobhouse, Liberalism (1911). Elsewhere William Logue
has argued that late-nineteenth century French Liberalism merely evolved into a New
Liberalism characterized less by individualism and more by a harmony between
concern for the individual and concern for the community good; see William Logue,
From Philosophy to Sociology: The Evolution of French Liberalism, 1870-1914
(Dekalb, Ill: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983), 1-16.
CHAPTER II

THE “SOCIAL QUESTION” IN THE FRENCH THIRD REPUBLIC

In the early stages of the Third Republic intellectuals, scientists, and politicians engaged in a debate that highlighted the extent of poverty and the magnitude of class conflict in France. By the start of World War I, a program of social reforms—from accident insurance to old age pensions—had been introduced and implemented by the Republican majority. While the basic intent of these laws was to provide workers with greater economic security, there were significant challenges to social reform that in the end disrupted the legislation’s effectiveness. Most reformers who advocated measures to alleviate economic insecurity were educated middle class men, and the young Republic was the source of their political influence and social mobility.\(^\text{27}\) Fearful that sweeping changes in the social realm would entail the sacrifice of such class privileges to the rising demands of Socialists and organized labor leaders, interventionist reformers and opponents of legislation debated how to best solve the “social question” without bringing harm to themselves or sacrificing those class privileges.\(^\text{28}\)

Moreover, the notion that the beneficiaries of those sacrifices would be French workers, whom the bourgeoisie ranked low on its scale of social respectability,


motivated social philosophers to search for alternative formulas for reform that would reconcile the needs of desperate workers with those of the bourgeoisie. That politicians, employers, and workers alike vehemently defended—at least rhetorically—the republican virtues of liberty, equality, and fraternity is an indication of the difficulty facing French social reformers. As they responded in various ways to the increased sense of social disharmony among these groups, the goal became the achievement not of social and economic equality, but rather of a truce between capital and labor, an idea articulated as “social peace.”

Introducing measures designed to reduce insecurity, reformers attempted to quell the tide of lower class discontent and thereby avoid popular revolt. However, those very measures at the same time had to protect the social foundation on which the fledgling Republic rested.

This chapter broadly outlines the public debate on the “social question” in France. For some advocates of reform, concern for the poverty and living conditions of poor workers was demonstrated with vivid descriptions of squalid conditions and passionate pleas for legislation. How better to move people to action than by raising their guilt through journalistic sensationalism? Many French reformers followed the late-nineteenth century trend of extolling the virtues of scientific empiricism and Comtean positivism. Social scientists undertook the task of documenting the actual conditions of poverty (though they did so with an awareness of the power their studies could wield among a literate and politicized population).

29 Stone, xvi.
30 Aisenberg, 10-11.
poverty as resulting from poor health and housing standards and demanded legislation to eradicate contagion. Reduced to a discussion of the social implications of Louis Pasteur's germ theory, poverty became analogous to an "epidemic."31

Social reform rivaled the Boulangerism, the Dreyfus Affair, and the debate over church and state as central issues for Third Republican politicians in belle époque France. On the political left, growing numbers of Socialists maintained that poverty was the result of an inadequate and corrupt capitalist system that would eventually be done away with via worker organizations, strikes, and even revolution.32 Meanwhile, moderate republicans, Opportunists, and Orléanists argued that state-sponsored reforms went against the grain of laissez-faire capitalism and traditional elements of liberal philosophy, such as private property and the rights of individuals. Closer to the center (or center-left), Radicals attempted to bridge the gap with interventionist legislation that would maintain solidarité between employers and their workers without infringing on republican freedoms, particularly liberté de travail—the employers' right to run their business without state interference.33 As Radicals juxtaposed workers' demands with those of big capital, their political philosophy by the early 1900s resembled what William Logue has identified as "New Liberalism."34

31 Ibid., 3; Stone, 32-33.
34 Logue, x.
Society's ills, the influential Catholic sociologist Frédéric Le Play had argued in the mid-nineteenth century, could be cured only by a return to rural, aristocratic culture and values that placed religion, family, and property at the heart of social organization. By the late-1870s, however, sociology and social economy gradually began to replace Catholicism, paternalism, and birthright as primary sources of political authority. French historian Maurice Agulhon has argued that Republican successes came in part because of this conquest of the secular over the clerical, that "the Republic became the only possible banner for the partisans of liberty and secularism." From the passage of the Ferry laws in the 1880s, which extended state-funded secular primary education, through the religiously charged Dreyfus Affair in the late 1890s and the Separation of Church and State in 1905, Republicans challenged clericalism and other traditional sources of power. In the realm of social reform, this conversion meant that science offered an alternative to the traditional understanding of poverty, working conditions, and public hygiene.

Henceforward, academics and politicians were increasingly wont to discuss social issues informed by statistics rather than by tradition. By the 1890s, Léon Bourgeois, the Radical politician and philosopher of solidarité, could argue with impunity that "truth, in the domain of sociology, seems obtainable only by the impartial

35 Shapiro, 89.
36 Logue, 216-17.
Numerous scientific studies of poverty were published during the Third Republic, and many of the authors followed Bourgeois’ dictum in their exclusive devotion to the accumulation of relevant information through empirical and statistical description and investigation. Only “facts” would identify the true nature of the relationship between workers, employers, and the state.

When collected and objectively analyzed, those “facts” disclosed the existence of alarmingly high levels of poverty. While some observers concluded that these statistics of poverty demonstrated the improvidence of the working class, others began to acknowledge that accidents, unemployment, irregularity of income, old age, and poor housing were endemic insecurities for which there were no adequate remedies or safeguards. Whereas before 1900 only industrial accidents and working conditions for women and children had been addressed in earnest by the state, by 1914 many aspects of the “social question” had received objective consideration and legislative attention.

Public hygiene was one issue in particular that highlighted the transition toward greater state intervention. Historians of social reform have isolated Louis Pasteur’s germ theory as the impetus for concern over public hygiene in France. As the understanding of the spread of contagious diseases entered the public consciousness, hygienists demanded greater regulation of public health, even “at the expense of traditional rights of privacy.” Beginning in the early 1880s, hygienist Octave Du Mesnil presented “a sordid tableau of misery, congestion, and disease” in his exposés

39 Aisenberg, 3-4; Stone, 32; Shapiro, 134-5.
of working class housing conditions in Paris. His inquiries and association with the Prefecture of the Seine and the Commission des logements insalubres eventually led to a 1902 public health law mandating housing inspections. Du Mesnil and other hygienists claimed that their studies were examples of strict, rigorous scientific method. In an 1899 study of Paris’ 13th Arrondissement, Du Mesnil and fellow hygienist Charles Mangenot professed to have “no other ambition” than to describe living conditions for Parisian workers with “the most scrupulous exactitude”.

We climbed the floors, visited, and measured the lodgings—however disgusting. We chatted with the occupants, who informed us about the nature of the work to which the members of the family had submitted, about the income they pulled in, and about unemployment in their industries; in a word, we engaged in a complete social hygiene study of the lodgings and tenants in the Pointe d’Ivry.

In their subsequent study Du Mesnil and Mangenot demonstrated that lack of security against ever-present unemployment and low wages required the attention of health experts, sociologists, and politicians. Simply blaming unemployed workers for falling into poverty was clearly illogical in the new scientific age. However, their Enquête also conformed to the spirit of positivist, scientific rationalism. Therefore, it was only of secondary importance that the statistics they presented—such as evidence that fully 41 percent of Parisians in the 13th Arrondissement subsisted below the official poverty

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40 Shapiro, 134.
41 Ibid., 137.
42 Ibid., 136.
44 Ibid., 1.
line—unmistakably proved the need for actions to ease the burden of want on impoverished Parisians. Accuracy, not action, was their primary goal.

Positivist social science converged with the preconceptions of liberal ideology on the issue of housing reform. Studies conducted by Henri Monod, director of public hygiene and assistance, and Jules Siegfried, a Protestant industrialist and Opportunist deputy from Le Havre who later became President of the Musée Social, joined Du Mesnil’s work in firmly establishing a link between demography and the propagation of disease. They discovered that the problem of housing congestion was more than a threat to the health and morality of slum dwellers; it also threatened the vibrancy of the French population as a whole, a population that stubbornly refused to multiply at a rate comparable with other industrialized nations.

Scientists also increasingly supported the equation of housing conditions, poor public health, and stagnant population growth, and provided the conclusion that poverty was the cause—not the result—of overcrowding and inadequate housing. Poverty propagated disease. Traditionalists, however, faulted the improvident lifestyles of the poor for the existence of slums, assuming that with greater thrift and improved moral standards the poor could improve themselves. Though hygienists

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45 Ibid., 133-47. Du Mesnil and Mangenot established this “poverty line” somewhat arbitrarily at one franc daily per capita. See Berlanstein, 39-41.
47Slow population growth was an important social and political issue, particularly following the trouncing by Bismarck. See Tom Kemp, Industrialization in Nineteenth Century Europe, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1985), 72-73.
frequently addressed the necessity of reform, traditional middle class reformers and politicians refused to address poverty in their efforts to solve the problem of congestion. Rather, reform discourse continued to target the symptoms of poverty rather than attack the underlying illness.

While those symptoms—of which congested housing and the spread of contagion were only two among many—were studied with the newest scientific methods in the decades before the outbreak of World War One, discussions surrounding their alleviation remained entrenched in medical fallacies and concerns about privacy. Regulatory commissions such as the Commission d'hygiène and the Commission des logements insalubres performed inquiries aimed at understanding, tracking, and containing the spread of diseases. However, in addition to prescribing conflicting improvements during ill-coordinated, overlapping visits, these commissions also attached great importance to objectivity and thus deliberately avoided collecting relevant personal information from individuals who were stricken with cholera or other diseases. The collection of such information clashed with the canons of late-nineteenth century medicine because it appeared to violate individual liberty. Even when studies like Du Mesnil's proved that personal information was vital to the comprehension of the spread of diseases, politicians balked, claiming that it infringed upon the individual liberty of tenant and landlord. The findings of hygienists and housing reformers eventually resulted in political efforts to clean up the worst slums. Yet it was not until social scientists demonstrated that unhealthy living environments aided the spread of
contagious diseases—especially those that struck their victims without regard for class—that legislated housing reform became a viable proposition.\textsuperscript{49}

Economists and sociologists, like hygienists, devoted great energy to the study of living conditions for the working poor. Most notable in this regard were the interventionists. Largely an academic community, interventionists advocated aggressive legislation directed at social inequalities, though they devoted much of their efforts to investigative description and theoretical entreaties.\textsuperscript{50} They argued that worker insecurities were becoming more acute and that traditional measures like \textit{mutualité} and self-help were ineffective unless supported by legislative measures.

Social economist Charles Gide remained devoted to both empiricism and to the promotion of interventionism well into the twentieth century. In his massive \textit{Les Institutions de progrès social} he presented statistics pertaining to living conditions and surveyed those social services already in place. However, Gide affirmed that his own liberal assumptions prevailed even within calls for intervention:

\begin{quote}
But what is an independent producer. It is a man who earns his living without employing salaried workers and without being one himself. He can hardly become very wealthy, but he can’t be suspected of enriching himself by the sweat of others.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{48} Aisenberg, 162-5.
\textsuperscript{49} Paradoxically, a primary source of opposition to the passing of the \textit{Salubrious Housing Act} came from poor tenants themselves, many of whom were fearful that debilitating inspection costs would be passed down to them by landlords. In this sense, for the poor, slum-dwelling was preferable to the increased strain that improved housing would have placed on their already meager incomes. See Berlanstein, 56-60.
\textsuperscript{50} Stone, 36-9.
\textsuperscript{51} Charles Gide, \textit{Les Institutions de Progrès Social} (Paris: Racueil Sirey, 1912), 471.
\end{flushright}
While the ideal of “independent producer” may have been feasible for highly skilled workers who could function as independent contractors, it had little application for most unskilled laborers. By elevating “independence” to such high status, he showed poor workers—who of course had little choice but to sell their labor—an idyllic image. While he advocated legislative intervention to repair the worst abuses of capital, Gide, like other intellectuals who opined on the social question, agreed that interventionist social reforms should not significantly alter the basic socio-economic landscape in France.

Social scientists succeeded in reducing many of society’s ills to conversations about the germ theory and statistical analysis rather than objective discussion about the relationship between disease and social inequality. In this sense perusal of the “social question” supports the argument that the burgeoning science of sociology was “a clever smoke screen for the defense of bourgeois interests, like liberalism in politics.”

By describing housing, wages, and the symptoms of poverty in general, the authors and publishers of reform discourse could claim philanthropic concern for poverty and public health while in essence remaining politically idle. Emile Durkheim put a positive spin on this aversion for political activism when he argued that “just as a great physiologist is usually a mediocre clinician, a sociologist is likely to make a quite inadequate statesman.” The burden of action was passed on to politicians.

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52 Logue, 170.
53 Emile Durkheim, “L’individualisme at les intellectuelles,” *Revue bleue*, 4th series, 10 (1898); quoted in Logue, 153.
Radical republicans exuded tremendous political influence in France from their electoral victories in 1902 until the outbreak of the First World War. Attempting to walk a tightrope between reactionaries on the right and revolutionary collectivists on the left, Radicals called for a dual political strategy. They aspired to show support for the masses of French workers by enacting protective legislation, while at the same time reassuring employers and business interests of their firm belief in private property. This duality exceeded purely political motivations with the doctrine of solidarity, articulated by Léon Bourgeois, a Radical politician and positivist philosopher who formed the first all-Radical ministry in France in 1895. For Bourgeois, solidarité addressed the “social question” by demanding cooperation between manufacturers and laborers. While in this sense he was not unlike the sociologists and hygienists of his day, he was also not content with the empirical documentation of conditions through the collection of scientific data. Bourgeois tirelessly applied his cooperative philosophy to political efforts to resolve the social question (though his actual political record in terms of legislative success was inauspicious, leading one historian to describe him as the “philosopher and social conscience rather than the effective leader of Radicalism”).

Bourgeois understood the pervasiveness for French workers of insecurity against accidents, unemployment, and old age. He was convinced that in order to secure “social peace” the Third Republic had a duty to alleviate insecurity in France

via social programs and legislative protections similar to those enacted in Bismarck’s Germany during the 1880s. He therefore urged “prévoyance sociale,” a social insurance program that provided a minimum below which workers would not be allowed to fall. 

Bourgeois viewed some legislative reforms as necessary. Reforms that supplied a modicum of prévoyance could help to stave off revolution. Whatever the government might do to appease workers—short of legislation undermining the liberté de travail—was welcome, for many Radicals feared that revolution was imminent if the material benefits of economic progress were not shared with the lower classes. Such fear led Bourgeois to the idea of a “quasi-contract” spelled out in his pamphlet Solidarité (1896). Bourgeois argued that each generation owed certain social debts, and that in particular the rich owed the poor a modicum of security. He thus supported arrangements that would oversee the maintenance of this contract:

Liberty cannot be practiced if man incessantly profits from the advantages offered by the social environment, incessantly taking his part...of the capital of human society, which increases with each generation. Thus a natural obligation exits for all mankind to work toward associations that divide profits and contribute to the continuity of their development.

Class responsibilities, he argued, were inherent in the interdependence of human beings. Bourgeois’ idea of solidarité stemmed from the belief that association, not competition, was the dominant human characteristic.

56 Ibid., 23.
57 Bourgeois, Solidarité, 152.
Yet laws of association, particularly those that interfered in the free determination of wages (part of the employer-employee contract), were universally met by employers' claims of liberté de travail. Bourgeois himself oscillated on the degree to which the state should interfere in the mechanisms of private property:

All collective intervention to regulate the conflict of individual interests is both arbitrary and vain. The state has one good function. It must make sure that the social struggle is not violent and bloody like the struggle between the species; it must maintain the natural peace, the “public order,” between men. With this function accomplished, its mission is over. The job of the state is, before all else, to function as security for the world. As far as the people to whom the state guarantees this security, they can own whatever they want. The state does not interfere in private combinations. It is to each to direct their affairs in their best interest.  

This clear delineation of the tenets of Liberalism seems to foreshadow the violence directed at striking workers. Reformers committed to resolving the social question within the framework of the Third Republic showed even greater commitment to the maintenance of social order, a commitment often demonstrated by force.

While solidarité appeared to repudiate the beliefs of late-nineteenth century liberals and social Darwinists, Bourgeois’ philosophy had another—a more conservative—aim. If social peace and the Republic were preserved through social legislation and solidarité, then the propertied and educated middle classes would also preserve their elite status within that Republic. La Prévoyance sociale was a solution to this problem, because it provided the bourgeoisie with a means to share with the lower classes a semblance of prosperity in the form of legislation against illness, old

59 Léon Burgeois, Solidarité, 41-42.
age, and unemployment—all without significantly sharing the capital from which that
prosperity was gleaned. Recognition of insecurity and actions taken to counter the
dangers of unemployment or the worries of old age and illness would appease workers
and distract them from the more immediate cause of their poverty—insufficient wages.
Even *solidarité*, Sanford Elwitt has argued, was less an attempt to legislate greater
security for workers than it was a “method of labor discipline.”

If the state was thus only responsible to protect the rights of property and to
keep the peace by “establishing equilibrium,” then workers were left without agency
and without a bargaining position unless it was provided by the whims of capital—an
unlikely scenario. Politically powerful business interests consistently argued that
employers and workers entered bargaining agreements over wages which workers
were free to accept or reject. Landlords who defended their interests against legislated
housing inspections believed government interference in this bargain meant no less
than the destruction of private property and the capitalist system. They discounted the
fact that workers living at or below the poverty line, for whom unemployment usually
meant gross deprivation, were at a disadvantage in such “bargaining.”

The interchange of ideas between scientists, intellectuals and politicians
characterized the late-nineteenth century Parisian Expositions. At the 1889 Exposition
reformers and scientists met within the Social Economy section (organized by

60 S. Elwitt, “Social Reform and Social Order in Late-Nineteenth Century France: The
62 Stone, 41-42.
Frédéric Le Play in 1867) where social economists and leaders from various political and ideological strata discussed and proposed solutions to the "social question." Those solutions discussed in 1889, however, had little in common with Le Playist conservative moral reformism, leading Charles Gide to claim that the section "got its revenge" on Le Play. One of those solutions was the Musée Social. In 1895 the Comte du Chambrun provided the endowment that finally launched this social think-tank, organized to aid in the "amelioration of the moral and material situation of the laboring classes." As a forum for debate, the Musée's membership was strengthened by the involvement of both Le Playist conservative economists and paternalist industrialists like Jules Siegfried and Emile Cheysson, as well as Republicans like solidariste Léon Bourgeois and interventionist Paul Pic. Though from divergent political orientations, these men all came from the educated bourgeoisie. The Musée symbolized the "high degree of consensus on the social question" by the various factions who weighed in on the issue. This "consensus" demonstrates the extent to which social reform in France carried a dominant middle class character.

At the Musée Social data was to be collected, documented, and published, with the eventual aim of providing material for legislative and academic debate leading to the improvement of relations between French employers and workers. As was

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64 Ibid., 3-4.
66 McGraw, 27.
generally the case with the empiricist writers who sought only to highlight the conditions of poverty, the Musée Social was not endowed with the specific advocacy of interventionist policies. On the contrary, many of its members retained strong support for the traditional, private sphere, ruled by notions of self-help and industrial paternalism. In fact, the Musée may have influenced Léon Bourgeois to focus his attention on friendly societies, private charitable institutions, and voluntary efforts at social insurance rather than legislation, which he came to understand as a mechanism useful only for maintaining, subsidizing, and supervising those private enterprises.\textsuperscript{67} Rooted in the discipline of “social economy”—the “programmatic and ideological content of [the] impetus for reform” as well as a science designed to boost economic production—and possessing a strong foundation in sociological methodology, the Musée Social set out to address social relations within the industrial community.\textsuperscript{68}

Members of the Musée Social were slow to abandon their belief that government should remain detached from employer-employee relations, and by extension from social legislation. As late as 1910 A. de Lavergne and Paul Henry iterated their distaste for legislation. In a massive study commissioned by the Musée on the causes, consequences, and potential remedies of unemployment, they argued that all state-sponsored measures to provide social insurance would eventually cause workers to abandon work altogether:

\textsuperscript{68} Elwitt, “Social Reform and Social Order,” 432.
In England and France, *mutualité* and insurance provide the provident worker with the means to shirk his own initiative in favor of those risks. Little by little, he becomes unaccustomed to earning his living and becomes professionally unemployed, demanding public charity in order to continue his existence as a vagabond.\(^6^9\)

The availability of social insurance programs, they argued, would make workers lazy and drive them to feign maladies in order to escape work.\(^7^0\) This rather bleak assessment of the perceived reaction of poor workers to legislative safety nets is representative of both the Musée’s general attitude toward social welfare and of the middle class stereotype of the improvident working poor.

Industrial paternalism (*patronage*) burgeoned in England during the early-nineteenth century. Paternalism became, for many French employers, a means to counteract the problems associated with legislated social insurance. They advocated social control, in which employers would extend “security” to their employees, thereby removing the necessity of State intervention. For example, the Schneiders, owners of Le Creusot, were interested in providing company housing to loyal, moral laborers.\(^7^1\) Factory owners extended company housing, credit, and health care to those workers who in exchange refused to organize. In this way “social peace” could be attained within the factory by creating communities of “tireless little workers.”\(^7^2\) In theory,


\(^{70}\) Ibid., 3-5.


\(^{72}\) McGraw, 37.
paternalism offered social control by removing the impetus for strikes and other forms of labor discontent and unrest.  

A prominent member of the Musée Social who entered the discourse on the side of *patronage* was the conservative civil engineer Emile Cheysson. A campaigner for social peace through cooperation between capital and labor, Cheysson outlined a program encouraging employers to take steps to quell worker discontent. Unlike Charles Gide, Cheysson believed no illusion should be given to a worker that he or she was “independent.” Iterating his paternalistic vision, he argued:

> Associations created for economic, social, or moral purposes, or even to provide for their members casual pastimes... are the best safety valve against popular passions. The well-organized and firmly directed association will make a powerful contribution to social peace.

Rather than expending energy fighting against the stream of worker antagonism, Cheysson argued, employers stood to gain from taking the lead in the *organization du travail*. By offering controlled work environments in which employees received generous benefits in exchange for company loyalty, “solidarity” of labor and capital could be achieved. After using Le Creusot, the large metallurgical firm, as his laboratory in the 1870s, Cheysson argued that “harmonious relations and the well-being and proper organization of workers” were forces “industrialists have no choice but to harness... if they do not want to risk paralysis by internal disorder.”

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73 Ibid., 38-9.
74 Cheysson, quoted in Ibid., 434.
Cheysson did not disguise the fact that his interest in preserving social peace was rooted in the science of social economy rather than in philanthropy. He quoted American social engineer W. H. Tolman, who claimed “Industrialists have begun to understand that everything that promotes the workers’ happiness, contentment, and skills provides a definite boost to business....” The bottom line, Cheysson assumed, was best enlarged by cooperation between capital and labor. That poverty was less severe, that birthrates rose, that alcoholism decreased, and that workers’ lives were enriched by such paternalistic measures were simply pleasant afterthoughts. Many reformers who shared Cheysson’s opposition to government intervention nevertheless found the alleviation of worker discontent an important and necessary goal. Yet most French employers did not share Cheysson’s paternalistic benevolence (wages at Le Creusot were higher on average and workers were kept during slow periods) and continued to oppose measures that infringed upon their liberté de travail (particularly the right to determine wages). For employers, such measures were as menacing to the social order as the social disharmony and class warfare poverty inspired.

Paternalism extended outside of the factory in other ways as well. Debates on the inadequacy of low-cost housing during the 1880s culminated in an 1894 Jules Seigfried-sponsored law established habitations de bon marché—affordable and respectable housing. The law provided credit to builders who constructed affordable

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76 Elwitt outlines Cheysson’s admiration for Tolman in Ibid., 70; William Howe Tolman, Social Engineering (New York, 1909), iii.
77 Stone, 53.
78 Shapiro, 101.
and respectable working class housing. Emile Cacheux, an architect and social engineer who drew up plans for worker housing, included gardens in his plans. The necessity of *le jardin* was crucial to Caheux's paternalistic notion of respectability. Return to intimacy with the soil would have a regenerative effect on workers whose morality was funneled downward by industrial progress. Yet even Cacheux admitted that his houses and their gardens would be too expensive for most unskilled workers. His plans simply exceeded their budgets, which further indicates a profound middle class unawareness about the realistic nature and extent of working class poverty.\(^79\)

Social control was a theme in the rhetoric of reformers. In *belle époque* France those who participated in the reform discourse understood that if the "social question" was not addressed workers would eventually revolt. Intervention, *solidarité*, insurance programs, pension plans, paternalism, factory housing and other courses of action were strategies of appeasement. However, though presented with appalling hygiene and poverty statistics, in addition to more immediate threats from organized striking workers, reformers debated how much relief, if any, the poor should be given. This balancing act between fear, submission to the popular will, and resolve to control the masses was fundamental to the actions of bourgeois reformers.\(^80\)

Reform socialist Benoît Malon confirmed that "social control" even dominated the

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\(^79\) Ibid., 99.

aspirations of the political left. "Necessary economic reforms," he claimed, "might spare us a violent revolution, so full of danger for everybody."\(^81\)

Impoverished workers, whether by the strike, by the help of sympathetic ears among the bourgeoisie, or by their own literary endeavors, did manage to find a voice that spoke to their own conditions. A few social commentators couched their descriptions of poverty and their suggestions for reform in journalistic realism. One example is Henry Leyret, a Parisian journalist who in the 1890s posed as a publican to study the workers in the faubourg of Belleville. Having "given in to the temptation to observe the workers in their environment," Leyret undertook what in reality was an ethnographic study of working class culture. \(^82\) He then introduced his working class clientele in poetic prose rather than with discussion of statistical methodology:

All winter members of the innumerable working class filed before my counter—large children with big hearts, burning at work, easy to love, sometimes rebellious and tough, and yet how resigned and patient. But, does patience last?\(^83\)

Leyret described in rich detail the working class culture he observed in his tavern, with chapters devoted to alcoholism and the culture of drink, to the importance of money to workers, to love, work, and to working class politics. The vibrant culture of the working class pub was not, he concluded, a sign of the deterioration of workers' morals; rather, it was a meager enhancement of the their rare leisure time. The bourgeois belief that workers somehow created their own poverty led Leyret to re-


evaluate the nature of working class political culture. Most workers, he found, were revolutionary, socialist, or both, and the pub was important to their militancy.

Leyret’s realism little reflected devotion to scientific positivism:

From the other side of my counter, witnessing the diversity of working class life, the Faubourg seems like a vast house of glass, in which a labored and sad humanity suffers and languishes, struggles and loves, out in the open for all to see. That humanity seems different because it is judged only by the crudeness and brutality of its sensibilities. Is life always so painful, harsh, and disconcerting?84

As opposed to detailed statistics, Leyret offered conclusions that worked outward from a pre-conceived understanding of poverty as a political and social evil. Leyret remarked that, while Republicans had promised reforms, they had failed to deliver adequate relief to poor Bellevillois. He presented politicians with the consequences of delay. Moreover, by addressing “the power of money,” he ranked among a small minority who concluded that poor wages—and thus economics rather than improvidence—was the vital component of working class poverty.

Issues of gender also dominated social reform rhetoric during this period. Middle class men who were in the process of prescribing ways for the poor to improve themselves also addressed the family as an instrument of social control. They argued that women were the nexus of the good republican family, and with masculine rhetoric called for protective legislation designed to reduce the number of women in the workforce.85 Some women, however, petitioned against proposals such as “equal

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83 Ibid., 14.
84 Ibid., 265.
85 Boxer, 51.
pay” with men, which they understood as a republican plot to make female workers undesirable. Employers would be unlikely to hire females at those higher wages. Others rejected the 11-hour day law and the ban on night work passed in 1892 primarily because night jobs were better paying than their daytime counterparts.⁸⁶ The most effective strategy women could employ to counter the effects of such legislation was to “speak with their hands” by accepting whatever work they could get and by disregarding laws that attempted to curtail their participation in the workforce.⁸⁷

As the Third Republic progressed into its Radical phase in the early 1900s, government bureaucracy became a more significant element of social reform discourse. Politicians increasingly transformed rhetoric into action, though the volume of debate outweighed concrete legislation. Debates frequently lasted decades before legislation was enacted, which reflected the rural conservatism of Senators who often blocked or amended laws.⁸⁸ In addition, implementation of new regulations was haphazard at best. For instance, a law shortening the workday for women and children to eleven hours finally passed in 1892. While it was debated, existing hours laws were ignored. After its passage, the new law remained unenforceable due to an inadequate number of inspectors, lack of cooperation from both employers and employees, and inherent inadequacies in the law, such as the exemption given to ateliers de famille (family workshops). Even when the law was amended in 1900 to correct some of those initial

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⁸⁶ Ibid., 61.
⁸⁷ Ibid., 68.
⁸⁸ Stone, 11.
failures, it still received little compliance. Similarly, health and safety regulations passed in 1893 were largely ignored, and in fact only applied to the small percentage of workers employed in large factories. Reforms such as the 1894 Housing Act or the 1902 Salubrious Housing Act also failed to inspire or enforce compliance.

The desire to implement a program of old age pensions was an issue upon which many Republicans, Socialists and workers agreed. Though political discussions on the issue had long since commenced, an actual bill was not introduced until 1901 when moderate Socialist Alexandre Millerand became Minister of Commerce during the Waldeck-Rousseau administration. The bill subsequently weathered nine years of debate before it became law in 1910, during which time arguments for and against old age pensions were wide-ranging. Radicals proposed a tripartate pension, where workers, employers, and the state would contribute to the pension fund. Labor representatives decried this plan, demanding that there be no deduction from workers’ already inadequate wages. Pensions, they demanded, should quell rather than foment worker insecurities. However, the predominantly Radical government after its electoral victories of 1906 was not supportive of bills that strayed from the ideal of individual responsibility, accepting Emile Levasseur’s argument that guaranteed pensions would “weaken the will to individual foresight (prévoyance) among future pensioners.”

A watered-down old age pension law was finally passed in 1910.

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89 Boxer, 46-7.
90 McGraw, 35.
91 Stone, 112.
By that time it had been diluted into a voluntary scheme that could be easily circumvented by employers.

Herein lies a paradox in the social reform discourse of *belle époque* France. Middle class commentators prescribed methods for alleviating the poverty that reform-minded observers—politicians, health experts, journalists, and workers—presented as the critical "social question" in France. However, rather than fostering meaningful legislative changes and profound improvements in living conditions for poor workers, the rhetoric of the debate merely demonstrated that the deep chasm between the class consciousness of the middle class and that of poor French workers remained largely intact. While a teleological view of French history, particularly its revolutionary past, might suggest that France had long been on the road to welfare statism, a closer examination of the rhetoric of reform reveals far greater complexity. Much of the rhetoric was directed at the defense of the liberal social order rather than at the installation of welfare democracy. The newly empowered middle class hoped to entice the poor to accept piecemeal reform measures sculpted with paternalistic hands, measures assuring the owners of capital that their *liberté* would not be infringed upon.

In this context, social reform little resembled an irresistible momentum toward interventionism, socialism, or the development of the welfare state.\(^92\) Rather, French social reform can perhaps best be described as a "counterrevolution" against an

illusory revolution that had yet to occur, a notion that will be elaborated in Chapter Four. The socially concerned bourgeoisie in France ultimately came to recognize the danger inherent in remaining idle on the social reform issue. It therefore resolved to answer the "social question" before discontent led to instability or even violence. Ultimately, the middle class was reluctant to alter drastically the social system upon which its own economic and social prestige rested. The following chapter focuses on the contemporary discourse in England, where to a degree social reformers, opponents of reform, and poor workers themselves reflected this French experience.

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CHAPTER III

SOCIAL REFORM IN ENGLAND

In 1935 George Dangerfield published The Strange Death of Liberal England, in which he described what he believed to be a shifting mood in England. He argued that the prevailing wisdom of the nineteenth century, of economic liberalism, class deference, and individualism, had been replaced by the emergence of welfare democracy. As evidence he highlighted the increase in protective social legislation and changes in perceptions of the poor beginning at the turn of the twentieth century and exploding in the wake of the First World War. Similarly, in 1911 L. T. Hobhouse described the nineteenth century as the “age of Liberalism” and went on to express regret that the century’s close had brought “the fortunes of that great movement to its lowest ebb.” The belief that English men and women had in some way given up on their strict adherence to retrenchment, economic laissez-faire, and Samuel Smiles’ creed of “self-help” has survived through much of the twentieth century.

In the early 1970s, however, Standish Meacham introduced a revision of this theory when he argued that Dangerfield and others had come to the “decline of Victorian liberalism” conclusion too readily. Trade unionism, women’s suffrage, and

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95 Hobhouse, 110.
problems with Ireland, Meacham claimed, were isolated events with their own patterns of causation and should not be taken as unmistakable proof that politicians, industrialists, and other Victorian elites had lost interest in individualism. In fact, as Peter Stearns demonstrated in the early 1980s, the rise in labor unrest and working class consciousness was not in and of itself proof that even the most impoverished workers had abandoned traditional institutions. Geoffrey Finlayson agreed with Meacham and suggested that the importance of Sir William Harcourt's famous utterance "we are all socialists now," as well as the "economic, social, and political significance" of the late-nineteenth century had been overdrawn. Historically, the writings and speeches of reform-minded politicians and union leaders have been cited as unwarranted proof of a high degree of radicalism. Moreover, "until historians have studied authentic working class sources more thoroughly than they have," Meacham argued, no conclusions supporting the decline of liberalism in late-Victorian England, even among the "radicalized" working classes, can be drawn.

This chapter addresses turn of the century English social reform discourse, which falls well within the confines of the debate outlined above. From the early 1880s through the start of the First World War, the "social question" in England assumed several characteristics, such as rising socialism among reform writers (many

\[98\] Finlayson, 125.
\[99\] See Ibid., 109-111.
of whom, like their counterparts in France, were anxious to provide protective legislation for "pauper" classes), and an equally significant increase in ammunition for reformers via an onslaught of statistical studies and journalistic propaganda exposing and addressing the extent of poverty. During the first decade of the twentieth century a marked increase in welfare legislation appeared in England. On the surface increased attention to poverty seems to support the Dangerfield thesis. Yet social reform in England, as in France, demonstrated far greater ambiguity.

In 1883 Andrew Mearns outlined for literate England what he perceived as the frightening reality of poverty in London's poorest neighborhoods in a pamphlet entitled "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London." During the first half of the nineteenth century, Mrs. Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* (1848), Edwin Chadwick's monumental *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britian* (1842), and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) joined Charles Dickens' fiction in presenting concerned English men and women with the social consequences of industrialization, including urban overcrowding and mass demoralization wrought by the ensuing poverty. While during the prosperous mid-Victorian years English reformers were hampered by a general complacency about social issues, by the late-1870s the economic depression led some observers to re-

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100 Meacham, "The Sense of an Impending Clash," 1364.
101 Some of these included the Children's Act (1902), the Unemployed Workmen Act (1905), the Trade Boards Act (1909), which protecting bargaining rights for sweated laborers, and a number of welfare measures addressed by the Liberal government of 1906, such as old age pensions, unemployment insurance, and the Royal Commission
defending free enterprise and the unfettered accumulation of wealth. Yet in spite of their reverence for the principles that had made England the center of a wealthy empire, Charles Booth and others came to realize that they were identifying underlying causes of poverty rather than manifestations of working class improvidence.

Some reformers, fueled by philanthropy or religion, railed against the detached rhetorical parlance of social scientists. Resolving to enter the slums to work among the poor, settlement houses bypassed the statistical accumulation of the Royal Statistical Society. They combined descriptions of cramped lodgings with stark portrayals of starving inhabitants, refusing to merely calculate statistics of poverty based on school board and census figures. Fiction authors like George Gissing portrayed desperate conditions in heartbreaking novels of filth, moral decay, and hopelessness, and John Galsworthy, H. G. Wells and other novelists offered negative portrayals of the middle class. Similarly, the “practicable” socialists of Toynbee Hall and the Fabian Society realized that shock value rather than pie charts could more quickly motivate politicians to action at the municipal and Parliamentary levels.

Syndicalists, members of the Trades Union Congress, and the moderate middle class socialists of the Fabian Society supported parliamentary measures to increase security for workers. They argued that higher wages, insurance, improved working conditions, and Poor Law reforms were the responsibility of the state. As their memberships increased, so too did the number of labor strikes and the volume of

103 Meacham, Toynbee Hall, 37.
socialist antagonism.\textsuperscript{104} By the early 1900s the Independent Labour Party assertively challenged Liberals and Conservatives for working class votes, leading the latter parties to attempt reconciliation with their poorer constituents. Some liberals began to discuss reforms that would minimize the negative effects of free enterprise, while conservatives sought to sway votes by beating the other parties to similar reforms. Both groups overcame their aversion for workers with the realization that working class votes were crucial. In this highly charged political climate, even staunch conservatives like Lord Salisbury understood that “the policy of laissez-faire can no longer be pursued without disaster to the state.”\textsuperscript{105}

Among the most prolific contributors to the discussion on the “social question” in England was Charles Booth. A successful business owner, Quaker philanthropist, and symbol of Victorian prosperity, Booth extended a personal interest in sociology—especially statistics—to the study of living conditions and to the question of poverty. He directed his famed energy and missionary zeal—traits he shared with many English gentlemen-philanthropists—to these issues in \textit{Life and Labour of the People in London}, published in seventeen volumes over the course of two decades.\textsuperscript{106}


\textsuperscript{105} Walter Arnstein, \textit{Britain Yesterday and Today: 1830 to the Present}, 7\textsuperscript{th} Ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath & Co., 1996), 203.

In 1885 Syndicalist H. M. Hyndman reported that twenty-five percent of London’s working population was living below the poverty line and in a state of deterioration. Booth berated Hyndman for publishing such incendiary and propagandistic falsehoods. "Mr. Booth was quite frank," wrote Hyndman, "he told me plainly that in his opinion we had grossly overstated the case." That Booth perceived such fantastic statistics, whether true or false, as threatening the prevailing economic sensibility is an indication of his early understanding of poverty as an unfortunate but correctable character flaw in the poor. However, Booth’s aversion for Hyndman’s tactics strengthened his resolve to determine, with greater exactitude, “conditions of the workers of London.” To that end he reexamined his own methodology and came to the realization that personal observation—heretofore excluded from his and similar surveys—must coexist with statistics. Knowledge of a person’s income did not elucidate how that person utilized that income. According to Booth, only personal observation of conditions, household expenditures, and budgeting habits could elaborate the causes of poverty. The import he placed on personal observation fundamentally broke with other reformers—particularly public health experts, sociologists, and French hygienists—who based their studies solely on scientific empiricism.

108 Ibid., 22.
109 Ibid.
One of Booth's most important contributions to the "social question" was his organization of London's class strata in terms of their amount and regularity of income, using terms like "lowest class" and "very poor" to delineate levels of poverty:

The "poor" have been defined or described as including alike those whose earnings are small because of irregularity of employment and those whose work though regular is ill-paid. They are further defined as those whose means are barely sufficient for decent independent life. Though not in actual "want," they would be the better for more of everything. Their lives are an unending struggle and lack comfort, but these people are neither ill-nourished nor ill-clad according to any standard that can reasonably be used.¹¹⁰

The categorization of levels of "lack of comfort" into groups, differentiating them from the lowest classes, indicates an important shift in the rhetoric of poverty. Booth began to distinguish between those whose poverty was their own fault because of drunkenness and vice and those whose poverty was caused by economic insecurity.

An ardent demographer, Booth also organized the socio-economic disbursement of London's population into a large city map with a color legend that signified, according to his categories, the social strata of the each neighborhood's occupants. This became a standard tool for a host of reformers, who used Booth's evidence—and his map—as a framework for debate. Reformers and opponents of state intervention could now debate housing reform legislation while both using facts derived from Booth's study.

Though dedicated to presenting scientific evidence that could be used to thwart poverty, Booth retained a strong element of conservatism in his writings.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 257-8.
¹¹¹ Ibid., 182.
The materials for sensational stories lie plentifully in every book of our notes; but, even if I had the skill to use my material in this way—that gift of the imagination which is called "realistic"—I should not wish to use it here. There is struggling poverty, there is destitution, there is hunger, drunkenness, brutality, and crime; no one doubts that it is so. My object has been to attempt to show the numerical relation which poverty, misery, and depravity bear to regular earning and comparative comfort, and to describe the general condition under which each class lives.\(^{112}\)

Booth oscillated between his traditionalism and his burgeoning awareness of abject poverty, particularly as he became increasingly aware of London's wretchedness:

I undoubtedly expected that this investigation would expose exaggerations, and it did so; but the actual poverty disclosed was so great, both in mass and in degree, and so absolutely certain, that I have gradually become equally anxious not to overstate.\(^{113}\)

In the course of his study Booth concluded that the statistics of poverty were in fact worse than even Hyndman had speculated. He found fully 31 percent of London's workers received less than was required for "comfortable" living.\(^{114}\) Booth and the School Board visitors who assisted him in visiting the poor and directly observing how those unfortunates lived were shocked and disturbed by what they found, and yet were bound by their faith in the scientific method to remain "passionless reformers."\(^{115}\)

Seebohm Rowntree, a similar nonconformist statistician, undertook a mission to survey conditions of poverty in Yorkshire, a less densely populated region than London. Aiming to outline the extent of poverty and to delineate between two distinct

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 175.

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 174.

\(^{114}\) Ibid.

types of poverty in York, he found that roughly 28 percent of that county’s population lived below the poverty line, compared to Booth’s 31 percent for Londoners. While historians have traditionally found strong continuity between Rowntree’s Poverty and Booth’s Life and Labour, Karel Williams in particular has more recently favored Rowntree for trying to avoid “mixing factual detail and moral judgment.” In any case, Booth and Rowntree were leaders in the statistical as well as personal observation of the extent of poverty in England.

Opposite Booth’s and Rowntree’s statistical analyses and rationalism was journalist George Sims, a middle-class reformer who visited poor Londoners in the 1880s under the auspices of the London School Board. Unlike Booth, Sims chose to sensationalize. “Brought face to face with that dark side of life that some good people think it best to leave undiscovered,” he argued, the middle classes would be forced to search for the “remedies for the great evil which lies like a cankerworm in the heart of this fair city.” Whereas Booth was content to err on the side of caution, Sims threw caution to the wind in his pamphlets by vividly portraying gruesome details of working class slum life. In How the Poor Live (1883) he described in great detail a

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116 Rowntree identified primary and secondary poverty, the former being comparable to Booth’s “very poor”, See Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (Boston: Routlege & Kegan Paul, 1981), 347.
118 Williams, 346.
poor family who allowed the cadaver of a deceased relative to lie in their overcrowded
apartment for several weeks, unable to afford the cost of interment and unwilling to
resort to the social blight of the pauper funeral. This description was given not as a
statistic but as an uncensored display of poverty. The contrast in titles alone—Booth's
*Life and Labour* vs. Sims' *How the Poor Live* and *Horrible London*—distinguishes
Sims' work as an exercise in shock.

Like other Victorian era reformers in England and France, Sims remained
devoted to his class as the pinnacle of provident living. The following metaphor of the
poor as a hopelessly "dirty" boy illustrates this bias:

> I do not for one moment dispute the excellent qualities of the moral and
> political soaps which kindly philanthropists are recommending as likely
to accomplish a miracle for the Outcast Blackamoors of Horrible
> London. But I am inclined to think the advocates of these said soaps
> underestimate the blackness of the boy.\(^{122}\)

Yet his apparent disgust for the slums of East London he observed is juxtaposed with
remorse and pleas for state—as well as improved private and charitable—intervention:

> There are drunkards, there are criminals, there are poor labourers in
> these districts who will never be "improved." No one who knows them
> has the slightest hope for them. But Sodom was to be spared for the
> sake of ten just persons. In the City of Dreadful Night, where our poor
> herd together, there are hundreds of just persons. For their sakes the
city must be saved.\(^{123}\)

The "saving" of London would be accomplished by legislative action. Sims believed
his propagandistic journalism would serve as a "bellows-blower" for the flame of the

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 2-3.
\(^{121}\) Ibid., 60-61.
\(^{122}\) Ibid., 114.
“social question” and therefore a catalyst for reform. He demanded that “Dr. State” address and essentially provide a prognosis for the problem of poverty. Chapters on housing, education, and the amusement habits of the poor were guides for reformers at the highest levels to utilize as they attempted to solve the problem of poverty.

Sims’ study distinctly resembled Henry Leyret’s work on the Parisian working class. Both surveys were strengthened by dependence on first-hand observation. However, Sims interpreted the mass culture of the poor through middle class generalizations and assumptions. For example, after visiting an inn frequented by thieves, Sims felt justified in concluding “the constant association of the poor and the criminal class has deadened in the former nearly all sense of right and wrong.” That Sims would expose his personal class bias toward the value of mass culture is not unnatural given that even those “scientific” observers of the day, such as Charles Booth, arrived at similar conclusions. Also like Leyret, Sims’ incendiary descriptions were intended to motivate an audience of reformers and socially concerned elites, particularly with the following criticism of a proposal to relocate workers to suburbs:

And therein lies one of the things reformers have to consider. There are thousands of these families who would go away into the suburbs, where we want to get them, if only the difficulty of traveling expenses to and fro could be conquered.

123 Ibid., 142.
124 Ibid., 113.
125 Ibid., 4.
126 Ibid., 11.
127 Ibid., 15.
Similarly, he followed a description of a small room occupied by a woman and her
daughters, aged seven and eight, with the assumption that the woman was probably a
prostitute and that she presumably brought her “dissolute prey” to that very room:

I would gladly have passed over this scene in silence, but it is one part
of the question which directly bears on the theory of state interference.
It is by shutting our eyes to evils that we allow them to continue
unreformed so long. I maintain that such cases as these are fit ones for
legislative protection. The State should have the power of rescuing its
future citizens from such surroundings, and the law which protects
young children from physical hurt should also be so framed as to shield
them from moral destruction.128

Pity, guilt, and fear of moral degeneration informed Sims’ entreaty to the State to help
the poor, an argument resonating with a population of reformers who generally shared
Sims’ perception of poverty as the result of moral improvidence.

George Gissing addressed the social question in fictional stories about London
slum life in the 1880s. One reviewer of The Nether World (1889) wrote that Gissing
“hoped to add to that sort of fiction which at times has been more successful than
Blue-books…in calling attention to the evils crying for remedy.”129 His “social
problem novel,” in the tradition of Dickens and Gaskell, addressed the horrors of
poverty and destitution. Having experienced poverty first hand, Gissing framed his
characters with profound realism. In the despairing confines of The Nether World—
Gissing’s metaphor for hell—lurked condemnations of the tragedies wrought by
industrialization and of Socialists who grasped at the delusion that society would

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128 Ibid., 13.
eventually be transformed into an ideal construct based on something other than
capitalism, materialism, and social inequality:

...he reached the stage of confident and aspiring Radicalism, believing
in the perfectibility of man, in human brotherhood, in—anything you
like that is the outcome of a noble heart sheltered by ignorance. It had
its turn, and passed.  

Such socio-political realism clarified the social inequalities and economic insecurities
that negated aspirations toward “human brotherhood.” Whereas Sims described a
family living in a room with a decomposing body, Gissing elicited despair with the idea
that the “noble” hope of improvement rested on an “ignorance” of reality.

Hatred of ignorance is a motif in *The Nether World*. It places Gissing nearer
Sims, Booth, and those reformers who abhorred what they perceived as a lack of
education and culture among the poor. Yet his modern understanding of poverty
allowed Gissing to blame social forces such as industrialization for the inability of the
poor to achieve education and culture:

He lost his guiding interests, and found himself returning to those of
boyhood. The country once more attracted him; he took out his old
sketch-books, bought a new one, revived the regret that he could not
be a painter of landscape. A visit to one or two picture-galleries, and
then again profound discouragement, recognition of the fact that he
was a mechanic and never could be anything else.  

Aspirations for a semblance of middle class culture by poor workers were often
quelled by lack of opportunity. The result was the vicious, inescapable cycle of
improvident existence from which Gissing derived the book’s title. While statistical

130 Gissing, 57.
131 Ibid., 58.
analyses of positivist intellectuals were more useful in Parliamentary debates, “social problem novels” were nevertheless crucial in the court of public opinion. As Mary Barton had exposed the horrors of Manchester in the 1840s, *The Nether World* and similar novels embellished poverty in late-Victorian England and energized the “consciousness of sin” that led to reformism.\(^{132}\) Gissing’s work vividly reminded social elites that conditions “in the abysses of the nether world” were intolerable.

One of several influential organizations to address the social question was the Royal Statistical Society, whose members presented and published voluminous studies of economic conditions in England’s poorest neighborhoods, highlighting in particular issues like pauperism, housing congestion, and unemployment. Like the Musée Social in Paris, its members were wealthy, educated industrialists and scientists whose aim was to document conditions and accumulate statistical information.\(^{133}\) Thus the Royal Statistical Society also remained in many ways a bastion of conservatism. In 1903 Sir William Chance presented a paper in which he addressed the Poor Law and pauperism in London during the years 1891 to 1901.\(^{134}\) Replete with numerous tables and appendices, he argued that pauperism, in terms of in-door (workhouse) relief, had increased in London due to the existence of an out-door relief policy. Chance

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\(^{133}\) This tradition of inquiry in nineteenth century England includes the Benthamites, who worked to “identify a problem and to bring pressure on Parliament.” Early examples of their success include the New Poor Law (1834), the Factory Act (1833), and the Board of Health (1848). All resulted from Chadwick’s and other statistical studies that confirmed wretched conditions. See Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Random House, 1983).
estimated that the monetary increase in poor relief signaled weakness among the poor rather than problematic economic conditions:

The figures support the theory that a lax policy of out-door relief so demoralizes a population, by leading them to look to the State instead of to their own efforts for support and help in times of difficulty, as to reduce it by degrees to such a state of indigence and idleness that, *nolens volens*, only in-door relief can be given.\(^{135}\)

He concluded that with access to welfare people would increasingly rely on it. Chance supported the traditional view that the poor had “moral defects.”

C. S. Loch, another member of the Royal Statistical Society, articulated his understanding of “pauperism” as:

Disease with feebleness of mind, susceptibility to illness with want of energy and purpose, poverty of physique with criminal tendencies—all these, besides the effects of physical and mental stress, due in some degree to economic causes only, find their place in that destitution or want of resources which eventually is expressed in pauperism.\(^{136}\)

Though Loch recognized that the economy could in some cases contribute to poverty, he more emphatically stressed that pauperism resulted from moral degeneration.

These conclusions about paupers had led to the passage in 1834 of the draconian New Poor Law, which sought to punish paupers, under the assumption that people would be encouraged to work if the alternative was horrible enough.

Research conducted and published by members of the Royal Statistical Society demonstrated that the logic of individual, not collective, economic and social

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\(^{135}\) Ibid., 559.
responsibility remained intact, even within the confines of analyses that indicated that systemic reforms were needed. In 1893 Henry Higgs presented a study of workers’ budgets collected during the nineteenth century. He discussed them in terms of relative cost analyses and questionnaire methodology (including a lengthy commentary on the usefulness of Le Playist method). The budgets in his study highlighted, among other things, the low wages for London workers and the high percentage of those wages spent on rent and food. However, Higgs drew no conclusions. He preferred to gather statistics and work “toward the construction of a weighted index number to test local variations in the purchasing power of a workman’s wage.”  

Higgs was “anxious not to disparage in any way the great value of these general statistics, or the security afforded by large numbers.” He urged that those statistics be “supplemented by some one or two minutely finished reports enabling us to see the economic life of a family steadily and see it whole.” In short, he was content to publish dispassionate articles about methodology, leaving interpretations to others. Like the French hygienists, Higgs exemplified how the accumulation of social reform ammunition was often concealed within a detached, positivist scientism.

While the Royal Statistical Society and similar observers of social problems continued to describe conditions without effecting changes, others devoted themselves to more direct improvements. Oxford philosopher T. H. Green, to whom a new class

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of reformers turned for inspiration in late-Victorian England, emphasized first and foremost in his teachings the preference for voluntary action over state intervention. Green envisioned a "practical" Christianity in which his followers would do their "duty" and devote themselves to "the cultivation of [the] higher self," an idea with reverberations in Léon Bourgeois' notion of a "quasi-contract." By the 1880s a phalanx of Oxford-educated reformers were following Green's advice, resolving to bring education, self-help, and "connection" directly to the poor, to whom, they increasingly admitted, the middle class owed its social debt. Green emphasized the importance of community and of "individual connection," and argued "against the intrusiveness of class." Only the elimination of class distinctions would bring about changes in social construction. But what would be the characteristics of this new class? How would it exercise "providence?" This question was easily answered by the resident social workers of Toynbee Hall, who entered Whitechapel and other poor working class districts with the goal of instilling in the poor of those areas the sensibilities and culture of the middle-class, values learned at Oxford and Cambridge.

In 1884 the Reverend Samuel Barnett inaugurated the Toynbee Hall settlement house in London's East End. Ten years as a parish priest in Whitechapel, one of the worst neighborhoods in London, had convinced Barnett that parochialism—charity and self-help promoted and organized by the church (looked to by traditional liberal-

138 Ibid.
139 Meacham, Toynbee Hall, 12.
140 Ibid., 14.
minded Victorians as the best defense against poverty)—was inadequate in such desolate and densely populated areas:  

The poor remain too poor, and there are great neighborhoods where good health and happiness are impossible. There must, therefore, be increased organisation of labour, further demolition of unhealthy houses, a great increase to the number of free libraries, open space, and baths, and a better Poor Law administration, so that the old may be cared for, the unskilled trained, and the idler disciplined. Town councils must go on in their activity to make the conditions of living as pleasant in poor as in rich quarters. At the same time the measure of philanthropy must be increased. There must be more sharing of the best, a more equal intermingling of classes, more generous giving...  

According to Barnett, the goal was to augment the “Tory” reliance on “the parochial system,” which “breaks down in the face of that huge mass of ignorance, poverty, and wretchedness by which it is so often confronted in the thickly peopled areas of our manufacturing towns.” Barnett’s listing of social needs that extended beyond the scope of the exclusive duty of the church and into the realm of state authority reflected T. H. Green’s notion of the necessary dissolution of class distinctions.  

“The State provision of means of health, education and recreation, and the passionate patience of philanthropy,” were integral to Barnett’s conception of social reform. Like Bourgeois in France, Barnett conceived of this duality of philanthropy and protective legislation as the best means for improvement. Together they would resolve the social debt owed by the middle class. By relying on philanthropy and self-

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141 Charles Booth later estimated that over forty percent of the population in Barnett’s parish lived at or below subsistence levels. See Booth, *On the City*, 56.
143 James Fraser, bishop of Manchester, quoted (1872) in Meacham, *Toynbee Hall*, 26.
help rather than excessive charity, individual initiative would not be destroyed. When passed, legislation would simply ensure that minimum safety nets were in place.\textsuperscript{145} Most importantly, the philanthropic actions of educated, middle class individuals would set the stage for a general reduction in poverty, for a general improvement in the quality of life for the poor, and for vastly improved class relations.

Though Barnett retained his living, his focus turned toward pragmatic social work and away from religion, which was logical given that very few of those residing in his parish were religiously devout or attended church even sporadically.\textsuperscript{146} Barnett and his wife Henrietta conceived of the idea of a settlement house in which young, gifted, high-minded Oxbridge-educated men would reside in East London. There they would make the “connections” with their poor neighbors that T. H. Green had believed would lead to class harmony. Toynbee Hall would facilitate education and community improvement through a hands-on methodology. Residents would work to correct what the organization’s namesake Arnold Toynbee and other intellectuals of the day recognized as the collective middle class failure to help the poor:

\begin{quote}
We have neglected you; instead of justice we have offered you charity, and instead of sympathy we have offered you hard and unreal advice.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

This “class consciousness of sin” fueled the resolve to create “a common ground for all classes” through individual effort rather than parochial or parliamentary means.\textsuperscript{148}

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\textsuperscript{145} Bourgeois’ notion of “liberal contractualism” is discussed in J. E. S. Hayward, “Léon Bourgeois and Solidarism,” 30.
\textsuperscript{146} The influx in Eastern European Jews into East London in the 1880s and 1890s was one determinant in poor church attendance; Meacham, \textit{Toynbee Hall}, 30-33.
\end{flushright}
While their settlement house would be “classless,” the Bametts and their fellow social workers also possessed a paternalistic motive in their charitable endeavors. They intentionally modeled their house to give the residents the rural look and feel of Oxbridge, which was quite out of sorts in the midst of the East London slums. The norms of Victorian high society accompanied the workers who entered Toynbee Hall, reflecting the intentions of Arnold Toynbee himself. He had urged, prior to his death in 1883, that in return for the willingness of middle class men and women to give such sacrifices in service to the poor, the poor had to pledge themselves to lead better lives according to the ideals established for them by their mentors. The building itself would proudly emit an air of wealth and culture, to which the poor must submit by allowing their benefactors to mold them into moral beings:

How can these degraded people be given these priceless gifts? The usual religious means have failed, the unusual must be tried. We must deal with the people as individuals, being content to speak, not to the thousands, but to ones and twos. We must become the friend, the intimate of a few. We must lead them up through the well-known paths of cleanliness, honesty, industry, until we attain the higher ground whence glimpses can be caught of the brighter land.149

When the vainglorious Bametts proposed that cleanliness and the other priceless gifts they could impart might lead to a “brighter land” for the poor, the metaphor carried weight based on their proximity to actual conditions:

...how to keep a family, pay rent of 2s. 6d. a week for each room, and lay up an adequate amount for times of bad trade, sickness, and old age. As it is seen how one after another the things which seem to make

148 Meacham, Toynbee Hall, 33.
149 Barnett and Barnett, Practicable Socialism, 93.
life worth living have to be given up, and as it is seen how many
“necessaries” are impossible, how many of the poor must put up with a
diet more scanty than that allowed to paupers, how all must go without
the leisure and the knowledge which transmute existence into life...\footnote{Barnett, 100-101.}

First hand experience, then, would translate into first-hand, voluntary, and effective
assistance. In effect, the Barnetts attempted to cut through the red tape of political
rhetoric and instill their own values in the poor through direct contact.

A major difference between the liberal attitude in mid-century England and the
late-nineteenth century reformism of Toynbee Hall was the recognition by the latter
that poverty was endemic and was not necessarily the fault of the impoverished. Most
intellectuals understood that the economy conspired to keep wages low and
unemployment high, and that slums like those in East London were the inevitable
results. And yet, the founders and foot-soldiers of Toynbee Hall, whose mission was
supposedly a “classless” one, set out not to alter those social conditions but to
eradicate symptoms of poverty by molding the poor into clean and provident beings
imbued with middle class Victorian values.

While the settlement workers of Toynbee Hall attempted to realize social
reform in East London’s poorest neighborhoods via direct contact with the poor, the
socialist Fabian Society sought to bring about piecemeal reforms by directing its
organizational apparatus at the mechanisms of the State. Organized in the mid-1880s,
the Fabians undertook the serious investigation of poverty and rigorous support of
concrete legislative action. The Fabian Society was composed of educated and
concerned middle class reformers like playwright George Bernard Shaw, artist William Morris, and scholars Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Their mild brand of socialism had more to do with increasing the size of government bureaucracy than with creating Marxist social equality. Like the Radicals in France, Fabians hoped to quell the revolutionary spirit of the working masses through legislation aimed both at destroying poverty and at conserving individualism and private property.\textsuperscript{151}

When several incidents involving striking laborers in London ended in violence in the 1880s, the Fabians adopted a moderate policy marked by the recognition that revolutionary agitation by workers was futile.\textsuperscript{152} Among the more progressive aspects of the Fabian Society was its direct involvement in local government.\textsuperscript{153} Their goal, like the Roman general for whom they named themselves, was to wear down the political opposition at the local level by “permeating” the major political parties with socialist thought. Gradually they hoped to create a bureaucratic machine that would execute the laws enacted by the inevitable socialist state.\textsuperscript{154} Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Fabians, and certainly the most significant example of the patience with which they operated, was the foundation by Sidney Webb of the London School of Economics. Education, Webb surmised, would be the gradualist tool for creating a


\textsuperscript{153} A good discussion of the Fabian’s primary municipal outlet, the London County Council, is Susan D. Pennybacker, \textit{A Vision for London} (1995).

\textsuperscript{154} On Fabian policy of “permeation” see Margaret Cole, “Beatrice and Sidney Webb,” in Katanka, 219.
new class of public administrators. The stress on education, the imposing presence of the Webbs and of figures like Shaw, and the belief that the Fabian ideal was supported by solid, scientific reason worked to convince many reformers and conservatives alike that those ideals held potential benefits.

With Beatrice Webb's inclusion in the Poor Law Commission—established in 1905 as one of the Balfour government's final acts—the Fabians entered the dialogue on the most central aspect of Victorian England's official policy toward poverty. The New Poor Law (1834) had long been a subject of criticism for reformers. The commission enabled reformers to voice their ideas for improvement or overhaul of the Poor Law system. Two reports were published after four years of debate, a *Majority Report* and a *Minority Report*. The latter, written by the Webbs, called for the complete abandonment of the Poor Law in favor of a series of legislative measures targeting unemployment, old age, and sickness, problems perceived by reformers and statisticians as root causes of poverty and ultimately of the need for the hated Poor Laws. The Webbs intended to establish a "minimum" below which the poor would not be allowed to fall. However, the revolutionary trait of this "minimum," and the aspect that separated it from Léon Bourgeois' minimum in France, was that it went beyond the advocacy of safety net measures and directly addressed the problem of inadequate wages. The establishment of a standard living wage, the Webbs argued, would not only give the worker "the competitive worth of his labour" but would theoretically

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155 Arnstein, 196.
keep the worker out of the auspices of the Poor Law altogether.\footnote{Pennybacker, 105-107.} Other members of the Commission—as well as most social reformers and politicians—were unready to consider proposing a “Standard Minimum of Civilized Life.” Margaret Cole, a contemporary of the Webbs, later explained that “the majority of [Beatrice Webb’s] fellow-commissioners were not prepared either to work as hard as she was, or to undertake stiff fundamental thought about the creation of an entirely new system.”\footnote{Cole, 226.}

The new system proposed in the \textit{Minority Report} closely resembled the welfare state that later marked post-war England, and its lack of support early on is indicative of an unwillingness to realistically consider sweeping government intervention.

Maud Pember Reeves’ study of working-class life, \textit{Round About a Pound a Week} (1913), presented a critique of the middle class assumptions about poverty and the poor that remained prevalent at the outset of World War I. Reeves, a middle class member of the Fabian Women’s Group, conducted in-house visitations with new mothers in the Districts of Kennington and Lambeth. Her observations introduced readers to the customs and mores of impoverished Londoners by illuminating how working class women constructed their lives and how they cared for families on meager incomes like a pound or less a week. She was careful from the outset of her study to identify that volatile working conditions, unemployment, and low wages had caused much of the poverty in Lambeth. Poor working class families were forced to
develop their own value systems, which little resembled the prescriptions of those who occupied higher rungs on the social ladder:

The merest outsider calling for the first time on Mrs. Smith knows her beforehand for the decent, cleanly soul she is. The same outsider looking at Mrs. Brown's front door and window would realize her to be one who puts a good face on things. And, if it happened to be the right time of a day which was not washing-day, probably would expect, after the proper ceremonial had been gone through, to be asked in to sit behind the cocoa tins. Who could tell anything half so interesting from the front doors of Mrs. Smythe and Mrs. Browne of Bayswater? Who could tell, on meeting each of these ladies face to face, more than her official age and the probable state of her husband's purse?¹⁵⁸

Contrasted with reformers of the 1880s, such passages illustrate that the nineteenth century belief in the necessity of spreading the middle class ideal was undergoing change. Reeves further identified a discontinuity between working and middle class mores in the following general description of visitations with poor Lambeth mothers:

At the beginning of each case the woman seemed to steel herself to sit patiently and bear it while the expected questions or teaching of something should follow. She generally appeared to be conscious that the strange lady would probably like to sit in a draught. Complimented on her knowledge of the value of fresh air and open windows, she might repeat in a weary manner commonplaces on the subject that had obviously been picked up from nurse, doctor, or sanitary inspector.¹⁵⁹

Reeves criticized the preconception that her class was morally and socially superior to the working poor. Elsewhere she reiterated this with an anecdote about food, remarking on the consternation "visitors" expressed when their "gospel of porridge" was not taken to heart by poor housewives. Visitors would return to find that

¹⁵⁸ M. S. Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1913), 6-7.
¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 16.
porridge, which they believed was a healthy, cheap, and practical meal, was not being consumed. One woman’s explanation for not serving porridge was simply that her family “eaved at it!” While on paper porridge appeared cheap and nutritious, visitors neglected to account for its blandness in an environment where food was one of few opportunities to escape the blandness of life in general. Also, fuel costs for a dish that required prolonged cooking were unendurable, and the luxury status among the poor of two main ingredients, milk and sugar, made it a less than pragmatic dish for most poor families. Poor Londoners preferred cheap fried fish from the innumerable street vendors, which further irritated their middle class overseers.

Reeves described “a respectable but very poor people (who) live over a morass of such intolerable poverty”:

Mrs. P. is terrified of debt. It was she who discovered the plan of buying seven cracked eggs for 3d. As she said, “it might lose you a little of the egg, but you could smell it first, which was a convenience.”

Budgeting for food, burial insurance, cleanliness, clothing, and rent on a minuscule and often irregular income meant a reliance on this type of thrift and on a version of respectability that Reeves identified as residing outside of the scope of middle class prescriptive behavior. How could a lady of culture find respectability in a mother’s purchase of cracked eggs for her family? For the working poor, provident living existed in the cleanliness of the front stoop, in the relative protection afforded by weekly burial insurance payments or small debts with local pawnbrokers and grocery

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160 Ibid., 57. See also Meacham, A Life Apart, 87.
161 Meacham, A Life Apart, 79.
men, and in a collective sentimentality where neighborliness often acted as compensation for lack of privacy. Reeves’ study exposed the gap between wealthy reformers and poor housewives in terms of these cultural differences. It also exposed a more profound gap between the ideal lower class constructed by middle class reformers and the ideal constructed by poor women who were altogether more familiar with the reality of their surroundings and social and material needs of their families. The Socialist Reeves was quicker to elaborate this discrepancy between the ideal working class and actual conditions than were the majority of inspectors. She decried the social inequality that existed between the poor and wealthy in terms of housing. A family in Lambeth, living in overcrowded, drafty, and infested slum housing paid more per square yard than a wealthy resident of Kensington, whose house included ample space and plumbing. 163 Reeves exposed the reality behind conditions of poverty, behind social inequalities, and behind the gulf in values between rich and poor.

The passage of reform legislation, from the Workmen’s Compensation Act of 1897 to the National Insurance Act of 1911, gradually began to transform England into a “welfare state” characterized by government intervention in the decades after World War One. Yet well into the twentieth century the rhetoric of many reformers continued to reflect the class biases upon which England had thrived. This chapter explores only a fraction of the reform discourse that appeared in England during the decades before World War I. Reports of Poor Law officials, meeting minutes of

162 Pember-Reeves, 88.
163 Ibid., 23.
municipal socialist committees, the pages of local newspapers, and parliamentary
debates are just a few of the many domains where issues centered on the alleviation of
poverty in its various forms were discussed. The reform rhetoric explored and
compared in the following chapter demonstrates the increasing relevancy of the debate
over social reform for middle class reformers, a group whose moral certitude was to
an extent shaken by the recognition that it had served injustices upon a large
percentage of England's populace.
CHAPTER IV

THE RHETORIC OF SOCIAL REFORM

This chapter examines and compares the rhetoric with which English and French social observers debated the “social question,” exploring in the process three rhetorical themes. First is the notion that the middle class largely projected onto poor workers the status of a comparatively less civilized “other.” Second is the presence within the discourse of a social reform goal that superseded the eradication of poverty, the provision of security, the general improvement of conditions, and peaceful cooperation between classes. This goal was the creation of what middle class observers deemed a more respectable—a provident—working class. Finally, the “social question” was characterized by a growing nervousness about the disruptive potential of class conflict, prompting middle class observers to expound upon the possible repercussions of remaining passive on the issue of social reform.

A significant element of the “social question” was the desire on the part of many middle class reformers to create a social environment marked by harmonious—or at least improved—class relations. However, most reformers also possessed underlying assumptions about how social classes should interact and, more generally, about the cultural value of the working class. Historian Peter Stearns has claimed that

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164 Breisach, 337.
a dominant middle class progressively forced itself on workers and attempted to alter
them, morally, culturally, and physically, following the prevailing wisdom that the most
precious gift they could impart to the working class was a superior respectability. 165

English reform rhetoric in particular suggests the existence of a middle class
"superiority" complex. In the 1920s Beatrice Webb lamented that housing reformers
of the 1880s had held such an intolerably low image of the poor, particular in terms of
their intellectual prowess. Reformers who demanded improved workers' dwellings
maintained that those dwellings should contain no modern appliances, as "everything
of that sort is a difficulty to them." 166 Along similar lines, in 1911 Canon Barnett
described the "unrepentant and unregenerate pauper," who:

...feels himself to be ill-treated, so he is always disconnected; he thinks
every man's hand is against him, so he is against every man. The
sudden death of all confirmed paupers—it is a terrible thing to say of
men and women—would be a great economic gain and hardly a social
loss. Paupers are not free men nor desirous to be free men, and their
presence is a blot on a Nation called to establish freedom. 167

For even the sympathetic Barnett, a mentality of superiority led him to characterize the
poor as somehow less than human, basic organisms supplying little but "the means by
which contagion—moral and physical—most rapidly spreads." 168 George Sims was
wont to compare poor Londoners in inflammatory literary prose to "the rankest of
weeds and the most poisonous of plants." He claimed that in London "so thickly do

166 This is the testimony given by housing reformer Octavia Hill before the Royal
crime and vice and drink and improvidence twine and intertwine and spread
themselves over the soil upon the fertilizing juices of which they flourish and grow
fouler day by day, that to the casual observer nothing else is visible.”

Samuel Hynes reinforces this middle class’ bleak stereotype of the poor in his
discussion of the National Social Purity Crusade. Organized in 1901 by the Reverend
James Marchant, the Purity Crusade presented disturbing statistics aimed at
highlighting the inherent immorality of the poor. Marchant emphasized the story of a
woman named Ada who had died of an undetermined “vice” in 1800. He described
her working class descendants, who numbered in the hundreds by the end of the
century, as including “beggars,” those “born out of wedlock,” “fallen,” and
“murderers.” Even in the early twentieth century some Victorians listed destitution at
the same moral depth as illegitimacy, prostitution, imprisonment, and homicide. The
murderer and the impoverished, in other words, shared genetic immorality and
qualities that had a direct bearing on their poverty. The Purity Crusade revealed a
“social bias that allied it with established wealth and privilege, and against the
neglected and victimized, and which gave economic foundations to moral anxieties.”

Henry Leyret referred to a middle class “affectation of superiority” which had
led observers to conclude that the poor occupied a low moral ground dialectically

169 Sims, 143.
171 Hynes suggests the undetermined “vice” was “sexual incontinence.” Hynes, 284.
opposite the middle class. Historian Michelle Perrot cites the pervasive tendency among the nineteenth century French bourgeoisie to depreciate physical labor and to derogate those who were forced to allow the “beast” of work to “devour their time.” Idleness allowed for self-improvement and cultural development; yet idleness was something only the wealthy could afford. “Affectations of superiority” could likewise be expressed in more poignantly condescending terms. Jeanne Bouvier, whose autobiography detailed her experiences as a teenage domestic servant in the early 1880s, recalls that upon leaving a home her employer “made fun of me because I had no trunk for my belongings.” Condescension could prevail even within studies that professed detached empiricism. Octave Du Mesnil and Charles Mangenot, shortly after delighting in their study’s “rigorous scientific method,” wrote “we climbed the steps, visited, and measured the housing, however revolting” and utilized adjectives like “sinister” and “beastly” to denote occupants of such slums.

In 1879 Jules Siegfried identified poverty’s “moral or permanent causes” as:

Drunkenness—the frequenting of cabarets and cafés that ruin the health and cause one to distaste work—unanimously emerges as the essential cause of pauperism. Idleness, no work on Monday, shocking behavior, disorder...the lack of well-being, are almost always noticed.

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172 Leyret, 230.
175 Du Mesnil and Mangenot, 1.
176 Jules Siegfried, La Misère: son histoire, ses causes, ses remèdes, (Paris, 1879), 45.
Siegfried, like numerous middle class observers, reformers, and hygienists, shared an understanding of the working poor as deficient in values, morally corrupt, and lacking in respectable ethics like hard work and self-denial. This mentality likely stems from the nineteenth century assumption that the middle class had gleaned economic and political success from an inherent possession of such values. The inability of the poor to improve, they assumed, stemmed from equally inherent shortcomings that only schooling in middle class values could ameliorate. Armed with the germ theory and the genetic implications of Darwin, observers offered dire predictions about "the lives of immorality inevitably awaiting the children reared in such an environment."^{177}

Despite Booth and Rowntree's startling late-nineteenth century revelations about the extent of poverty in England, many middle class politicians and philosophers remained convinced that the causes of poverty were moral rather than physical. Likewise, French social scientists studying the conditions of poverty as late as 1910 continued to equate poverty with improvidence. In their survey of the causes, consequences, and remedies for unemployment, Lavergne and Henry remained convinced that unemployment was caused primarily by workers "who can't physically or don't want to work."^{178} They equated striking laborers with vagabonds who practiced "voluntary unemployment," and generally placed those workers squarely at fault for the insecurity caused by strikes. Fluctuations in market conditions, as well as

^{177} Shapiro, 85.
the inadequacies of existing measures in easing the burdens of work irregularity—such as mutual aid societies—were presented only as secondary causes of poverty.

Characterizations of poor people as both brutally ignorant and immoral were frequent in the social reform discourse. C. S. Loch wrote of paupers:

I take it for granted that, generally speaking, pauperism is evidence of social demoralization. It is a form of dependence on the public fund of the community, which implies not only want of resources, but usually, on the moral or physical side, the want of some of the qualities that are essential to sustain life in a civilized community.¹⁷⁹

Such stereotypes about the poor were significant elements of the social reform debate and may explain why the most vivid call for change in a 1901 Edwardian collection of essays on the social question was directed not at housing, temperance, education, land, wages, or even at improving conditions in general. Rather, C. G. F. Masterman’s solution for the ills of society was “a conditional hope of religious revival.”¹⁸⁰

The conclusion reached by many who were presented with the most urgent social question of the day was that poverty would only be reduced if the poor were converted into respectable members of society. Giving them charity, Reverend Barnett maintained, was not the proper solution:

Inquiries into social conditions lead generally to one conclusion. They show that little can be done for, which is not done with the people. It is the poverty of their own life which makes the poor content to inhabit “uninhabitable” houses, and content also to allow improved dwellings to become almost equally uninhabitable...Such poverty of life can best be removed by contact with those who possess the means of higher life.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Loch, 289.
¹⁸⁰ Hynes, 64.
French observers like Jules Seigfried were devoted to anticlericalism rather than “religious revival,” and yet echoed Barnett by calling for paternalistic “conversion.”\textsuperscript{182}

Do you want to create, at the same time, contented men who are true conservatives? Do you want simultaneously to combat misery and socialist errors? Do you want to increase the guarantees of order, of morality, of political and social moderation? Then let us create workers’ housing!\textsuperscript{183}

Middle class men and women, who in many ways detested the lower classes, consequently defined themselves as an opposite of the wretched, miserable, and often destitute “lower” working classes.

Some middle class reformers, however, were motivated to act by the very wretchedness of the poor and expressed remorse and hope for social improvements. They recognized that a social and to some extent financial debt was owed to the working poor, upon whose backs their fortunes had been gained. The Toynbee Hall notion of “connection” between classes joined Bourgeois’ notion of “quasi-contract” in demonstrating that class responsibility—or at very least the admission that gross inequalities were inherent in laissez-faire capitalism—was increasingly a motivation for reform. In 1895 Barnett commented:

It is most satisfactory that town councils have been roused to a sense of their power, and have been made to feel ‘that their reason of being is not political but social, that their duty is not to protect the pockets of the rich but to save the people.’ But it is disappointing to reflect how little all these improvements mean: how poor the poor remain, how inadequate are the average wages to meet the needs of life, ... how low is the standard of health in East London compare with that of West

\textsuperscript{182} Reid, “Industrial Paternalism,” 579-607; Berlanstein, \textit{The Working People}, 100-1.
\textsuperscript{183} Jules Seigfried, quoted in Ibid., 93.
London, how altogether below the requirement is the provision of libraries, baths, and open spaces. It is disappointing that emotion still governs methods of relief, that the rich give to relieve their own feelings rather than to relieve the poor.\footnote{Banett and Barnett, \textit{Practicable Socialism}, 1-2.}

While guilt did not immediately alter long-existing prejudices about working class squalor, it at least led reformers to evince concern about conditions and sanction improvements. However, middle class intellectuals concerned with the "social question," by first describing the improvident poor and then recognizing the protective necessity of offering regenerative assistance to them, were actively reinforcing their own superiority as a class. In short, themselves imbued with the "means of higher life," they were driven to mentor, teach, and convert the impoverished, savage "others" to a semblance of respectability.

The endpoint for many of those who addressed the "social question" was thus the creation of an improved, "provident" working class. Providence held various meanings for reformers on both sides of the channel. For Léon Bourgeois, provident workers were those who understood and had access to insurance, pensions, and savings; in short, those with economic foresight. This belief led him to work for the establishment of the Commission d’Assurance et de Prévoyance Sociale.\footnote{Banett and Barnett, \textit{Practicable Socialism}, 1-2.} Similarly, the goal of the Alliance d’Hygiène Sociale was to foster foresight in the realm of public health. Officials of the London County Council understood that their task was to provide the means for the administration of good works in "the general effort to
moralize and domesticate the popular classes.\textsuperscript{186} The English Local Government Board’s President in 1910 defended his groups’ initiatives to introduce improved housing by arguing that such projects enhanced citizenship and improved personal responsibility:

A good house developed certain qualities necessary in these days. It resisted pauperism, diminished dependence, made for sobriety.\textsuperscript{187}

Middle class reformers systematically defended the value system of their own class, as historian Geoffrey Finlayson has argued, by discharging “ideological concessions” in exchange for workers’ acceptance of the virtues of that value system.\textsuperscript{188}

Antagonists of welfare legislation opposed charity, which they believed led to “pauperization.” If the poor were given support then it would encourage them to remain lazy and content in their poverty.\textsuperscript{189} The British Charity Organization Society in particular reacted against such cash-payment charity proposals. Rather, they hoped to foster moral and economic regeneration and an enlarged comprehension of the “natural capacity in all men for a life of independence.”\textsuperscript{190} This opposition to welfare had been fundamental to the creation of the English Poor Law and the French hospice system, both of which were draconian systems intended to dissuade rather than

\textsuperscript{185} The Committee on Social Insurance was created under the auspices of the Labor Office in 1893. In 1906 both were elevated to the Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance. Stone, 60-61.
\textsuperscript{186} Elwitt, “Social Reform and Social Order,” 441.
\textsuperscript{187} Finlayson, 186-7.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{189} Elwitt, The Third Republic Defended, 39.
encourage people to seek aid from the state.¹⁹¹ Contrary to welfare, independence remained the ideal, regardless of the improbability that most poor people could actually hope to attain it. Education, tutelage, and instruction in correct living were the vital elements in the creation of providence. State assistance was the last straw, viable only for those who were ready to abandon their independence.

Education was, for a host of Victorian Liberals and French Republicans, the vital component of successful social reform. In France, the early 1880s saw the passage and implementation of the Ferry Laws, which established free, secular, and compulsory primary education. A similar system was in place in England by the early 1890s (though the Church of England and nonconformist denominations retained greater influence there). Education reformers in both countries assumed that the primary school could be utilized to alter existing attitudes among working class families. If poor children could be taught the proper values of respect for authority, obedience, order, and cleanliness, they could be “broken in” to respectability and given their “one chance of civilization.”¹⁹² In her study of poverty among children in London, Anna Davin considers the chairman of the London School Board, who was beset with the task of providing instruction for “tens of thousands of children...who are, I regret to say, grossly ignorant and utterly uninstructed.”¹⁹³ His solution to the dearth of intelligence and values of these poor children was to teach hygiene and

¹⁹² Anna Davin, Growing Up Poor, 134.
¹⁹³ Ibid.
improved regularity of attendance. Instruction had to occur outside the home (as the family perpetuated bad habits) and under the auspices of teachers who were well-versed in middle class values. However, such prescriptions failed to adequately account for the burdens poor working class families were forced to endure, particularly when sending a child to school often resulted in acute hardship due to the loss of a small but precious income.

Similarly, French reformers saw primary education as the means of inculcating in the working poor those values of “providence” desired by the bourgeoisie, values such as “patriotic acceptance of conscription and loyalty to the Republican political system and the capitalist social order.” In *La Misère* (1880), Jules Seigfried recognized the importance of education in the creation of proper individuals:

Without doubt instruction provides man the means of more easily earning his living. It emancipates, from a material point of view. But it is not enough that education enables him to earn a living; it must also give him the strength to struggle against bad instincts, to vanquish them, and to march down the path of good. There is the task of education.

The “social problem is,” claimed Léon Bourgeois, “in the last resort a problem of education.” While the economy remained off limits to social reformers, middle class intellectuals inextricably linked social reform with moral reform through education. Sanford Elwitt makes the suggestion that within the Third Republican

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194 McGraw, 15.
“social question” discourse, “liberals subordinated social reform to transformations in attitudes.”197

Whereas in England the most zealous social reformers targeted temperance, budgetary improprieties, and education, French reformers devoted their greatest energies to combating contagious diseases, infant mortality, and poor public hygiene.198 To address these issues, reformers in both countries aimed significant energy at housing reform and, in particular, at the problem of urban overcrowding. They generally viewed slums both as germ factories and as vehicles for the perpetuation of improvident living. In France, a 1902 Housing Law mandating inspections of working class housing was unpopular both among landlords who determined rents and among the tenants who would have presumably benefited (but for whom improvements often meant increased rent). Though the law was supposed to protect people from the dangers of slums, it also authorized that only homes posing an immediate demonstrable danger to a neighboring residence were to be inspected. In other words, individual liberty was so safeguarded and personal responsibility for living conditions so pervasive that inspectors needed proof that individual squalor was causing direct harm to others before action could be taken.199 In this manner effective improvements in living conditions for poor working class families were subsumed to liberal ideology.

197 Ibid., 182.
198 Briggs, 16-20; Berlanstein, 56-63.
199 Aisenberg, 136.
The failure of housing legislation also reflected the pervasiveness of the view that overcrowding and urban filth were examples of the improvidence of the poor. Historian Ann-Louise Shapiro explored this idea:

Raffalovich drew the inevitable conclusion; “Against extreme poverty there is no remedy, pauperism is incurable;” Passy concluded that “it is better for the worker to have a cramped, somber, humid dwelling than none at all.” Echoing this conclusion, Leroy-Beaulieu noted that “what is to us a hovel is for the lowest class a sort of Eden” and criticized the “superficial philanthropy” which engineered the destruction of the legendary Cité des Kroumirs, removing a slum but forcing its poor inhabitants to seek even more precarious shelters.200

By this logic, living in slums was a malady with which the poor had been stricken, and for which an antibiotic was needed.

The equation of poverty and improvidence was an important rhetorical theme in the early-twentieth century garden city movement. In the nineteenth century, paternalistic—and generally nonconformist—factory owners at various times worked to create utopian worker paradises modeled on the metaphor of “the employer as father,” where workers would be molded into a happy, docile, loyal employees.201 By the late-1890s philanthropists came to the further conclusion that garden cities—planned suburbs featuring ample parks, wide boulevards, and modest, affordable, spacious housing—could attract both poor workers and capital alike into profitable ventures that would alter the urban landscape. They would “regain” the nostalgic, rural, healthy “paradise” that had existed in an idealized, medieval past.202

200 Shapiro, 104.
201 Donald Reid, “Industrial Paternalism,” 581.
202 Meacham, Regaining Paradise, 1-10.
In his recent study of garden cities and "Englishness," Standish Meacham highlights the drive on the part of many English reformers—from the utopian socialist Ebenezer Howard to the paternalistic Cadburys—to distance urban populations from nineteenth century industrial centers. If moral regeneration was to occur, such urban cesspools and "shock cities" had to be replaced by vibrant suburbs set as much as possible in a natural, rural environment. Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, the designers of two of the earliest garden cities, were both members of the arts and crafts movement and devoted followers of Morris and Ruskin.\footnote{Ibid., 70.} As a result, their designs were fueled by the belief that aesthetically pleasing surroundings would foster morality. While Meacham calls this a "worthy enough vision," he also notes that Parker and Unwin's vision of morality, which would also be fostered by designing an urban milieu that would allow workers to keep themselves to themselves, "denied the institutions that over the years [workers] had grown to rely on as a way of establishing a community as they understood it: shops, pubs, street life—the warp and woof of the urban working class neighborhood."\footnote{Ibid., 92-3.} The architects consciously sought, in their developments at Letchworth and Hampstead Heath, to introduce elements of middle class sensibility to workers, believing that such indoctrination would inevitably improve their quality of life and provide them with moral regeneration.\footnote{Ibid., 75.}
The founders of the earliest English garden cities also feared perpetuating class conflict and urged suburban designs that allowed for the co-mingling of the wealthy and poorer classes. Success in this endeavor was dubious at best:

[Unwin] made it his business to improve the quality of life for English men, women, and children. He appreciated the fact that those people needed to understand their lives in terms of some sort of social aggregation beyond their individual selves and their immediate families. Yet he appeared unable to work comfortably with the reality of class consciousness. His plans tended to brush aside the immediate, implacable reality of class.206

In the end, garden suburbs in England evolved into profitable housing ventures in which many of the original “classless” intentions were subsumed to market needs. Moreover, the homes and neighborhoods that were produced remained unaffordable for most of the poor workers who had provided the impetus for their construction. The rhetoric of the English garden city movement contained a guarantee that proximity to nature, to middle class standards of culture, and to wealthy neighbors who might serve as examples of provident living, would benefit the poor working class families who resided in such proximity. This guarantee never reached fruition.

A similar movement existed in France in the late-nineteenth century, as housing reformers advocated the construction of garden cities and utopian cités ouvrières (worker cities). In *La Cité Jardin* (1904) Georges Benoit-Lévy described an ideal French city (having looked to English model cities like Port Sunlight for inspiration). In the French “garden city,” Charles Gide explained in the book’s preface, “one can

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206 Ibid., 77-8.
see the perfect beauty of nature.”207 Like Ebenezer Howard, Benoit-Lévy imagined a lush, rural paradise, a setting that he believed would counter the damage caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization, which violently separated workers from natural surroundings and from an idealized agrarian past:

In order for a person to lead a dignified and just life he must have a family, a house, a city. Numerous are those who lack a true family, rare are those who possess a decent roof over their head, and exceptional are those who belong to a city truly worthy of the name.208

The garden city would be the logical next step for the “progress of civilization” and “the evolution of humanity.”209 And yet, like other reformers of his day, Benoit-Lévy inextricably linked a bias of class superiority to a natural phenomenon. He echoed the English reformers’ belief that the lower classes would be morally and physically reinvigorated by going “back to nature.”

Independence, so cherished by economic liberals, was also a goal in the formulation of garden cities and cités ouvrières. Paternalistic employers like Émile Cheysson regarded the allotment garden as a vital component of company housing schemes.210 Gardens fostered providence and independence insofar as they encouraged workers to involve themselves in the creation and maintenance—as with an investment—of an object of beauty. Émile Cheysson expressed his sympathetic and philanthropic desire to allot working class families “a corner where they could see the

207 Charles Gide, préface to Georges Benoit-Lévy, La Cité Jardin (Paris: Henri Jouve, 1904), ii.
208 Benoit-Lévy, 7.
209 Ibid., 260.
210 Donald Reid, “Industrial Paternalism,” 583.
sky, grass, and flower” and to place “within the austerity of lives bowed by incessant work a little poetry and an ideal of beauty.”

And yet gardens required nurturing and necessitated interaction with the soil, both of which reformers viewed as lacking in the working class and as vital for moral regeneration. Gardens would also teach foresight, as they had to be planned and cared for with thought given to weather and seasonal changes. A return to the soil, supporters believed, would translate into economic prévoyance, political conservatism, and social moderation. Allotment gardens were taken seriously by the managers of many company towns; iron miners at Briey in Lorraine, for instance, could be fired for neglecting their gardens. Wide boulevards, semi-rustic surroundings, and access to the soil would inspire moral behavior, in terms of loyalty to the employer, docility, hard work, and disavowal of labor unions.

Whether preaching education, paternalism, or “garden cities,” the middle classes in England and France were determined to mold what they perceived as a morally corrupt and intellectually bankrupt class into something resembling their own image. As improved literacy—caused in part by the spread of compulsory secular education in the 1880s—increased working class exposure to elements of middle class culture, many of the designs and improvements sought by reformers were grasped by

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211 Cheysson quoted in Shapiro, 93.
212 McGraw, 39.
213 In addition to their moralizing qualities, the construction of cités ouvrières would allow them, like Baron Haussmann’s Paris, to be more easily policed. See McGraw, 36-40; and David P. Jordan, Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
the poor as desirable. However, historians have also illustrated that many poor workers remained unreceptive to the philanthropy of their “betters.” The abhorrence shown by some workers for middle class prescriptions was an important rhetorical theme addressed by social commentators, who expressed uneasiness about the unpredictability of a disgruntled working class. This, to some extent above and beyond the wishful creation of a provident working class, was a profound motivation to the reformers and observers who debated the “social question.” Even Socialist leaders, many of whom were themselves middle class, became increasingly critical of workers who often refused to act as a unified body, whether in their attendance of union meetings, in their purchase of socialist newspapers, or, most importantly, in their voting records.214 Donald Reid cites the fact that union locals were at times more interested in “advancing their members’ immediate well-being than in launching a general strike” as one reason for this growing impatience.215

Though real wages increased during the late-nineteenth century—a period characterized by a European depression that exposed the precariousness of bourgeois prosperity—the visibility of high levels of poverty was amplified by rising numbers of strikes and by agitation from workers and labor organizations. What Gareth Stedman Jones described as the “Threat of Outcast London” (in reference to Mearns’ 1883 pamphlet) brought home to the middle class “the potential dangers of a situation whereby respectable workers might be swept into direct action by the less

215 Reid, “Putting Social Reform Into Practice,” 80.
respectable.”

Standish Meacham similarly articulated this fear of a disgruntled working class. He noted that some workers refused to happily submit to the will of would-be benefactors who persuaded them that their true rewards would come in heaven. Rather, they prayed “not so much for their own salvation as for the damnation of their earthly tormentors.”

The danger of organized laborers seeking redress for the wrongs of the bourgeoisie held political and social immediacy.

Fear of the working poor existed on many levels. French hygienists, for example, used the scientific method to expose the dangers of working class insalubrité to the bourgeoisie. Interventionists, armed with evidence that non-action could potentially threaten all members of society in terms of the spread of contagion, were motivated by more than philanthropic charity. Reformers demanded housing legislation and health inspections that would fundamentally alter and improve “the physical presence of the poor, of their living conditions and their lifestyles.”

Alteration of “physical presence” and of “lifestyles” entailed wholesale cultural changes that surpassed those prescribed for improving “living conditions.”

English reformers were also concerned about eradicating both contagion and cultural pollution. George Sims warned of the dangers of young, lower class servants—“rank weeds”—serving in wealthy households:

Now, if you will take the trouble to think out the possible result of girls going from such pigsties as these straight into well-to-do families, where they will nurse the children and be constantly in the closest

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216 Finlayson, 121.
217 Meacham, *A Life Apart*, 16.
218 Shapiro, 84.
contact with the younger members of the family, I think you will see that the dangers of unhealthy homes for the poor may be equally dangerous to a better class.²¹⁹

Perceptions about the “low” culture and morals of the working poor, as well as appeals to logic based on class distinctions, at times prevailed over scientific reason. Like Du Mesnil, Sims found it necessary to highlight lower class cultural corruption with language that would evoke fear in order to convincingly show that reforms were as necessary for the well-to-do as they were for the poor.

A comparison of public health reforms shows a divergence in English and French reform rhetoric. English health reformers like Edwin Chadwick had created, much earlier in the nineteenth century, a charged atmosphere over public hygiene that became pressing much later in France. Whereas in the 1890s French rhetoric largely targeted social improvements in purely scientific, political, and ideological rhetoric, much of the contemporary English discourse was fueled not by the germ theory but rather by startling sociological statistics, missionary zeal, and admitted fear of cultural and class pollution. In historical perspective, strikingly similar descriptions, demands, and arguments were created from divergent intellectual environments. The idea of spreading germs terrified French reformers in the same way that undeniable statistics of poverty wracked the English middle class with guilt. Solutions like housing reforms, health inspections, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, and factory acts all in some way addressed these social problems; they were similar means to

²¹⁹ Sims, 59.
similar ends. Yet, their origins were rooted in motivations inspired by different social, cultural and historical peculiarities.

Concern over the widening gulf between social classes also motivated social observers. Maud Pember Reeves illustrated how middle class school board visitors were awed by the choices poor families made regarding their budgeting and habits of cleanliness. In London, for example, women in very poor neighborhoods spent hours each day scrubbing their front stoops, a rather hopeless endeavor in light of the constant presence of airborne factory filth that methodically re-carpeted all with layers of soot. London County Council observers, School Board inspectors, and even labor leaders marveled at this strange practice. Why did the poor not extend that energy toward educating themselves, spending time with their children, improving their personal hygiene, or attending church? Observers often failed to find the significance of a clean stoop to the housewife’s—and the family’s—cultural respectability, largely because many poor people sought respectability among their neighbors and peers and at the street level rather than among the wealthy volunteers who made periodic visitations.

Few reformers reflected Pember Reeves’ and Henry Leyret’s acceptance of the poor as dignified and culturally unique. Similarly, few understood that a culture existed among the poor, one that resulted from prolonged want and neglect rather than endemic immorality or lack of divine favor. This is not to say that the poor refused to put on airs to impress their benefactors. Pember Reeves noted attempts on the part of
poor men and women to appear respectable to school board visitors. A woman who went out of her way to fulfill the visitor’s desire to sit in a draft probably had learned that bit of hospitality from previous visitors but had not applied the knowledge to her daily life. Poor women in Lambeth, she points out, were slow to overcome their fear of drafts, which they perceived as transportation for illness.221

Workers who were daily confronted with death and disease, with unemployment and want, often found succor in the release of “low” entertainment such as music halls.222 This was unacceptable to social reformers, who presented such habits as immoral and as demonstrative of a general lack of economic foresight. More importantly, these were aspects of a culture that could feasibly reach beyond the slums of Paris or London. Pasteur’s theory made this a gloomy proposition for inhabitants of wealthy suburbs, who increasingly realized they were vulnerable to both cultural pollution and indiscriminate germs. If the poor were immoral, insalubrious “microbe factories,” the cultural characteristics associated with the poor symbolized those germs and struck fear into middle class families. The realization that traditions and myths existed outside of the visitors’ realm of understanding and exclusive of their prescriptions for proper living added to the fear that the wealthier classes were in the process of creating, as many Socialists argued, too vast a gulf between rich and poor.

220 Meacham, A Life Apart, 89.
221 Pember Reeves, 16.
222 The appearance and grand success of music halls and cinemas in Saint-Denis around 1900 was followed by middle class consternation at their success and at the rapid demise of the local “respectable” theatrical productions. Berlanstein, 128-133.
That the culture of the poor proved resistant to middle class meddling had long been an area of concern for reformers. It was lamented by Le Play in the 1870s and echoed by Toynbee Hall and mutual aid society volunteers in later years:

The suffering classes, which today dominate society by their votes, are generally incapable of comprehending the true interests of their families. Sentiments of hate and envy, developed by the disorganization of the foyer and the workshop, cause the population to be suspicious of the natural authorities who would be worthy to govern the neighborhoods.223

Clearly, reformers were somewhat daunted by the attitude referred to by Peter Steams as worker "traditionalism."224 The lower classes, reformers believed, had to be shown, through example, through education, and as a last resort through legislation, that the culture and the moral plateau of the bourgeoisie was more desirable than their own. Fear of the alternatives—class conflict and decreasing cultural continuity between social classes—was more dangerous to the minority ruling classes than was an appeased working class that had given up its revulsion for inequality in exchange for greater economic security.

In belle époque France, a very realistic fear of social revolution existed in the popular literature of the day and in the debates of the Chamber of Deputies. Emile Rey, a doctor and deputy from Lot, revealed that fear was a motivation for reform in a speech advocating old age pensions:

223 Frédérick Le Play, Le Programme des Unions de la paix sociale (Tours, 1876), 123; cited in Shapiro, 89.
224 Stearns, "The Effort at Continuity in Working Class Culture," 626-655. Stearns argues that workers resisted modernization, clinging to a traditional, guild-like culture
We must not fool ourselves! The poor classes are becoming impatient with a Republic which, after twenty-nine years of existence, has not brought them appreciable relief for their sad situation. It would be dangerous, especially in the face of the unhealthy excitations of which these classes are the object, to continue to refuse them legitimate satisfaction.\textsuperscript{225}

Léon Bourgeois and other solidaristes further asserted that the wealth acquired by the bourgeoisie over the course of the nineteenth century had to be shared with the poor. This “natural obligation” was not simply a call for charity. Bourgeois believed legislative measures were required to subsidize mutual aid societies.\textsuperscript{226} He was able to make this argument, one that cut sharply against the grain of traditional laissez-faire economics, by couching it in a cause/effect relationship in which non-action was directly correlated with social revolution.\textsuperscript{227} In England, a similar fear of the working class was identified by Winston Churchill, then a member of the Liberal party:

With a ‘stake in the country’ in the form of insurance against evil days, these workers will pay no attention to the vague promises of revolutionary socialism. It will make them happier citizens, more efficient workers, and happier men.\textsuperscript{228}

English writer John Galsworthy offered a sharp critique of the class divide that caused many among the upper class minority to fear imminent social revolution. In \textit{Fraternity} (1909), Galsworthy painted a critical portrait of the “official” classes in England, for that collided with industrial change. Workers had agency, he asserts, in defining their class structure and culture.


\textsuperscript{226} Bourgeois, \textit{Solidarité}, 152.

\textsuperscript{227} Hayward, “Educational Pressure Groups,” 16.
this he was sharply criticized by the *Saturday Review*. He was referred to as "insane" and his book was deemed "an insidious and embittered attack on our social system." View the themselves as pinnacles of society in terms of culture and morals, members of the middle class were not prepared to stand for such criticism of their artists, intellectuals, and their attitude of superiority. That Galsworthy was not a reformer and was writing about improvements he hoped to see in his own class lends insight to the harsh defensive reaction by the *Saturday Review*. In fact, the attack on Galsworthy as a "traitor to his class" was somewhat premature. In a previous publication he had described the poor as "the very self of the brute beast that lurks beneath the surface of our State; the very self of the chained monster whom Nature tortures with the instinct for possession, and man with whips drives from attainment."

By the early twentieth century a few observers began to invert the equation that slums, poverty, and the state of decline among the working poor resulted from their improvidence. Instead, they increasingly blamed economic conditions for improper housing and other inadequacies that fueled the "social question." The seeds of this conversion can be found as early as 1884. The British Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Class asked the Earl of Shaftesbury, who had claimed that "the evil of overcrowding" had "increased very much" in the preceding decades, "Is it the Pig that makes the Stye, or the Stye that makes the Pig?" His reply:

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229 *Saturday Review*, vol. 107 (March 13, 1909), 341-342; reprinted in Hynes, 78.
230 Hynes, 76.
Now I am certain that a great number of the people who are in that condition have been made so by the condition of the houses in which they live. I have no doubt that if we were to improve the condition of the dwellings, there would be a vast number of very bad cases who would continue in the filth in which they began; but I am sure that no small number might be rescued from it by being placed in better circumstances, might have greater enjoyment of health, and might thus be much improved in their general condition.\textsuperscript{231}

Seebohm Rowntree later noted that slum-dwelling was caused by the \textit{necessity} of cheap housing; it was “induced by irregularity of income” rather than by the some genetic desire of poor people to reside in slums.\textsuperscript{232} Canon Barnett of Toynbee Hall made one of the most vocal criticisms of the intentions of social reformers who equated poverty with improvidence; it was also one of the most elaborate defenses of the human worth of the working class:

\begin{quote}
The conversion of sinners—at any rate while the sinners are sought chiefly among the poor—the emigration of children, the spread of thrift and temperance among the work people, will still leave families occupying single rooms and the sons of men the joyless slaves of work, a state of society for which no defense can be made. It is only a larger share of wealth which can increase comfort and relieve men from the pressure brought on them…\textsuperscript{233}
\end{quote}

Middle class social reformers, regardless of their motivations for discussing social reform, demanded improvements for poor workers while in essence defining themselves in contrast to those very “improvident” workers. They urged the preservation of the existing hierarchical social system, for the preservation of their

\textsuperscript{231} \textit{First Report of the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Housing of the Working Classes [England and Wales], with Minutes of Evidence and Appendix}, Parliamentary Papers, 1884-85, Cd. 4402, Q. 39.
\textsuperscript{232} Rowntree, 144.
own high social status within that system, and for improved workers who conform to a
middle class ideal. Whereas expenditures on welfare in France in 1910 may have been
as little as 25 percent of those in Great Britain, Roger McGraw nevertheless found that
in both countries legislation was inadequate and failed to make any profound impact
on poverty.\textsuperscript{234} However, this legislation formed a crucial foundation for the
development welfare states in Europe. Generally in the literary discourse on the
“social question,” reformers defined their own middle class mentality, exposed their
continuing assumptions about the poor and about poverty, and demonstrated their
continuing adherence to tenets of economic liberalism and mid-nineteenth century
negative preconceptions about the working class.

\textsuperscript{234} McGraw, 33.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

For most of the late nineteenth century...the struggle for [social] gains generated idealism, energetic leadership, thousands of pages of empirical investigation, and few concrete results.\textsuperscript{235}

Social reformers and their opponents in France and England engaged in similar debates on the "social question" in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. These debates largely addressed the degree to which the state was responsible for providing insurance or security to the poor and the degree to which the poor contributed to their own poverty. In both countries reformers demanded legislation targeted at old age, sickness, unemployment, and bad working and housing conditions. George Sims echoed French hygiene experts when he claimed that the "sanitary defects of the tenements are, at present, absolute dangers to the Public Health." He demanded that "on this ground alone it is desirable to agitate for reform."\textsuperscript{236} Defenders of capital countered by arguing that legislation affronted the rights of private property. French social engineer and defender of laissez-faire Emile Cheysson claimed that "the struggle for existence" contributed to the "triumph of individualism."\textsuperscript{237} Within the confines of this debate myriad observers sought to

\textsuperscript{235} Berlanstein, 57.
\textsuperscript{236} Sims, 109.
\textsuperscript{237} Elwitt, The Third Republic Defended, 83.
survey conditions, garner support for and against legislation, and promote action at the local and national levels. The preceding chapters have broadly outlined the framework of the “social question” and the rhetoric of the debate in England and France.

During the mid-nineteenth century, research by scientists like Charles Darwin and Louis Pasteur had begun to substantially modify long-existing preconceptions about religion and about the nature of mankind’s relationship to the environment. Statisticians and hygienists, motivated by their dedication to the scientific method, convincingly proved in their studies that Europeans were faced with daunting problems created by rapid industrialization and urbanization; in short, by modernization. Nightmarish poverty and fear of contagion, class warfare, and rising socialism increasingly persuaded some members of the middle classes to reevaluate their strict adherence to laissez-faire capitalism. The passage of insurance legislation in Bismarck’s Germany during the 1880s resonated with many observers in England and France, who increasingly were faced with demands for similar reforms from disgruntled workers.

The language used by reformers reflected these changing attitudes toward poverty and social welfare. In France, Léon Bourgeois wrote of the existence of a “quasi-contract” between social classes. Beatrice Webb claimed that the rich owed a “social debt” to the poor. Socialists advocated a general shift away from the ascendancy of property. Most importantly, late-nineteenth century reformers were
concerned about the repercussions of their own idleness, choosing as an alternative to
debate the "social question" in clubs, journals, pamphlets, and in political discussions.
Such ideas diverged distinctly from the doctrines of self-help and laissez-faire that had once characterized middle class liberal ideology.

Symbolic of middle class morals in the mid-nineteenth century, Charles
Dickens' character Gradgrind had "defended himself against his feelings by fleeing into his constricted, cold, affectless reality, into facts, facts, facts." Using this analogy to describe the late-nineteenth century, historian Peter Gay referred to the "social question" as "a productive flight into reality." Though "facts" were formidable weapons, reformers in England and France alike were challenged with presenting those facts in such a way as to inspire action or foster legislation. This function was largely carried out through the use of rhetoric, as George Sims elaborated:

Public opinion boldly expressed never fails to compel the obedience of those who guide the destinies of States. Public opinion is a chorus of voices, and the strength of that chorus depends upon the manner in which each individual member of it exerts his vocal power.

Sociologists who were working under new scientific methods of empiricism studied conditions of poverty and gasped at their findings. Increasingly they presented poor housing conditions, bad sanitation, and traditional symptoms of poverty such as

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238 Historians have argued that France experienced "modernization" to a lesser degree than did England. In particular see Trebilcock, 155-160; David Landes, The Unbound Prometheus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Kemp, 49.


240 Sims, 110.
slums, prostitution, and pauperism as resulting from social inequalities rather than chronic immorality. The belief that the economic institutions responsible for bourgeois prosperity were also the root causes of the overwhelming statistics of poverty among the working poor was a shift from the ideological assumptions contained in Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*.

Social reformers who favored legislation thus argued that poverty was the fault of the economic and social system. Therefore it fell to the State to correct the situation by providing legislation that erected safety nets for the unfortunate, most of whom, by no fault of their own, had fallen victim to poverty. Laws protecting victims of industrial accidents were established in 1897 in England and in 1902 in France. Old age pension plans and hours regulations for women and children were also enacted during this period. While reform legislation aimed at protecting workers became diluted and ineffective when implemented, it nevertheless laid the groundwork for later, more sweeping reforms.

What must not be neglected is the fact that large numbers of social commentators, rather than demanding legislation and government intervention to protect workers, instead called on reformers, educators, and philanthropists to instill in the poor the provident lifestyles of the middle class. They argued that if workers could be imbued with the proper techniques of "civilized" living, such as thrift and hygiene, then eventually they would be able to pull themselves out of poverty and enjoy more fruitful and meaningful lives. Legislation did not fit into this equation. Such a mentality originated in the traditional notion that had predicated the New Poor Law
(1834), that poverty was the fault of the victim. Protective laws amounted to charity and would create greater poverty because of the laziness and wiliness of the improvident working class.

These two modes of thinking overlapped in the social reform discourse. For instance, Léon Bourgeois suggested that the wealthy had mistreated workers and therefore owed them a modicum of the rewards that had been reaped from their labor. At the same time, he supported legislation that subsidized traditional private methods of assistance—such as Friendly Societies—rather than forcefully advocating more direct protection laws. Similarly, Samuel Barnett in England championed assistance to the poor and advocated the teaching of provident living in direct contact with the poor. Yet he also wrote that most poor people were by nature uncouth and that their sudden disappearance would have a positive impact on society. With these conflicting ideas evident, and given what Asa Briggs has called “the many lags in the story of social reform, long gaps between pressure and product,” it is possible to conclude that the transition to the post-World War One welfare state was not as smooth as some secondary historical literature has suggested.

Concerned middle class social reformers understood that the “natural” organization of society would begin to crumble without at least preventive measures aimed at the eradication of poverty and the amelioration of class conflict. Such measures, these “timid” reformers hoped, would create a provident working class

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241 Briggs, 5.
242 Hynes, 55-57.
without substantially undermining the social order. The new working class would be
content with its position and therefore would no longer appear as a revolutionary
social threat. While the idea that the best way to restrain the masses was via social
reform eventually prevailed, middle class reformers initially turned their attentions to
curtailing the symptoms of poverty. This they hoped to accomplish by improving
hygiene, by supplying workers with small gardens, by introducing the poor to the
culture of the middle class through direct contact, and by enacting piecemeal
legislation providing some security during illness and old age. Most importantly, they
hoped to create improved workers who better conformed to the middle class ideal of
respectability while remaining docile, "tireless little workers." Serious consideration
for the establishment of economic security for the working poor, such as effective,
state-subsidized old age pensions, was much slower to develop in the late-nineteenth
and early-twentieth century French and English social reform discourse.
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