

Liberalism, Eugenics, and the State. The Case of the Philosophy of Bernard Bosanquet

15/2013

Political Dialogues

Keywords: *eugenics, charity, idealism, individualism, interventionism, liberalism, Poor Law, socialism, social policy*

Summary

The aim of the paper consists in presenting the place occupied by Bernard Bosanquet's philosophy in the context of the welfare provision debate taking place during the first decades of the XXth century in Britain. The main thesis of the article is that although often accused of totalitarian or radically individualist tendencies, which supposedly had an effect on his attitude towards eugenics, Bosanquet's treatment of the "social problem" may be seen as an application of moderate liberal principles. To prove this, the author will focus firstly on intellectual and political attitudes of the time towards eugenics, then passing to Bosanquet's stand in relation to this issue, and finally drawing conclusions referring to the thesis of the article.

Reading today the history of the eugenic movement may induce a feeling of confusion and cognitive dissonance, of which the main reason is the Janus-faced character of historical approaches to the movement. On the one hand researchers face a determined postwar criticism of any suggestions of legitimate relation between genetic differences and a position occupied by individuals in a social hierarchy, or their social behavior.

But until the outbreak of II WW it is quite impossible to find widespread condemnation of not only eugenic theory, but also practice. Instead, one comes across a popular belief among European as well as American intellectuals and politicians in the accuracy of eugenic theses, either in their positive (i.e. advocating the marriages of genetically valuable individuals and convincing them, by means of public education, to have as many descendants as possible) or negative (i.e. hindering the marriages and sterilizing "worthless" elements of the society – recidivists, alcoholics, prostitutes, or the "feeble-minded") version.

The course of events leading to the situation, in which eugenics claimed the position of a prevailing social and political approach to the social problems seems to begin with the 1880. and the reports on the birthrates of the poor (Hasian 1996, p. 113). The following public debate concerning the danger of "mentally deficient" people outnumbering "normal" citizens, as well as the issue of financial resources necessary to provide for them with any kind of material support, led to formation in 1904 of the Royal Commission on the Care and the Control of the Feeble-minded. The effects of the works of the Commission

have triggered off further institutionalization of the eugenic debate, which from the perspective of contemporary political divisions may seem surprising. The reason for this is the fact that most liberals have fiercely engaged in the debate, not condemning eugenics, but either sharing the conservative admiration for the radical eugenic scheme implying inter alia compulsory sterilization of the “hereditary paupers”, or advancing more moderate eugenics, based on voluntary action. Thus some commentators, mostly from political right, criticize this particular engagement as demystifying liberal hypocrisy (liberals on this view on one the hand advocate individual freedom, and on the other are ready to sacrifice it for effectiveness and economy).

Eugenics became the subject of fundamental agreement across the diverse ideological lines between the conservatives, socialists, and liberals of that time. While the conservative support to the idea of controlling birth-rates of industrial class (the so called “industrial residuum”) may seem understandable in terms of premises underlying their social perspective (Dorey 2011, p. 15-18), liberal recognition of primacy of political and personal freedom and socialist respect for equality should rather result in criticism of eugenic postulates. But they did not. There are few possible explanations of this paradox. Socialists’ positive attitude towards eugenics (either positive or negative) was due to their doctrinal closeness to the idea of improvement of social conditions by means of state interference. This applied both to Fabians (S. Webb, B. Webb) and Marxists (J. B. S. Haldane, K. Pearson) (Paul 1984, p. 573). Such figures as G. B. Shaw, H. J.

Laski, H. G. Wells, were the most popular leftists supporting general regulations regarding matters such as reproduction and family. Some of them were very critical of eugenic movement *par excellence* (e.g. Haldane 1938), since their goal was classless society, and not elimination of genetic deficiencies. But the improvement of the living conditions of the poor by means of centrally-distributed imperatives and prohibitions, implied in moderate forms of resolving the “social problem”, was doctrinally close to all socialists.

Marouf A. Hasian rightly points to the fact that liberal support for eugenics, even in a moderate form of individual and voluntary actions initiated mostly by public opinion, and not compulsory sterilization and prohibition of genetically undesired marriages, helped liberals to realize at least few political goals: it enabled simultaneous advocacy for interventionism and criticism of thoroughgoing income redistribution, it helped gain a theoretical background for the postulated social and economic reforms (health insurance, poor laws, child labor regulations), it facilitated propagation of middle-class morality, and it made possible justification of political elitism and limited franchise (Hasian 1996, p. 115).

Not only doctrinal specificity of liberalism and socialism explains what seems today to be at least politically unreasonable stand. Also scientific findings of the time seemed to speak in favor of undertaking actions aimed at resolving the problem of “hereditary paupers”. The period separating outbreak of the second Boer war from the I World War have witnessed real “boost for eugenics and

social imperialism” (MacKenzie 1976, p. 517-518). During that time eugenics constituted mainstream scientific paradigm to deal with social problems. Works by Charles Booth, H. Llewellyn Smith, or Alfred Marshall, arguing for biological origins of poverty, have been backed with persuasive and exhaustive empirical data (see Richardson 2003, p. 64-65). It was then that Winston Churchill was the vice-president of International Eugenics Congress in London (1912), and that Eugenics Society managed to pass Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. Thus liberal and socialist readiness to support eugenic agenda may be said to result not from willingness to discriminate particular groups, but rather from scientific discoveries and theses based on empirical data (Freedon 1978, p. 178). The radical opposition to any interference with individual freedom, personified during the parliamentary debate over Mental Deficiency Act by Sir Josiah Wedgwood, was perceived even in liberal ranks as blindly doctrinal, irrational (because unscientific and sentimental), and unpatriotic (since sacrificing future common good for present personal interests) (Hasian 1996, p. 119).

Doctrinally distant from liberal mainstream were thinkers and reformers gathered around Charity Organization Society, a leading relief organization in London. COS have been under philosophical attack since 1880., when the debate over the possible scope of state intervention in private lives of lower classes has originated. Its doctrinal insistence on individual self-reliance, self-help, on priority of molding character (“in social reform character is the condition of conditions”, as John Atkinson Hobson sum-

marized this stand) (cit. after Vincent & R. Plant 1984, p. 102) before helping out materially or financially, and its distance from positive eugenics placed it in opposition to main political actors (although despite its insistence on voluntary action, COS has played a role of a personal base for Eugenics Society)¹.

Similar moderate liberal approach to eugenics had been represented by thinkers identified as New Liberals. Although they agreed neither with voluntarism of COS, nor with thoroughgoing interventionism, their postulates combined the essences of both by stating that what matters is both character and external circumstances influencing and shaping it. Leonard Trelavny Hobhouse, the main representative of New Liberalism, has been known *inter alia* for his criticism of eugenic scheme in the name of individual liberty and equality of opportunity (Freedon 1978, p. 189-190).

Laissez-faireism vs. Socialism – Distorted Alternative

Bernard Bosanquet, one of the main representatives of the British idealist tradition and a disciple of Thomas Hill Green, has been an object of philosophical and political attack from surprisingly divergent positions. Firstly, as an advocate of COS politics of particularism and individual charity (resulting e.g. in opposition to free school meals), with its insistence on self-reliance, he has been viewed e.g. by Fabians as radical liberal individualist, not appreciating the positive role played by the state in citizens’ life. Secondly, although Bosanquet is

1 On relation between COS and Eugenics Society see Mazumdar 1992, chapter 1.

considered to be both a New Liberal, and an intellectual *spiritus movens* of COS², he has often been accused of illiberal or even totalitarian inclinations. The criticism of his *The Philosophical Theory of the State* by Hobhouse (Hobhouse 1918) has resulted in a widespread conviction of strictly Hegelian (i.e. antidemocratic and “Prussian”) character of his political philosophy³. Some scholars even argue that Bosanquet advocated eugenics, which “provided [him] with a modern framework within which to integrate parts of Plato’s theory that were seriously at odds with Green’s essentially liberal conception of (...) value of individuality” (Morrow 1984, p. 104, cf. Morrow 1985, p. 511-512). There is no doubt that some of Bosanquet’s opinions suggest correctness of such interpretation. His open criticism to panmixia, i.e. “genetic laissez-faireism” where each of a kind may have progeny with one another, references made to the so called Jukes’ family as a source of unnecessary burden to the state and society (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 303), statements that an unrestricted reproduction of “mentally deficient” people will inevitably make “society deteriorate” (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 297) (changing it into “human inferno” with persons “without human qualities”) (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 291), and the advocacy of the „seclusion of the hopeless inebriate and the feeble-minded girl-pauper” (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 304), seem to make such criticism legitimate.

2 On Bosanquet’s involvement in COS see den Otter 2007.

3 Many authors have undermined validity of such interpretation (see Taylor 1920, Sabine 1923, Broad 1919, Plamenatz 1968, Sweet 1997, Nicholson 1990).

Undoubtedly Bosanquet did engage in the disputes concerning eugenics and social selection. In his lectures delivered before London Ethical Society he was clearly in favor of introducing policies protecting society from such “deterioration”. He also fiercely criticized main discussants in the eugenic debate. He attacked theoreticians who called themselves faithful continuators of Darwin’s theory applied to social relations. It was mainly Herbert Spencer and his version of “survival of the fittest” that Bosanquet focused on. According to Spencer, organized charity disturbed the processes of natural evolution of mankind, distorting also “the *average* effect” of the laws of nature, which is “to ‘purify’ society from those who are, *in some respect or other*, essentially faulty”. “He on whom his own stupidity, or vice, or idleness, entail loss of life, must, in generalizations of philosophy, be classed with the victims of weak viscera or malformed limbs. (...) Beings thus imperfect are nature’s failures, and are recalled by her laws when found to be such” (Spencer 1883, p. 415). According to Bosanquet, Social Darwinists’ belief in the necessity of state’s non-interference in the process of natural social selection, which is supposed to lead to the establishment of societies comprising of the most adjusted individuals, is at odds both with Darwin’s theory and the actual state of affairs. Spencer’s and his followers’ analyses and diagnoses are improper due to their mindless equation of humans with animals and plants. All their faults took beginning in the crucial reduction of a complicated human condition to a simple, lower animal existence. Because of this initial oversimplification Spencer could not comprehend that

evolution in modern societies means something very different than the natural evolution. It is not a “struggle”, without which “the world would still have been inhabited only by men of feeble types, sheltering in caves and living on wild food” (Spencer 1899, p. 241) (even if its brutal character significantly diminished over the centuries), but social exclusion of those unable or unwilling to co-operate and fulfill their duties towards the rest of society.

But *laissez-faireism* in relation to state interference and to the problem of social selection is as erroneous as the opposite, socialist stand. Bosanquet followed Benjamin Kidd in differentiating between “true Socialism” and “State Socialism”. The first one “has always one definite object in view, up to which all its proposals directly or indirectly lead. This is the final suspension of that personal struggle for existence which has been waged, not only from the beginning of society, but, in one form or another, from the beginning of life” (Kidd 1895, p. 220-221). Kidd has attributed such view to Marx, Engels, and Edward Bellamy. This was also the standpoint of Fabians, and an ideology implicit in the old Poor Law (and to some extent also 1834 Poor Law) and Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law (1909), based on the idea of necessity of institutional help to all willing to receive it (Bosanquet 1909; Bosanquet 1895a, p. 303-304; cf. Vincent 1984). This stand, in Bosanquet’s opinion, certainly cannot be said to benefit the common good, and society as a whole. It results in nothing but support to those unworthy of it, who with material help gain no incentive to self-betterment. The second kind of so-

cialism, which Bosanquet found much more acceptable, “regulates the competitive struggle while enhancing the efficiency of competition” (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 291). It uses state’s institutions to create most favorable conditions for competition between individuals, it helps those needing only temporary support to significantly improve their living conditions, while omitting everyone else.

The role of inspiration to criticizing *laissez-faireism* and unlimited interventionism was played to Bosanquet by the writings of Darwin himself. Bosanquet used them to criticize Spencer. In his opinion the gulf separating *Origins of Species* from *Principles of Ethics* is impossible to bridge. Where Darwin saw progression of species, Spencer saw struggle for survival between individuals. The first one referred to natural world, the second extrapolated this arguments to modern societies. This last step is particularly logically doubtful, since there are far too many differences, Bosanquet says, separating natural from social condition: „the struggle for existence has, in short, become a struggle for a place in the community; and these places are reserved for the individuals which in the highest degree possess the co-operative qualities demanded by circumstances” (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 294). Natural social selection requires not only competition but also cooperation, thus consisting not in improvement of particular individuals but of communities. The loosing community is always the one acting not as a whole, but as it was comprised of individuals striving for personal gains. Furthermore, it is not mere survival that is at stake in modern societies but rather a struggle for betterment of the conditions of

existence. Natural social selection does not consist in struggling for life and death, but in leaving own descendants (as Darwin wrote). Today this does not mean begetting as much progeny as possible, but providing for their safe and sound existence. Thus Bosanquet could fairly state his intellectual debt to Thomas Henry Huxley, referring particularly to his statement that “What is often called the struggle for existence in society [...] is a contest, not for the means of existence, but for the means of enjoyment. Those who occupy the first places in this practical competitive examination are the rich and the influential; those who fail, more or less, occupy the lower places, down to the squalid obscurity of the pauper and the criminal” (Huxley 1897, p. 40).

Bosanquet’s own vision of natural social selection constituted a basis for his response both to individualist and collectivist thinkers. Contrary to individualists, he recognized a necessary role of the state in shaping favorable conditions of societies’ development. Unrestricted reproduction of poor, genetically disadvantaged masses will never result in promotion of their most valuable traits, but will effect in social deterioration (since welfare usually translates into weakened progeny). Yet Bosanquet differed also from socialists, especially in his criticism of general systems of social policy, since “the application of this initiative to guarantee without protest the existence of all individuals brought into being, instead of leaving the responsibility to the uttermost possible extent on the parents and individuals themselves, is an abuse fatal to character and ultimately destructive of social life” (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 290). Such general approach

to resolving social dilemmas is unjustly said to rest on the authority of science. But social reality is too complicated for scientists, who will never explain all causes of human behavior and create infallible instruments of improving everyone’s position. The only legitimate alternative is practical and particular testing of „de facto will and capacity to give a value in the way of social service for which a return adequate to self-support is received from society” (Bosanquet 1967, p. 158). This means making support dependent on displaying the ability to self-support, independence from others, and fulfilling duties attached to the place occupied in social structure.

Ideas Matter

Both strategies – laissez-faireism and unrestricted interventionism – fail to grasp the conditions of individual development due to the overall character of their recommendations (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 301). Only by considering and acting with individual cases we can improve lives of people capable of helping themselves, either by supporting them directly, or by shaking them out of the state of pleasant apathy. At least two arguments, in Bosanquet’s opinion, weight in favor of this line of thought. Firstly, in case of most of deficiencies of human character it is not clear whether they are inborn or caused by external circumstances (Bosanquet 1967, p. 143-146). The place occupied in a social hierarchy, the supposed indicator of individual success or failure, and praised by adherents of laissez-faireism as an infallible indicator of “transmittable qualities” (Bosanquet 1967, p. 148), should not be viewed as such. It is impossible to

determine whether such position is the result of inherited tendencies/abilities or uncontrollable circumstances. Thus it is improper to assume that general aid will benefit both these categories of people. Secondly, in case of the general welfare systems it is unclear how particular people would respond to the same aid (whether understood as state interference or non-interference). It is possible that actions curing some individuals will be poisonous or inefficient to others (Bosanquet 1895a, p. 149-150).

Bosanquet's own attitude towards the question of efficient social welfare is based on ideas of particularism, voluntarism, and idealism. The necessary condition and a first step to bettering the situation of the poor is reshaping their worldviews. Their actual position is largely dependent not on themselves, but on the system of ideas dominating social consciousness – the general will of the community (Bosanquet 1895b; see Grygienc 2013, chapter 3.2.3). Creating a general system of welfare implants most people with an idea that “something must be done” to prevent them from failure to provide for themselves and their families (Bosanquet 1895c, p. 112-113). It is this attitude that is largely responsible for the poor condition of the masses. And it is this kind of social policy that always results in a waste of resources, since „You cannot organize what has lost the organic character” (Bosanquet 1895c, p. 109).

Thus the starting point of every effective welfare program should consist in the separation of those willing betterment of their position from those unready or unable to undertake such

effort (Bosanquet 1993, p. 297-298). Reformatory work should not be fully inclusive. If it strives, as it should, at the „maintenance of the struggle for existence in the social sense, or the maintenance of natural selection in the social sense of that term” (Bosanquet 1967, p. 154), it has to exclude all individuals incapable of betterment. When this separation of “what has lost the organic character” is completed, the social welfare may proceed with aiding condition of the poor. Since a character is in large part a result of both material and ideological (i.e. the general will of community) circumstances, the social reformer has to undertake twofold effort: educatory and supportive. With a help of diversified means (“public assistance, public opinion, education of the public mind”) he has to change people's characters and their living conditions. Both these elements are interconnected by ties of mutual conditioning. Development of character requires material stability, and economic welfare usually results from individual self-reliance. The only „true analogue of social selection in human society” (Bosanquet 1967, p. 299) must comprise of two elements: moral and material responsibility of family, and interference of society and state institutions. Thus every reformer inevitably faces a question: what to begin with – character or conditions? Bosanquet chose the second option (Bosanquet 1895c, p. 110-111), which comes down to a systematic improvement of financial stability through full-time paid employment (Bosanquet 1895d, p. 312-313; Bosanquet 1895c, p. 112-116).

Conclusion

Advocates of both critical approaches (“liberal” and “totalitarian”) to Bosanquet’s vision of effective poor relief and natural social selection seem to be mistaken, since his philosophy in this respect can be described neither as illiberal nor radically liberal.

Firstly, although Bosanquet did engage in the debates on the social problem and favorable conditions of natural social selection, his propositions regarding these matters seem rather cautious and moderate even to a contemporary reader, for whom it might be difficult to call them illiberal. Bosanquet did not advocate laws forbidding “undesirable” marriages, nor any other form of institutionalized compulsion regarding matters of social selection. In his opinion the only acceptable action must consist in modification of the environment, never in restricting personal freedom (Bosanquet 1967, p. 152). The only way to introduce a lasting change of living conditions of the poor is to transform their attitude from mental dependency upon charity and state’s support to self-sufficiency. This may be achieved only by changing the general will of society, which in turn can be realized by transformation of public opinion through institutionalized change of means of support provision. Thus authors ascribing to Bosanquet a “Hegelian” tendency to put the state above individuals (whose personal interests are almost of no value), which results in his alleged approval of eugenic methods of eliminating “worthless” elements of society, oversimplify Bosanquet’s stand. From the perspective of opinions prevailing in the beginning of the XXth century

in Britain, Bosanquet’s approach to the problem of “hereditary paupers” and its possible solutions, may be said to be moderate and liberal.

Similar inaccuracy may be ascribed to theses of radically liberal character of Bosanquet’s vision of social policy. Although undoubtedly he advocated significant limitation of state’s prerogatives in the field of welfare (*vide* his opposition to Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law), he nonetheless discerned necessity of undertaking institutionalized actions supporting the poor (cf. den Otter 2007, p. 43-44). Some people would never attain material independence (even if they are mentally self-sufficient) if it wasn’t for temporary state support or charity.

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