If Shaw had not written his plays, few people – perhaps no one – would be much concerned with his labours as a socialist thinker and propagandist or with his convictions as a religious philosopher, although in both areas his achievements, by ordinary standards, would have constituted an honourable life’s work. But the standards of history are severe: the career of a distinguished Fabian is by now of interest only to specialists in British political or economic history, that of a latter-day Lamarckian to an even more restricted circle. Nevertheless, Shaw’s ideas demand attention from those who would understand his work. Not only do they suggest his relation to the intellectual currents of his age but, in a quite direct way, they appear in his plays. In *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, for example, Shaw the socialist slips into the mouth of Crofts, the ‘capitalist bully’, an unconscious revelation of what
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Shaw sees as the pervasive corruption of capitalists society, in which all ‘are pocketing what they can’ and avoiding ‘inconvenient questions.’ In a more profound way, Shaw’s ideas, transformed into dramatic metaphors, permeate all his plays. The commitment to socialist action in his life becomes in his drama a commitment to human existence in the world, especially as transformed by comedy; at the same time the commitment to the ascendant thrust of the Life Force becomes a darker, to some degree secret, impulse to transcend that world. How this transformation occurs will appear in later discussions of individual plays, but for the present it is important to see just what were Shaw’s religious, political, and economic ideas.

The roots of Shaw’s socio-economic ideas extend deep into the nineteenth century, at least as far as Carlyle, with his denunciation of the misery engendered by irresponsible economics and his puritanic emphasis on the necessity for work, and as far as Ruskin, with his revulsion from the ugliness of the world created by nineteenth-century capitalism and his distrust of popular democracy. Indeed, Shaw, always endeavouring to present socialism as truly English in ancestry, claims that Ruskin, believing in government by ‘an energetic and enlightened minority’, was a prophet of ‘the Bolshevist party’. Although Shaw said that only Sidney Webb of the early Fabians was directly influenced by John Stuart Mill, nevertheless Mill’s advocacy in his later writing of a gradual evolution to socialism through such economic experiments as government acquisition of land for co-operatives and of monopolies, suggests some significant relation to Fabianism.

But neither these figures nor other predecessors provided the systematic, ‘scientific’ economic basis that Shaw, and indeed the socialist movement, needed. In the