Shortly after P.A. Kropotkin’s arrival in Britain, in an article published in the magazine *Nineteenth Century* in 1888 under the title “The Struggle for Existence: a programme,”¹ T.H. Huxley, the Victorian biologist and populariser of Darwinism, described in explicitly Darwinian terms his view of the plight of modern Britain. He began by drawing a picture of “primitive society” as a constant fight for scarce resources:

... the weakest and stupidest went to the wall, while the toughest and shrewdest, those who were best fitted to cope with their circumstances, but not the best in any other sense, survived. Life was a continual free fight, and beyond the limited and temporary relations of the family, the Hobbesian war of each against all was the normal state of existence. The human species, like others, splashed and foundered amid the general stream of evolution. ...²

and, even though he saw “civilised” society as one “in which the war of individual against individual is most strictly limited” in pursuit of the social good, i.e., “embodied morality,” nonetheless “the effort of ethical man to work towards a moral end by no means abolished, perhaps has hardly modified, the deep-seated organic impulses which impel the natural man to follow his non-moral course.”³ Scarcity itself has forced man to this point: the ethical society is a mere ideal, “mankind has not yet reached this stage by a very long way, and my business is with the present.”⁴

To be more specific, he continued, Britain in the nineteenth century had enjoyed a historically unique period of prosperity. But this period of peace and plenty was coming to an end: her economic and industrial lead over other countries was being eroded. When, in nature, a predator became weakened, a competitor vanquished it and took its place. Now too, in international economic competition, the leading nation, Britain, was being challenged by rival countries whose economies, if not already more powerful and dynamic...
than Britain’s, bade fair to become so. What could the world’s dominant industrial power do to secure its preeminent position once again? Britain’s possibilities were limited, Huxley wrote, because it could not feed itself due to the pressure of increasing population: as Malthus had pointed out at the beginning of the century, the natural growth of population, if unchecked, would increase geometrically against a background of merely arithmetic rises in food production, and this would inevitably lead to starvation for many and the need to import much of the food consumed by the majority. These food imports had to be paid for by exports of industrial goods. Huxley argued that this situation was all very well and good while Britain was the economic superpower which she had been for much of the nineteenth century. But if Britain were to be faced by stronger rivals who could outproduce her, undercut her and take her place in world markets, then she faced a mortal risk: not merely the economic risk of becoming a lower-ranking economic power, but the inability to pay for imports of food needed to remove the risk of physical extinction for large numbers of her inhabitants. Poverty might have a minority of the working population in its grip now: this was inevitable. But if something were not done, it would become the fate of the majority, destroying that social stability which long prosperity had bought Britain.

The incentive to improve Britain’s position, to maintain her world economic supremacy, was tremendous, therefore. Huxley maintained that the clue to this decline, which had to be reversed, lay in one thing: Britain, unlike her more successful rivals, had a much worse educated and trained labour force (it should be remembered that he was writing at a time well before the great Education Acts of the twentieth century). He went on to advocate the setting-up of an industrial education system to train the skilled workers which British industry needed and which her competitors had already taken steps to provide themselves with (e.g., Germany with her technische Hochschulen). The system should be financed, Huxley specified, by local council taxation, as only local councils had the knowledge and experience to predict local industrial needs and tailor the training to respond to them. Only by this means could Britain hope to stave off the decline which threatened to relegate her to the second rank of economic powers or lower, and the prevention of which was