THE ETHICAL SOCIALISM OF R.H. TAWNEY PART TWO BY PHIL SHARPE

INTRODUCTION

It is interesting that in his next major book about the moral limitations of contemporary society the aim of Tawney is to resolve these problems not through the formation of a functional society but with the realisation of equality: “And evidently it requires it in a special degree at a moment like the present, when circumstances confront it with the necessity of giving a new orientation to its economic life, because it is in such circumstances that the need for co-operation, and for mutual co-operation and toleration upon which co-operation depends, is particularly pressing. But a common culture cannot be created merely by desiring it. It must rest upon practical foundations of social organization. It is incompatible with the existence of sharp contrasts between the economic standards and economic opportunities of different classes, for such contrasts have as their result, not a common culture, but servility or resentment, on the one hand, and patronage or arrogance, on the other. It involves, in short, a large measure of economic equality – not necessarily in the sense of a an identical level of pecuniary incomes, but of equality of environment, of access to education and the means of civilization, of security and of independence, and of the social consideration which equality in these matters usually carries with it.”(1)

Thus the definite conception of the functional society as the realisation of equality has been diluted and replaced with an ambiguous principle which lacks precise social content. Hence the possibility becomes apparent that equality could be realised under capitalism. The preference still seems to be that socialism represents the most principled and effective manner in which equality can be realised. But the prospect is also established that it is possible to introduce ethical criteria such as equality into the activity of capitalism. This suggests that we should aspire to realise socialism but not be disappointed with the situation in which a type of capitalism is developed in which genuine equality becomes possible. Consequently the ultimately goal is not an ethical socialist society and is instead the realisation of the principle of equality in connection to the development of genuine co-operation and consideration. In other words Tawney advocates the prospect that a caring type of capitalism can be created that is able to acknowledge and practice the principles of equality. He no longer makes the emphatic claim that only with the creation of the functional society is it possible to establish genuine equality based on the unifying role of common social purpose. Therefore instead of the end being the most important aspect of his approach it is the primacy of moral principles which are ultimately defined in terms of equality.

The point being made is that the emphasis of Tawney is on the prospects of modifying existing society in order to make it compatible with the principle of equality, and the goal of an egalitarian society is relegated into secondary consideration. Tawney is still concerned to change the unequal situation of circumstances and institutions which generate inequality, but this does not necessarily mean the development of an alternative society because the emphasis has become one of the transformation of individual situation rather than changing the character of society.(2) This means what is important is realising principles like equality of consideration and as a result his standpoint is diluted to mean ‘that the social environment and economic organization should be made more conducive to equality’.(3)

The change in emphasis in the position of Tawney means that his major argument is with the various elitists who reject the possibility of greater political and economic equality within capitalism. He is concerned to show that people are not inferior because someone may be more intellectually gifted than another person, and he disputes the claim that the distribution of wealth would ruin society. He is concerned to refute the claim that individual differences undermines the claim for equality, instead: “A society which values equality will attach a high degree of significance to differences of character and intelligence between different individuals, and a low degree of significance to economic and social differences between different groups.”(4)

Tawney is aware that the character of capitalism generates the class system and the general division between those that work for a wage in contrast to the few individuals who own large-scale property. But his alternative is posed in terms of a good idea rather than a definite conception of a functional society: “It is possible to conceive a community in which the necessary diversity of economic functions existed side by side with a large measure of economic and social equality. In such a community, while the occupations and incomes of individuals varied, they would live, nevertheless, in much the same environment, would enjoy similar standards of health and education, would find different positions, according to their various abilities, equally accessible to them, would intermarry freely with each other, would be equally immune from the more degrading forms of poverty, and equally secure against economic oppression.”(5) Tawney vaguely talks of the necessity of this form of civilised community that would remove the causes of inequality and act in the spirit of change, but this is posed in terms of the application of rhetoric rather than the specific elaboration of a society that is able to establish principled forms of equality. Indeed the emphasis of Tawney is to provide arguments against the limited conception of equality of opportunity, which occurs within capitalism, and so neglects establishing detailed arguments in favour of a society based on economic equality. Therefore he argues in dogmatic terms that equality of opportunity is not a substitute for practical equality: “But opportunities to ‘rise’ are not a substitute for a large amount of practical equality, nor do they make immaterial the existence of a sharp disparities of income and social condition. On the contrary, it is only the presence of a high degree of practical equality which can diffuse and generalise opportunities to rise. The existence of such opportunities in fact, and not merely in form, depends, not only upon an open road, but upon an equal start.”(6)

However a supporter of equality of opportunity could argue quite convincingly that this principle was superior to the vague notions of Tawney despite the limitations of its application. The actual practice of equality of opportunity meant that people could realise social mobility despite practical problems caused by privileged forms of education. In contrast Tawney could outline what was flawed about this types of equality realised under capitalism, but he could not provide a valid alternative because of his reluctance to justify the functional society. Instead equality was diluted to mean a collection of criteria or principles, but he could not outline how these principles could be realised. Instead his standpoint was reduced to that of moral outrage against the limitations of capitalism, and so his perspective was not satisfactory. He knew what he was against, and outlined his views eloquently, but he was not able to establish convincingly what he supported. Instead his position was reduced to a collection of clichés that were morally worthy but which lacked the content of socialist conviction. What would really resolve his theoretical impasse would be the elaboration of the conception of the functional society. This would indicate that capitalism could not realise the aim of social purpose and therefor lacked the basis for the attainment of equality. However the contemporary standpoint of Tawney was unable to sustain this level of conviction. Instead his conception of practical equality was vague and so could be reconciled with capitalism. For example, how was practical equality realised when compared to ‘equality of opportunity’? The inability to connect the ambiguity of practical equality with the definite conception of the functional society meant his approach was based on indecision rather than systematic argument. What was omitted from his contemporary viewpoint was the influence of a definite socialist conviction. His standpoint became about what was wrong with capitalism instead of the advocacy of socialism. The point is that what was required was not a dogmatic repetition of the conception of the functional society but instead meant connecting his contemporary arguments for equality to a precise understanding of how socialism could establish the conditions for its realisation. The failure to carry out this argument would mean that his position could only suggest what was ethically wrong with capitalism, and therefore failed to argue in favour of the ethical aspects of socialism. Tawney seemed unaware of these problems because he utilised the principle of equality as the basis for resolving any outstanding theoretical arguments. But did this conception of equality refer to capitalism or socialism?

The major theoretical problem was that if he did consider that equality could be realised under capitalism, and so resolved the previous contention that ethics had no connection to capitalist economic activity, the view that only socialism could establish a social system based on morality had become compromised. Instead the implicit assumption was that practical equality, or equality of condition and environment, could be realised under capitalism. Indeed it could be argued that the strategic aim was to achieve caring capitalism and so the ethical necessity of socialism or the functional society had become superfluous. It is possible that this is not the intention of Tawney and his aim is still socialism. But the conception of practical equality is an ambiguous basis to justify the ethical importance of socialism. Indeed it could be suggested that practical equality can be applied within both capitalism and socialism. What had originally been an ethical argument for socialism had become diluted to a question of political choice. The working class could apply mass pressure within capitalism in order to establish a system of practical equality. This standpoint was connected to an emphasis in the role of Parliament and the Labour Party. In contrast the revolutionary approach was connected to socialism and consequently repudiated.

THE ARGUMENT FOR EQUALITY

However Tawney’s ambiguity seems to be challenged by what becomes a more explicit argument about the relationship between equality and socialism. He outlines important criteria for equality: “It is necessary because a community requires unity as well as diversity, and because, important as it is to discriminate between different powers, it is even more important to provide for common needs.”(7) Tawney supplements this view with an analysis of capitalism that suggests the situation in which the majority of people are wage earners cannot realise this egalitarian definition of reality. The assumption is that the development of community cohesion that is based on united social goals requires socialism, but he does not articulate this view in definite and explicit terms. Despite this ambiguity he seems to uphold the relationship between ethics and an alternative to capitalism: “Social well-being does not only depend upon intelligent leadership; it also depends upon cohesion and solidarity. It implies the existence, not merely of opportunities to ascend, but of a high level of general culture, and strong sense of common interests, and the diffusion throughout society of a conviction that civilisation is not the business of an elite alone, but a common enterprise which is the concern of all.”(8) This viewpoint suggests a contrast between the form of limited equality of capitalist society, which is equality of opportunity, and the higher form of equality of a united community, or the suggestion of socialism. Only under socialism can it be possible to develop a society with common interests and purpose, and which aims to realise a unified sense of well-being. The point being made is that equality must be more than the possibility for social mobility by a few exceptional people instead it should be the character of society that is able to realise the aspirations of all its participants, and this cannot be possible in a situation where the majority of people are wage earners and have few opportunities to achieve social mobility.(He does not discuss a capitalist society with high levels of social mobility, which was not present in the 1930’s) But his explicit alternative to capitalism is not socialism but instead a an economic system of decentralised property ownership: “Thus in conditions in which ownership is decentralised and diffused, the institution of property is a principle of unity. It confers a measure of security and independence on poor, as well as on rich, and softens the harshness of economic contrasts by a common similarity of social status.”(9) However he admits that this type of property ownership has been succeeded by the modern industrial system and the inequalities associated with it. Hence by his own admission he seems to express uncertainty about the viability of the socialist alternative to the inequalities generated by capitalism.

Tawney knows what he is against. He is opposed to a system that generates inequality of power based upon economic domination, and so promotes vast disparities of income and the acquisition of wealth by a few individuals. These aspects result in special advantages for a few and the urgent needs of the majority are neglected. This situation is expressed in dire social and housing conditions, lack of educational opportunities, and low wages. Tawney argues that the alternative is not to support a crude re-distribution of wealth that would result in continued low incomes for the majority of the population. Instead it is necessary to utilise the income of the rich for projects of common advantage. The result would be the creation of a public health system and decent education for all and the utilisation of income in order to develop projects for those with the greatest need. Hence the aim in the education system would be to end differences of opportunity based on income. Economic policy should be based on the conscious attempt to overcome unemployment, but adequate social service should also be developed for those in need. These advances would mean that vast differences of income would be ended: “While diversities of income, corresponding to varieties of function and capacity, would survive, they would neither be heightened by capricious inequalities of circumstances and opportunity, nor perpetuated from generation to generation by the institution of inheritance. Differences of remuneration between individuals might remain; contrasts between the civilization of different classes would vanish.”(10) The direction of industry will require the agency of a National Investment Board, and there will be appropriate levels of public ownership in order to ensure that the economy is based on the aim of meeting the needs of society. Taxation should be increased but the aim is not to promote high taxation but instead to achieve a level that is able to promote the creation of a society of equality.

Hence we can now understand the approach of Tawney more satisfactorily. He appears to support the election of a left wing government that would introduce reforms that have a culminating effect and ultimately realise a different society of socialism. Taken separately the various reforms can be introduced within capitalism, but more generally the accumulation of reforms will result in an egalitarian society that is not based on the domination of a system of economic gain. Instead what will have been achieved is socialism. However he still makes no mention of any creative role for the working class in this process of the transformation of society. Instead the agency of change is the government, acting in terms of its control of the state, or socialism from above. However the ultimate aim is primarily defined by the principles of socialism because the existence of a political system of legal equality that enables a few people to exercise economic power will have been ended. Instead: “In conditions which impose co-operative, rather than merely individual effort, liberty is, in fact, equality in action, in the sense that not all men perform identical functions or weld the same degree of power, but that all men are protected against the abuse of power, and equally entitled to insist that power shall be used, not for personal ends, but for the general advantage.”(11) However in order to realise this end the means should be moderate. Tawney advocates co-operation between companies and trade unions rather than class struggle in order to promote the aim of modernisation and his suggestions for nationalisation are cautious: “The important question is not whether an undertaking is described as private or public; it is whether if it is private, adequate guarantees can be established that it performs a public function, and whether it is public, it performs it effectively.”(12) Hence the question of whether an industry should be nationalised or merely regulated by the state should be a matter of expediency and not rigid dogma. Thus the issue of the transition to socialism requires consent and the agreement of the capitalists who may support the aims of public service, and the working class will be asked to moderate their actions in order to establish a harmonious process of change. The point being made by Tawney is that both capitalists and workers can become public servants and be an integral part of the process of the activity of promoting social goals. In this context the issue of the transition to socialism is not defined by class struggle between workers and capitalists. Instead the aim should be to promote class compromise in order to realise a co-operative society connected with the principles of equality.

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM

Tawney contends that the inter-war period has led to situations in which the forces of capitalism have attempted to undermine the role of democracy. He argues that socialism is based on the importance of democracy or the exercise of power by the method of consent. The only type of socialism that will be able to obtain popular support is one that is committed to freedom of speech, tolerance and the rejection of violent methods, and instead promotes the democratic approach. The election of a Labour government must mean the active support of working people for its measures and imply: “Either it means a decisive break with the whole policy of capitalist governments, or it means nothing at all.”(13) This means the primary tasks are not to nationalise the Bank of England and establish regulation of major companies, but rather to create a mass movement in favour of change. Finally Tawney has accepted that the ultimate impulse for socialism is connected to the creativity of socialism from below. The popular power of the rank and file is essential if the Labour government is to act with conviction and with the understanding that it represents the will of the people: “It must treat electors not as voting fodder….but as partners in a common enterprise, in which the party, indeed, will play its part, but the issue of which depends ultimately on themselves. It must explain to them – not, of course, in an hysterical fashion, but with gravity and candour – the character of the opposition which will confront a Labour government, and appeal to them, if they believe in democracy to see it through a crisis…..In order, in short, to tackle its job with some hope of success, it must mobilize behind it a body of opinion as well informed as the opposition in front.”(14)

This process of change does not mean support for the class struggle which is still defined in terms of sectional motivations but it does mean the development of opposition between the forces of socialism and capitalism. This understanding could mean the conception of a democratic form of class struggle which occurs at the level of Parliamentary conflict. Tawney accepts that the failure to realise socialism by this process will represent defeat and equality will not be introduced into society. However he also argues that if a mass movement of popular will is created the Labour government will be able to act to introduce socialism. In this context he is suggesting that the possibilities for socialism do depend on the activity of working people. The role of democracy also involves the development of popular struggle, even if the ultimate agency of change is the role of Parliament. What he underestimated was the actual unwillingness of the 1945 Labour government to mobilise the forces of mass democracy. Instead they were content to introduce limited measures that resulted in the formation of the welfare state by bureaucratic methods and they lacked any intention to promote socialist democracy. In this manner they rejected the ambitious conception of equality which had been promoted by Tawney. Their aim was not equality and instead they were motivated by the task of the efficient administration of capitalism. This mean the concept of the community was diluted and its ethical aspects were replaced by the role of an imperialist nation state that was part of the American Empire. The inability to realise the ethical socialism of Tawny was not because of a supposed lack of realism but was instead because of the empirical aim of the Labour government was to reconstruct the British nation state with the modified addition of the welfare state. Thus Tawney was confronted with a dilemma, would he support the 1945 Labour government or alternatively attempt to uphold his ethical socialism in the changing era of the economic boom and the Social Democratic settlement? He had the choice of loyalty to the Labour Party or justification of the more consistent standpoint that argued the Labour Party had rejected his ethical socialism in the name of expediency.

EPILOGUE 1938-1950

Tawney attempted to avoid a definite answer to the above polarised question. He did admit that some equality had developed within society. The share of wages within the national income had undergone a modest income in the gross national product. However he admits that the development of the welfare state, especially the National Health Service has resulted in important advances for equality, but in general he maintains that: “The truth is that, at the present stage of its history, the economic system is necessarily a power system. It is a hierarchy of authority; and those who hold its levers exercise, consciously or unconsciously, a decisive influence on countless human lives.”(15) In other words the system of inequality has been modified but it has not been transformed in terms of the establishment of the primacy of ethical principles, and he argues that co-operative action that would create the situation of equality has not been carried out. However he also ambiguously suggests that social advances have meant: “The wage earners and recipients of small salaries are freer.”(16) He makes a cautious conclusion that inequality has been reduced but that progress is still taking place slowly and in a limited manner: “In so far as the opportunity to lead a life worthy of human beings is needlessly confined to a minority, not a few of the conditions applauded as freedom would more properly be denounced as privilege. Action which causes such opportunities to be more widely shared is, therefore, twice blessed. It not only subtracts from inequality, but adds to freedom.”(17)

Thus Tawney concludes ambiguously that if progress continues it may be possible to establish equality within capitalism, but he has not rejected his overall aim that socialism is the most effective basis to realise this principle. He outlines in his conclusion that the defenders of capitalism remain the most intransigent opponents of equality and only the undermining of their economic and social power will advance the aim of promoting the ethical progress of the aims of socialism. However in an indecisive manner he has also accepted that the continued application of reforms may be what is sufficient in order to establish a society based on equality. Substantial progress has been made in this regard. The implicit assumption is that only the continued election of Labour government’s supported by the popular will can ensure that advances towards the egalitarian society will be made. But definitive success will be realised with the socialist transformation of society. Unfortunately this point is made in a highly rhetorical and vague manner, and so it is possible to claim that Tawney has become a reformist. This impression was apparently confirmed by his sympathy for the revisionist politics of Gaitskell.(18) But in one sense he remained a systematic advocate of the idea that capitalism could not be convincingly reformed because it remained opposed to the influence of ethical principles such as equality. Capitalism was most compatible with the reduction of ethics to the private sphere so that the accumulation of wealth could occur unhindered. Furthermore, the defenders of capitalism opposed equality because they recognised it was most compatible with socialism, and this was an important reason why Tawney connected equality with socialism. But in order not to be critical of the 1945 Labour government he was prepared to accept that the mixed economy could represent the advance of ethical principles. Ultimately his definitive standpoint represented inconsistency and concessions to the reformist practices of the 1945 Labour government.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations in the position of Tawney we can utilise his views in order to promote the ethical argument for socialism. This development would also address the problem of the lack of an ethical approach within Marxism. For, ultimately Tawney is making the point that if a so-called socialist society cannot sustain moral principles like co-operation, community and equality it does not deserve to be called socialist. Thus the question of ethics is not an abstract issue for any socialist but is instead of immense relevance in relation to tackling the problems involved in constructing a principled and democratic socialist society. The development of Stalinism indicated how the aims of socialism can be effectively rejected when the role of ethics is neglected and denigrated. In this context the ethical socialism of Tawney has immense value both for providing a moral critique of capitalism and for outlining the ethical basis of a socialist society.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)R.H. Tawney: Equality (Fourth Edition) Geoge Allen and Unwin, London 1964 p43

(2)ibid p49

(3)ibid p51-52

(4)ibid p57-58

(5)ibid p71-72

(6)ibid p106

(7)ibid p107

(8)ibid p108

(9)ibid p110

(10)ibid p150

(11)ibid p168

(12)ibid p183

(13)ibid p203

(14)ibid p207-208

(15)ibid p230

(16)ibid p234

(17)ibid p235

(18)Ross Terrill: R.H Tawney and his Times, Andre Deutsch, London, 1974 p79-80