

Progressivism Unleashed: Milner and the Reconstruction of South Africa, 1899 – 1905.

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Alfred Milner was the High Commissioner of South Africa between February 1897 and April 1905, one of the five members of Lloyd George's imperial war cabinet after December 1916, and Secretary of State for the Colonies between January 1919 and January 1921. He was the outstanding advocate of British imperialism in this period, one of the three great proconsuls, and, especially after 1906, a leading member of the Die-hard Conservatives in the House of Lords. For many historians, and some of his Liberal contemporaries, Milner's credentials as an English political figure were doubtful. In his recent effort to demonstrate the insignificance of the late 19th century Empire to the British people, Bernard Porter has suggested that the last proconsul was hardly English at all. "Milner, probably the hardest-nosed of all of [the "imperial zealots"], and personally responsible to a great extent for the outbreak of the Boer War," he argued, "was born and received his early education in Germany, whose contemporary brand of aggressive nationalism seems to have rubbed off on him."¹ Scholars of the English expanding welfare state in the early 20th century have handled Milner's embarrassing imperialist politics by offering him bit-parts in the wings or by avoiding him altogether.² Yet Milner was – with the other architects of the South African War, Roberts and Kitchener - one of the key advocates of British national identity registration; the National Register, and the Identity Cards that were issued along with it between 1915 and 1919 as a tool for the total mobilisation of the English war economy, are the immediate lineal ancestors of the current identity scheme. The first National Register was strongly endorsed by progressives like Beatrice Webb, but its most powerful advocates were all veterans of imperial government.³

There is a great deal of truth in the view of Milner as an "automaton of empire," to use the phrase coined by his most recent biographer.⁴ In the period between 1900 and 1920 he was personally implicated in many of the most odious acts of British imperialism. The list is long. Milner famously forced war with the Transvaal in 1899, a war that was briefly very popular but which rapidly went publicly sour as the Boers turned to guerilla war and the British to concentration camps. After the enormous, unanticipated, financial and moral cost of the war, Milner further antagonized his Liberal and trade union opponents by introducing 60,000 indentured Chinese labourers to work the mines. Just weeks before the 1906 election Milner strengthened his enemies' use of the weapon of "Chinese Slavery" when the press discovered that he had sanctioned the illegal use of flogging in the compounds. The result was a political earthquake, shredding the Conservative Party's hold on parliament and ushering in to existence the new Labour Party. After Milner was humiliated in parliament by Churchill weeks later, he turned to the party of reaction in earnest. In 1909 he was one of the key organisers of the Lords' revolt against Lloyd George's People's Budget, notwithstanding the fact that the budget

¹Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, 231 Porter extends this argument about the foreignness of key imperialists to others like Amery, Haldane, Kipling and Rhodes; South African historians have made similar arguments about Milner's "doctrinaire cast of mind", see Thompson, *The Unification of South Africa, 1902-1910*, 5; and Mawby, "Capital, Government and Politics in the Transvaal, 1900-1907: A Revision and a Reversion," 398.

²Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, 237; For those who ignore Milner, and the history of imperial state making, see Higgs, *The Information State in England*; and Agar, *The government machine*; Milner's advocacy of the social changes required for industrial war is more fully treated in Taylor, *English history, 1914-1945*, 75-114.

³Here I would include Walter Long, president of the Local Government Board, who was responsible for the National Registration Bill. Long, one of Milner's allies, was a former Chief Secretary for Ireland and president of the Union Defence League. Agar, *The government machine*, 134.

⁴Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*.

was designed to pay for the expansion of the navy and the provision of universal old age pensions – two causes that Milner would normally have endorsed. On the brink of the Great War he organised a secret, and treasonous, effort to defeat Asquith's policy of Home Rule for Ireland by buying weapons to arm the Ulster Volunteers. The opening of the war with Germany turned Milner into a fierce opponent of the Liberal advocates of free markets, a position that he began to share with another old enemy, Lloyd George. After Asquith was evicted from the Cabinet in 1916, Milner worked industriously and loyally under George as the architect of a pervasive system of industrial conscription and state regulation. Perhaps the capstone of his career as a reactionary imperialist – certainly as far as the Labour-aligned progressives like Beatrice Webb were concerned – was his advocacy of British support for the White Russians in the civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution. There was truth in Milner's self-pitying description of himself as a man who had “amassed all the most unpopular ideas.”⁵

Milner's politics changed after his ignominious return from South Africa - he was bitter and much less hesitant about allying himself with the most conservative elements of English politics. But this is not to suggest that his political goals drifted to the right after 1906. He was, on the contrary, strikingly consistent throughout this life about the goal of a racially-defined British empire. After his death Milner's friends published a succinct summary of his political philosophy, a Credo, in which he described himself as an “Imperialist and a British Race Patriot.” This account, published after a lifetime characterised much more by defeats than victories, is remarkably similar to the statement he made in 1885 as a failed Liberal candidate for parliament: “Let us always remember that in speaking of our country we do not mean these islands,” he reminded the voters of Willesden, “we mean every land inhabited by men of the English race living under English institutions.” And he predicted that a “great Anglo-Saxon Confederation” of self-governing countries, united in mutual defence, would preserve a “universal peace.”⁶

By the end of Milner's life the project of a racially defined empire was already an anachronism, shattered by Britain's military dependence on India and the disinterest and hostility of the white dominion leaders.⁷ The Anglo-Saxon empire had also completely lost its allure for progressives. “Before the war we had come to assume that this desired process, combining progress with order, had become the normal way of the world, and a way that was peculiarly Anglo-Saxon,” Beatrice Webb confessed to her diary in November 1919 with the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre probably in her mind; “Today we are confronted with Europe in social chaos, Great Britain oppressing subject races, and the USA folding herself in her self-righteous prosperity, refusing to take part in the settlement of Europe, and leading within her own boundaries an enraged crusade against the new industrial democracy.”⁸ Part of this disenchantment followed from the appearance of attractive new suitors for the progressives attention. The growth in the parliamentary power of the Labour Party, with real opportunities for political power after the end of the war, was one. Another was the dramatic arrival of Lenin's Soviet Union offering the intoxicating model of a young state mobilising “the fervour of the faithful in the Communist Party; and the scientific knowledge of the experts specially trained to serve that Party in all departments of social and industrial life.”⁹ Yet the roots of the progressives disenchantment with empire actually lay much earlier, and much of the

⁵Milner to Dawkins, cited in Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 237; These events are also extensively documented in four biographies. Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics*; Marlowe, *Milner*; O'Brien, *Milner*; Crankshaw, *The forsaken idea: a study of Viscount Milner* comes closest to being an autobiographical account.

⁶Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics*, 130.

⁷Lavin, *From Empire to International Commonwealth*, 127-131.

⁸Webb, “*The power to alter things*,” 1905-1924, 353.

⁹*Ibid.*, 366.

change was wrought by Milner himself.¹⁰ Before 1906 he shared an interest in the empire as an engine of domestic social welfare with a broad array of progressives in England.

In this essay I want to show that Milner was not, as Eric Stokes (and many others) have claimed, “singular in his views”¹¹; he was, rather - like Karl Pearson, Beatrice Webb and William Beveridge - one of the defining figures of English progressivism. Milner's enthusiasm for the supremacy of the people he fuzzily called the “undivided British race” was almost universally held amongst English-speaking intellectuals between 1890 and 1910, but it was especially energetically articulated by a group of socialist reformers.¹² Milner was actually, as Semmel observed, unusual amongst these “social-imperialists and imperial-socialists in expressing concern for the native peoples in the Empire.”¹³ For most of these people, the effort to “breed and maintain an Imperial race,” as Sydney Webb described it, involved the introduction of policies that were much less biological (or demographic) than they were social and technocratic. The prospects of the Anglo-Saxon race followed much less from the kinds of eugenic interventions being formulated by Francis Galton and Karl Pearson (and which would later shape state policy profoundly in Italy and Germany), than a suite of institutional reforms of the poor law, the housing and labour market and the introduction of a centralised state power of surveillance and regulation.¹⁴ In practice, Milnerism, despite his often repeated enthusiasm for a racially defined British Empire, was constituted out of a set of fiercely articulated reforms of the state's power to shape the economy. The administrative measures that Milner successfully implemented in South Africa – state-supported scientific agriculture, race-based segregation, fingerprinting as the basis of identification, and the establishment of a network of coercive labour registries – were all typically progressive. What was unusual, and perhaps distinctive, about South Africa in the period before 1905 was that these elaborate schemes of social engineering faced no meaningful opposition.

A typical progressive

In the decades before he went to South Africa, Milner mapped out a curriculum vitae that would, later, become the norm for the new architects of the 20th century welfare state. In his study of the English bureaucratic machine, Agar noted that the new “social innovators typically passed through the obligatory points of late-nineteenth-century middle-class left-leaning social radicalism: the University Settlement Movement ... the Charity Organisation Society ... Toynbee Hall, or involvement with the philanthropic surveys of poverty.”¹⁵ Milner was involved with each of these institutions, a founding figure of the most significant of them, and probably the first person to plot a life through each of these points.

Milner, like Karl Pearson, was scholastically brilliant at a time when the competitive examination - not an Oxbridge or aristocratic pedigree – was an extravagant measure of genius and key to the door of state power.¹⁶ From the day he won a senior scholarship to Oxford until his departure from Balliol with a Prize Fellowship to New College, his undergraduate career was a triumph. Milner was the “most brilliant son” of a generation of Balliol undergraduates, and his career evolved under the protection of the

¹⁰Thompson, “The Language of Imperialism.”

¹¹Stokes, “Milnerism,” 49.

¹²Jones, *Outcast London*, 330-6; Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood”; Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*; Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform*; Searle, *Eugenics and politics in Britain, 1900-1914*; MacKenzie, *Statistics in Britain*.

¹³Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform*, 186.

¹⁴On the political and social limit on eugenics in Britain, see MacKenzie, *Statistics in Britain*, 106-119; and Stepan, *The idea of race in science : Great Britain, 1800-1960*, 111-20; And for state preoccupation with fertility in Italy, Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, reproduction and Italian modernity*.

¹⁵Agar, *The government machine*, 87.

¹⁶MacKenzie, *Statistics in Britain*, 31.

Master, Dr Jowett, while he was at the height of his formidable powers.¹⁷ Throughout his life, Milner was able to call upon a host of striving Balliol graduates, and their associates, for insight and assistance. These friends, more than any other asset, equipped him with unmatched influence in the imperial capital. Before the Chinese Labour debacle he exercised a strange hold over the imperial centre, a power the leader of the Liberal opposition, Campbell-Bannerman, called the *Religio Milneriana*, because he seemed to personify the intellectual and political ideals of his age.¹⁸

At Oxford Milner was an intimate friend of Arnold Toynbee, the scholar who coined the phrase “industrial revolution” to highlight the social wreckage caused by the economic changes of the preceding century.¹⁹ “Toynbee used his profession as an economic historian,” as many like him have since, “to atone for the sins of his class, teaching his students to reject the 'iron laws' that had been proclaimed as the theoretical basis of laissez-faire.”²⁰ It was at Balliol that Milner adopted his lifelong disdain for the mechanistic philosophy of Adam Smith's liberalism. And it was also through Toynbee, whose “mind was full of schemes” that he was introduced to the neo-utilitarianism of late 19th century progressivism.²¹ Toynbee died prematurely in 1883, and a decade later, Milner described him as “in the thick of every movement to improve the external conditions of the life of the people – better houses, open spaces, free libraries, all the now familiar objects of municipal socialism.”²² His relationship with Toynbee was intense, forming a small circle of students who set up the early projects of university outreach; “no man has ever had for me the same fascination,” Milner later acknowledged.²³

It was also at Balliol, under the influence of Toynbee's mentor T H Green, that Milner adopted the progressive's obsession with a moralizing and uplifting state. For Milner this state was the expert-led British Empire, a sentiment he shared with the other leading progressives – George Bernard Shaw, Karl Pearson, Sydney Webb – until 1906. Over the next decade this agreement unraveled under pressure from popular democracy at home and protests from India. But in the thirty years between 1880 and 1910 Milner's conviction of self-sacrificing personal duty to a benevolent and ascendant state charged with the improvement and protection of an organic English community was the progressive norm.²⁴

After he left Oxford in 1879 Milner tried briefly, and miserably, to earn his living as a lawyer, but even as he was busy with this legal training he was researching Bismarckian socialism and writing articles for WT Stead at the *Paul Mall Gazette*. In August 1883, after Stead was made editor of the magazine, he invited Milner to join him. For several months they worked together on a campaign highlighting the misery of London's East End poor. Drawing on Milner's own experiences of Reverend Samuel Barnett's Whitechapel settlement, they serialised Mearns' sensational pamphlet on the *Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, one of the key texts precipitating urban social reform and Galton's concern with the demographic danger posed by the poor.²⁵ The place of

¹⁷Pakenham, *The Boer War*, 13; O'Brien, *Milner*, 31-43; Faber, *Jowett, a portrait with background*, 357-364; Speech by Stanley Baldwin at Oxford in 1925 in Headlam, *The Milner Papers*, 2:475; Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 27.

¹⁸O'Brien, *Milner*, 177.

¹⁹Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, 228.

²⁰Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform*, 16.

²¹Milner, *Arnold Toynbee*, 54-6.

²²Milner Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 30; Milner, *Arnold Toynbee*, 15.

²³ Milner, *Arnold Toynbee*, 20; W T Stead later recalled that “Milner was very kind to everybody, and exceptionally kind to me, but he loved Arnold Toynbee in a way in which I have never known him care for mortal man.” Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*.

²⁴Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood”; Harris, *William Beveridge*, 86-90; Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*; Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform*; Shaw, *Fabianism and the Empire: a Manifesto by the Fabian Society*; Thompson, “The Language of Imperialism”; Jones, *Outcast London*, 310-314, 333.

²⁵ Jones, *Outcast London*, 281-321; Norton, “Karl Pearson and Statistics,” 8.

muckraking journalism in progressivism has been stressed by historians since Hofstadter wrote that “the work of the Progressive movement rested upon its journalism” and that “the Progressive mind was characteristically a journalistic mind.”²⁶ After the *Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, W T Stead would go on to become the most celebrated muckraker on either sides of the Atlantic; his *Pall Mall Gazette* the flagship of the New Journalism that fueled the muckraking press.²⁷ Using the instantaneous communications offered by the telegraph, the magazine would become famous internationally for its arresting, emotional style, highlighting the personal predicament of women, children and the poor. An important part of this personalized journalism was a sustained criticism of the rich and the powerful. “Stead introduced human interest stories that exposed the secrets of the rich and incited sympathy for the domestic plight of the poor.”²⁸ In the *Outcast London* campaign Milner and Stead, unprecedentedly, indicted the aristocratic landowners and landlords of the East End for the horrible conditions of the city's poor.²⁹ During the East End riots of 1886-7 Stead offered working class activists space in his newspaper to strengthen this line of criticism and hold the attention of his middle-class readers.³⁰

Both Stead and Milner would later claim that their campaign had been instrumental in turning the English public towards the Empire as a remedy to the pressing difficulties of urban poverty. “We were both enthusiasts about the Race and Empire,” Milner remembered, and both “shedding very fast the old tradition of the laissez faire school and believed in the power and the duty of the State to take vigorous action for the improvement of the conditions of life among the mass of the people.”³¹ Milner left the *Gazette* in the middle of 1885 in time to avoid being associated with the unsavoury controversy that followed Stead's staged purchase of a girl to publicize the White Slavery exposé, *Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*.³² In the decades that followed Milner used the popular press to drive his policies, exasperating older and more powerful politicians like Salisbury; he cultivated intimate friendships with important with journalists, lobbied for the appointment of his friends as editors and made sinister use of the timing and content of official publications.³³ These were all skills of a progressive muckraker.

In these years Milner was also an associate, and a patron, of Samuel Barnett's Toynbee Hall, arguably the most important site of the trans-Atlantic progressive movement. Amidst the publicity of the *Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, Barnett proposed a fund for a permanent university settlement house in London. His object, like Toynbee's, was to foster “connection” between the middle-class elites from the universities and the downtrodden poor in the city. It was an intensely moralizing project, preoccupied with “tradition, order and authority.”³⁴ And it worked by building what Emily Hobhouse's cousin called an “an oasis of Oxford or Cambridge academic life” amidst the squalor of the East End. For its first two decades, Barnett's settlement was a fantastic success. “From the opening of Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel at the edge of London's East End in 1884, Samuel Barnett's institution was a magnet for American visitors,” Rodgers observed, “Jane Addams [founder of the most influential American settlement house] made visits in 1887, 1888 and 1889.”³⁵ Like so much of the early progressive effort, Toynbee Hall began to unravel after 1906, partly as a result of its founder's retirement,

²⁶Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 185-6; Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 148-155.

²⁷Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 64-5; Walkowitz, *City of dreadful delight*, 84.

²⁸Walkowitz, *City of dreadful delight*, 84.

²⁹Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 39.

³⁰Walkowitz, *City of dreadful delight*, 29; Jones, *Outcast London*, notes on 294-5.

³¹Whyte W T Stead Vol 1, 100-101 cited in Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 40.

³²Walkowitz, *City of dreadful delight*, 81-119.

³³Porter, *The Origins of the South African War*, 109 - 119.

³⁴Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform*, 53, 55.

³⁵Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 64.

partly because the pessimistic temper of Edwardian politics saw little potential benefit in “connection,” and partly because of the huge range of competing welfarist interventions. As early as 1900 Toynbee Hall had earned a reputation as a school of administration for “young, reform-minded civil servants.”³⁶ George Lansbury, writing in 1912, commented acidly that the “one solid achievement of Toynbee Hall, and the most important result of the mixing policy of the Barnetts,” was the “filling up of the bureaucracy of government and administration with men and women who went to East London full of enthusiasm and zeal for the welfare of the masses, and discovered the advancement of their own interests.”³⁷ But the larger significance of the project was surely in the fact that it provided a model for middle-class social reform around the globe. By the end of first decade of the 20th century Toynbee Hall had been replicated by 400 similar institutions around the Atlantic.³⁸ From its establishment Milner was a supporter of the settlement, he gave lectures to the students and, long after his return from South Africa, he worked as the chair of the trustees of Toynbee Hall.

In order to test the argument that Milner was a typical progressive of his period it is useful to compare his life and views with the biography of an individual whose credentials in this respect are unimpeachable. William Beveridge was the architect of the modern British welfare state; his 1942 Report on Social Insurance lay the foundations for the National Health Service and the unemployment benefit, and, decades earlier, he was also the moving spirit behind the national system of labour exchanges. Like Milner he was the child of a “poor” middle-class family, required to use his wits to earn his bread. He won a scholarship to study at Balliol, and did very well academically, although not with the glory that followed Milner. After leaving the university in 1901 he studied, briefly, as a lawyer after he left Oxford between 1901 and 1903. In that year, against his mother's wishes (she wanted him to go to South Africa to make his fortune) he took up a post as the sub-warden of Toynbee Hall. By the end of 1905 he had grown tired of “connection” and began writing fulltime for the reform-oriented Tory newspaper, the *Morning Post*, on the recommendation of the Master of Balliol, Edward Caird. Towards the end of the decade Beveridge would work with the Webbs on a scheme for a national system of labour exchanges, as a way to redress the widely recognized failures of the urban casual labour market and feed his growing interest in the development of a statistical understanding of unemployment.⁴⁰

Beveridge's political views in this period mirrored Milner's, and he proposed domestic social remedies that were identical to the authoritarian schemes that were actually implemented in South Africa. He was, as Jose Harris observed, “undoubtedly an imperialist” and he endorsed the social-imperialists grim view that “as a matter of historical necessity 'progressive nations' would increasingly dominate undeveloped nations.”⁴¹ His interest in the development of the labour exchanges, which he shared with the Webbs and many other progressives, was partly to identify the residuum who “not only refused to obey the laws of evolution but inhibited the rest of society from obeying them as well” in order for the state to isolate and incarcerate them.⁴² The real difference between these two figures is that Milner had the opportunity to implement the plans of progressivism without having to modify them to make them acceptable politically.

³⁶Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform*, 85.

³⁷Ibid., 123.

³⁸Abel, “Toynbee Hall, 1884-1914,” 609.

⁴⁰Harris, *William Beveridge*, 32-126.

⁴¹Ibid., 32, 90.

⁴²Ibid., 120.

Social Engineering

Milner, unlike Beveridge and the Webbs, had the opportunity to govern, something that was generally denied progressives until thirty years later. From 1885 to 1889 he worked, first as an informal press secretary and then as official private secretary for George Goschen, who became Chancellor of the Exchequer. For two years he was directly involved in the negotiation, planning and publicity of the national budget. During his tenure Goschen introduced the first death duty (which Milner later made in to a key source of property tax) and shifted the bulk of the state's expensive debt on to lower interest bonds – magically freeing up large amounts of new funds. It was this skill in the recalibration of large debts that Milner took with him to Egypt in 1889 when he was appointed Director-General of Accounts for the Egyptian government under the operations of the veiled protectorate. For two years he worked under Cromer regulating the extravagant bureaucratic arrangements for debt payments and tax collection, but his most influential work was only completed after he returned to England.

In June 1892 Milner began writing *England in Egypt*, and he had completed it before he took up his new post as Chairman of the Inland Revenue Board in November. This four-hundred page defence of England's veiled protectorate was a massive popular success; it came out in six editions between 1893 and 1895, and “transformed Milner from a relatively obscure civil servant into an imperial figure of importance.”⁴³ The book was an extended discussion of the beneficial effects of British social reform in Egypt, contrasting the great changes wrought by the “practical Englishman” with the “vast army of mechanical scribes” and “highly cultivated Beys and Pashas” of the Egyptian bureaucracy. Milner described British rule as a sweeping reform movement, slowly reorganizing the oriental bureaucracy until “native officials gradually acquire the habit of energy, equity, self-reliance, and method.” His description of colonial rule is an account of progressivism in action, sweeping out an essentialised and orientalist decadence. “Everywhere the struggle has been against corruption, against formalism, against unjust preference shown to the wealthy and powerful, against backstairs influence of every kind.” The British had set to work energetically reforming the plant and programs in the prisons, building new water and sewerage lines, instilling an enthusiasm for sanitation in the cities, and deportment in the schools. The Egyptians (like the Boers) had been spoiled by the unrestrained gifts of nature and lacked “the strenuousness and the progressive spirit which would characterise any equally intelligent race tilling a less bounteous soil and breathing a more bracing atmosphere.”⁴⁴ But the real purpose of the book, and its core message, came from the title of its ninth chapter, the Struggle for Water.

Milner's book was partly an advertisement of the irrigation projects already completed, and a call for the re-engineering of Egypt through the building of a great dam at the first set of cataracts on the Nile. The book provided a popular account of the promise of the great dam just as the technical proposal, written by William Willcocks, had gone in to official circulation. Three years after the first edition of his book, Milner reported that “the scheme for the creation of a gigantic Reservoir” had made “rapid strides towards realization.” The dam was eventually built between 1898 and 1902, but it was funded from externally raised loans and the land tax. Milner's eloquent appeal to “British generosity” did not persuade his government to fund the project, but that did not limit its significance.⁴⁵

⁴³Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 87.

⁴⁴Milner, *England In Egypt*, 355, 358-362, 369-71, 386.

⁴⁵Milner, *England In Egypt*, viii, xii; Tignor, “British Agricultural and Hydraulic Policy in Egypt, 1882-1892,”

In his story of the heroic achievements of British rule in Egypt, the agents of the revolution of progress were the Anglo-Indian irrigation engineers. “The longer I remained in Egypt,” he wrote, “the more I saw of the country, the more clear it became to me, that the work of these men [the Anglo-Indian engineers] had been the basis of all the material improvement of the past ten years.” He credited them with “the great scientific attainments, the memory, the minute knowledge of the country, and the mastery of detail”⁴⁶ that was necessary to turn the ancient waterworks into the platform of a revitalised agriculture. In all this the financial officers – his own job – had merely acted as enablers of the work of the engineers. This enthusiasm for the marriage of state spending and engineering as the source of the key plans, and the policy, of government was characteristic of Milner's government in South Africa, and it remained with him after he had returned to England. Beatrice Webb took George Bernard Shaw out to Milner's “inhabited ruin” in 1906, and after hearing his “emphasis on plentiful capital, cheap labour and mechanical ingenuity” she observed - battling herself privately with the competing moral imperatives of science and religion - that he seemed to “enormously overestimate the value of the purely material forces.”⁴⁷

In his study of modern Egypt, Mitchell suggests that an intriguing simplification of the material world - the development of the concept of “the economy”- took shape in the second quarter of the 20th century. “By 1950 the word had acquired a new meaning,” he argues, “It no longer referred to a set of attitudes and relations but denoted a distinct social sphere, “the economy” (now always with a definite article), the realm of a social science, statistical enumeration, and government policy.”⁴⁸ The distinguishing characteristic of this new domain, which was also the source of its power, was that it “stood for the material sphere of life.” Along with this focus on the domain of work, of the real, the physical and valuable came the property of calculability; the objects of the economy rendered themselves “most easily represented in statistical and algebraic calculation.” Mitchell suggests - he does not, unfortunately, demonstrate this – that the concept of the economy was colonial in origin. He points to the timing of the collapsing imperial order as the context for the development of a newly national economic field – an idea that was reflected in Harold Macmillan's 1957 request for “something like a profit and loss account for each of our Colonial possessions.”⁴⁹ It was the distance between the colonies and the center that “opened up a space of separation” making possible, indeed enforcing, the view of each colony as a “self-contained object whose ‘problems’ could be measured, analyzed and addressed.”⁵⁰

Milner certainly conceived of the colonies in these terms long before there was any thought of abandoning them. His account of the benefits of English rule in Egypt reads like a national economic assessment, a country considered as a firm. “Egypt today,” for example, “even with the burden of more than £100,000,000 tied tightly on her back, is better than it would have been, had she been able to repudiate every penny of these millions.”⁵¹ And the explanation of the benefits that will accrue to the country, and her debt holders, from an investment in the waterworks at Aswan amounts to a national business plan. The new systems of irrigation allow the export crops - sugar and cotton – to replace wheat, beans and clover, which leave the land unproductive for “half the year.” With the new dam “hundreds of thousands of acres might be restored to fertility, while other large tracts might be made to bear crops for the first time, or to bear

⁴⁶Milner, *England In Egypt*, 309.

⁴⁷Webb, “*The power to alter things*,” 1905-1924, 48; On the wider philosophical problem posed by idealist and secular philosophy for this generation, see Harris, “Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy,” 48.

⁴⁸Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*, 81.

⁴⁹Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 395.

⁵⁰Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*, 100.

⁵¹Milner, *England In Egypt*, 219.

two crops a year where they now produce only one.” All of this would have “stupendous” effects on agriculture, trade and even industry. Milner wrote about the financial prospects for Egypt (and later for South Africa as well) in an almost breathless, optimistic style that promised bountiful results in the future from a significant investment now.⁵² “In this, as in other instances, what is so striking about Egyptian Public Works,” he promised, “is the largeness and rapidity of the return, when capital is wisely expended.”⁵³

The building of the dam, as Mitchell's study shows, turned modern Egypt in to a global laboratory for an extended series of involuntary and catastrophic technological and economic experiments. With the dam came mosquitoes and bilharzia snails. The snails and mosquitoes carried malaria and schistosomiasis in to a human population that had not previously suffered them. International aid agencies sought to combat the diseases through the introduction of DDT with further even more nasty biological and economic effects. A similar chain of horrible technical problems and remedies accompanied the introduction of irrigation in agriculture. “In a private report in 1942,” he notes, “the British acknowledged that the surest way to restore the health of the Egyptian population would be to destroy the dams and return to basin irrigation.”⁵⁴ His point is that the key arguments of social progress, upon which much of our social science, and almost all policy, depend, are determined by a persistent oversimplification of the character of capitalist development. “The engineers who built the irrigation works had not considered the possibility that snails or mosquitoes would make use of their work to move, or that certain parasites would travel with these hosts, or that devastating consequences would ensue.”

Liberalism and progressivism

There is little that is controversial about the claim that Milner's enthusiasms for empire were widely shared by social reformers before 1910, or that Milner was one of the harshest critics of laissez-faire liberalism and one of the early defenders of state socialism. Half a century ago Semmel tracked the interwoven histories of late 19th century British imperialism and socialism, following Chamberlain and Milner as key protagonists in the expansion of the Empire and the evolution of the early plans for the welfare state. Both men were ideologically closely aligned to the “benevolent British bourgeois progressive[s]” dominated by the Webbs.⁵⁵ “Milner's 'nobler socialism',” Semmel observed, “was in conception little different from the 'collectivism' of the Fabians.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Searle has shown how the National Efficiency movement that lay the foundations of the 20th century state – producing, in short order, a new national system of education, a reorganized Army and Navy, the Committee of Imperial Defence, old age pensions, unemployment insurance and a network of labour bureaus – drew on the Milnerian preoccupations of expert control of the state, the critique of laissez faire economics, the corrupting effect of party politics, and the vast potential wealth available from the empire.⁵⁷

It is a more impertinent argument, especially for a historian of South Africa, to suggest that Searle and Semmel were writing about the same thing, that Joseph Chamberlain's social imperialism and Beatrice Webb's national efficiency formed part of a single movement we should call progressivism. The clear advantage of this

⁵²Ibid., 281, 270, 266.

⁵³Ibid., 310.

⁵⁴Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*, 23.

⁵⁵Webb, “The power to alter things,” 1905-1924, 353.

⁵⁶Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform*, 185.

⁵⁷Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*, 116, 205-6.

characterisation, as Daniel Rodgers' *Atlantic Crossings* demonstrates, is that it highlights the dense and mutually reinforcing relationships between the different regional struggles, and agents, of social reform. All around the Atlantic activists and scholars were in conversation, designing common institutional remedies for the social problems of urban industrialisation.⁵⁸ Progressivism, in this view, emerges - like its parent Utilitarianism - as a single political philosophy of very wide significance.⁵⁹

It is easy to identify the progressives on the basis of what they rejected in the older movement of modern liberalism; these included some of the foundational principles of the genitive philosophy. Progressives, on both sides of the Atlantic, were hostile to the theory of individualism, to Smith's moral economy, to private property and the law (because, invariably, the law preserved property rights). And they were generally sceptical, or dismissive, of the workings of parliamentary democracy and political parties. While they adopted the utilitarians ideas on the promotion of happiness and the limitation of suffering, the general distinguishing features of Progressivism objectives included a conviction that the state should be both the agent and the telos of the good society, a preoccupation with scientific - especially statistical - methods of social science, an insistence on expert controlled government and an irrepressible interest in social engineering. Segregation and eugenics were both rhetorically much favoured by progressives, although in England both faced formidable internal and insurmountable political obstacles.⁶⁰

The relationship between Liberalism and Progressivism is important, not least because of the significance in our contemporary critical theory of Foucault's argument about the origins of the nanny state. Modern "government has as its purpose not the act of government itself but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health," and, he continues, "it is the population itself on which government will act either directly through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the flow of population into certain regions or activities."⁶¹ In his account of the history of this new "art of government," Foucault has argued that the modern state began to derive its sovereignty from the policing of the physical and mental well-being of its citizens. It was 18th century liberalism's fostering of a dispersed set of individual rights - "to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs" - that, paradoxically, expanded the state's power.⁶² "This is modern democracy's strength, and at the same time, its inner contradiction," Agamben, following Foucault, has argued, "modern democracy does not abolish sacred life but rather shatters it and disseminates it into every individual body, making it into what is at stake in political conflict."⁶³

But Agamben may be wrong to link liberal democracy and the government of population so directly. One of the startling lessons of politics in post-Apartheid South Africa is that the principle of biopolitical sovereignty - the idea that the state's legitimacy

⁵⁸Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*.

⁵⁹ One danger here might be that the fine-grained intellectual history of late-nineteenth century Britain, attentive to the hidden effects of the metaphysical and institutional disagreements between individuals and factions, might be swamped by the eloquent but sweeping characterisations of progressivism that have dominated US history since the middle of the last century. This is, I think, best left as a warning, to be addressed as an open empirical problem.

⁶⁰McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*; Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*; Freedman, "Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity"; Keller, "Anglo-American Politics, 1900-1930, in *Anglo-American Perspective: A Case Study in Comparative History*"; Beatrice Webb, in May 1920, "Someone has to think things out and our task in life is to be pioneers in social engineering." Webb, *The power to alter things, 1905-1924*, 357.

⁶¹Foucault, "Governmentality."

⁶²Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 145.

⁶³Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 134.

hinges on the biological well-being of its subjects – is not necessarily coterminous with the liberal democratic state. In the absence of the cultural transformation wrought by scientific social welfare - the real work of progressivism - the state can ignore the basic rules of biopolitical government, while meticulously obeying the other rules of liberal democracy.⁶⁴ The horrible irony of modern South Africa, in many ways the key contemporary political problem, is that the legal and institutional basis of racial segregation and indirect rule - the “hegemony on a shoe-string” that has characterized state-making on the African continent in the 20th century – foreclosed both the capacity and the legitimacy of expert-controlled, scientific government.⁶⁵ And segregation, as many scholars have shown, was one of the distinctive political instruments of early 20th century progressivism.⁶⁶ In this sense the rise of progressivism in the 1890s is unmistakably the source of the Foucault's biopolitical state, and the reason that in many of the former colonial states the government of population is so profoundly neglected.⁶⁷

The task of improving society had long been an integral part of liberalism, it was a fondness for formalized segregation as a tool of progress that distinguished progressivism from the utilitarian liberalism of John Stuart Mill. The “two liberal impulses” - one limiting the state's capacity to intervene in the market, the home, the church, and the other charging those in authority with the pursuit of happiness – existed in tension before the 1890s. “The stronger the claims for a particular intervention being progressive, or bettering life,” Mehta comments on 19th century liberalism, “the more it has pressed against the existing norms limiting the use of political power.” Progress, then, was always the end of liberal government. For Mill progress also provided the ideological basis for imperialism. For 19th century liberalism, the “empire,” Mehta observed, “is an engine that tows societies stalled in their past into contemporary time and history.”⁶⁸

For progressives, obsessed with the corruptions and weaknesses of their own urban populations, this “pedagogic obsession” was obsolete optimism. When Lionel Curtis, in the middle of his struggle with Gandhi, proposed the “gradual segregation of the natives to their own territories” in Johannesburg in 1907 he was attacking the Liberal Prime Minister's statement, just weeks before, that the empire ought not to exist at all if it was not “founded on equality.” Adopting Pearson's statistically derived eugenic pessimism about the “normal racial curve” against Gandhi and Campbell-Bannerman, Curtis declared that “individuals must be judged not by what they are but by their potentiality and that potentiality can only be measured by the history of the race as a whole.” To meet this reality the “splendid theory of absolute equality between all British subjects has to be departed from in all directions” and the empire should simply “secure to each country the best government compatible with its conditions.”⁶⁹ Curtis was articulating the progressive determination to cut the liberal tow-line.

⁶⁴ Of course I have in mind the state's policy on HIV prevention between 1995 and 2009, but a similar perplexing disregard for the rules of policing population, as Foucault described them, has characterised much of the post-Apartheid state. Much of this condition has to do with the contested character of public health in the post-colony. See Weinel, “Primary source knowledge and technical decision-making: Mbeki and the AZT debate.”

⁶⁵ This phrase is from Sarah Berry's study of uncertainty and conflict in land rights under indirect rule, Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land”; For an extended analysis of the parsimony and paradoxes of African economic development policy, even under Sidney Webb, see Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*.

⁶⁶ Jones, *Outcast London*, 331; Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 213-4; McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*, 189-218; Woodward, *The strange career of Jim Crow*; Legassick, “British Hegemony and the Origins of Segregation in South Africa, 1901-1914”; Swanson, “The Sanitation Syndrome”; Swanson, “The Asiatic Menace.”

⁶⁷ This is, inevitably, a complicated story, having as much to do with the unsustainable burden of the social welfare schemes that coincided with decolonization as it has to do with the long history of neglect that preceded it Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*; Cooper, *African since 1940: the past of the present*.

⁶⁸ Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 79, 81-2.

⁶⁹ Curtis, “The place of subject people in the Empire.”

This desire to break with the foundational principles of 18th century liberalism was a key part of the way that the progressives understood themselves. They raged against the parsimony and impotence of “Gladstonian cant” and the weaknesses of laissez faire economics.⁷⁰ And they closely identified their own project with the new powers of the emerging social sciences, especially in comparison with their utilitarian forebears. “It seems to me the Benthamites fall lamentably short in their understanding of the scientific method,” Beatrice Webb explained to her diary, “They ignore the whole process of verification.”⁷¹ The progressives project of reform was directed at the widening public (notwithstanding their suspicions of party and working democracy) and they made adroit use of the new muckraking press.

⁷⁰Milner to Wilkinson, 1888, cited in Thompson, *Forgotten Patriot*, 60.

⁷¹Webb, *All the good things of life, 1892-1905*, 201.

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