

F.J. FISHER (1908-88)

AND THE DIALECTIC OF ECONOMIC HISTORY

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F.J. [Jack] Fisher's work as an economic and social historian began as a student at the London School of Economics in the later 1920s, when the subject was just gaining momentum as a separate field of study.¹ He often recalled it as an exciting era. Everything was yet to be pioneered and all discoveries seemed fresh and important. His own first degree was in history, which he always praised as an excellent grounding, but the vitality and scope of the new specialism made it an irresistible field for research.

While certainly not a Marxist, he shared a Marxist awareness of the significance of economic and social factors. He viewed economic history not as a hermetic discipline but as a key element that needed to be integrated into wider interpretations.² Indeed, throughout his career, his lectures and conversation displayed a scintillating breadth of information; and he was very quick to absorb new concept from related fields of study.

Influential among tutors at the LSE was Eileen Power,³ whose magnetic and elegant lectures were much admired. But, above all, his mentor was R.H. Tawney, some thirty years his senior, to whom he always remained deeply devoted. When Fisher was subsequently appointed as a Lecturer at the School, Tawney and he worked harmoniously together. They shared a common intellectual unorthodoxy as well as common research interests in Tudor and

Stuart economic history. For example, Tawney's celebrated 1941 article on 'The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640' acknowledged Fisher's help in counting the sales of gentry manors – in what proved to be a much-contested technique for assessing English social mobility before the Civil Wars.⁴

Nonetheless, there was a very marked intellectual divergence between the two scholars. Tawney was a social philosopher – a theorist of Christian socialism – as well as an economic historian: the author not only of *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912) and *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) but also of *The Acquisitive Society* (1921) and *Equality* (1932).⁵ It was an unusual multiple role, and one that few among his contemporaries or his successors have sought to emulate, as the academic world has become relentlessly more specialised. Among later historians, only E.P. Thompson has shown the same scope, as man of letters, as participant in theoretical debates within the broad tradition of European Marxism, and as campaigner for nuclear disarmament.⁶

By contrast, Jack Fisher had no interest in contributing to civic philosophy, and was sceptical of ideology in any form, hence endorsing neither Christianity nor socialism. He was influenced by the Left in the 1930s, but then and thereafter he kept his own political views very much to himself. He also enjoyed demolishing any uncritical slogans that were rashly uttered in his hearing. In the 1960s, for example, he frequently challenged the more euphoric nostrums of the revived Left. Naïve Marxists, especially those who stressed 'the economic factor' without knowing any economics, found him a tough critic. But he remained ecumenical in his unorthodoxy. If he was not a stereotypical man of the Left, nor was he a standard right-winger either of old or new vintage.

Indeed, he willingly tendered his own trenchant analysis to historians of very different intellectual persuasions. To take three examples, as a young man in 1932 he acted as a vigilant proof-reader of J.U. Nef's classic study of

capitalist industrial growth in sixteenth-century England, *The Rise of the British Coal Industry* (1932);⁷ in the later 1930s, he gave detailed briefing on seventeenth-century social history and criticised the text of David Petegorsky's Left Book Club book on agrarian communism, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War: A Study of the Social Philosophy of Gerrard Winstanley* (1940);⁸ and in 1962 F.J. Fisher and Olive Coleman were jointly thanked for 'much stimulus and invaluable criticism of the typescript' by their colleague, A.R. Bridbury, whose revisionist *Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages* (1962) argued the case for economic expansion rather decline or a 'crisis of feudalism' in the fifteenth century.⁹

In other words, Fisher was not by any means a straightforward Tawney 'disciple' but the Tawney legacy that he did enthusiastically accept was a dedication to the study of English economic and social history at the LSE; and it was there, as a researcher and teacher, rather than as an administrator or departmental empire-builder, that he exerted his immense influence.

With others of his generation, he contributed to the process whereby the new subject specialism was consolidated, professionalised, and advanced. That was not achieved by a single person or a single academic institution. But from the mid-1940s onwards, when he returned to the LSE after active war service, Jack Fisher was undoubtedly one of the most challenging figures in what was widely accepted as one of the key departments of economic history, staffed by eminent figures such as T.S. Ashton (who succeeded Power and preceded Fisher in the established chair in economic history), Eleanora Carus-Wilson, and Lance Beales. There was an atmosphere of excitement and expansion. Fisher's work as teacher, writer and critic helped to give new rigour and new direction to the developing subject. His formidable intellect was undoubtedly feared by some as well as admired by many. But his analytical sharpness, in combination with his lack of pomposity and willingness to treat everyone on equal terms, made his style uniquely challenging.

The major intellectual influences upon him came in turn from the ferment of ideas – from both left and right – at the London School of Economics,¹⁰ supplemented by his own wide reading, particularly in development economics, sociology, and social anthropology. His interests were eclectic. He was, for example, well versed in classical economic theory, which he thought essential training for economic historians; but he viewed economics as an analytical tool rather than as a satisfactory interpretation of human behaviour, being equally firm that economists should study the complexities of economic history. Indeed, he was particularly attracted by debates in the developing social sciences. Among LSE colleagues from those disciplines with whom he enjoyed friendly disputation were the anthropologist, Lucy Mair,¹¹ and the demographer, David Glass.¹² In general, however, it was notable that Fisher referred only very infrequently to his own intellectual sources and development, remarking that scaffolding was to be pulled down once it had served its purpose. Nonetheless, his essays and his conversation between them have, in retrospect, supplied a number of clues.

Not surprisingly, he was attracted to iconoclasts. For example, among the early sociologists, he was impressed by Thorstein Veblen's acerbic analysis of conspicuous consumption in later nineteenth-century America,¹³ which provided the spur for his own perceptive discussion of the role of consumption in the growth of sixteenth-century London.¹⁴

Among economists, he was particularly interested in those studying the new and topical subject of the Third World experience of underdevelopment, or colonial history as it was termed before decolonisation. He enjoyed, for example, the spare logic of Hla Myint, another colleague at the LSE, whose analysis of development economics in 1964 highlighted the diversity of 'backwardness' and the problems involved in state planning for growth.¹⁵ Here theory was augmented by practice. During the Second World War, Jack Fisher – then in his mid-thirties – had been seconded from the RAF to the post of deputy

economic and financial adviser to the Minister of State in Egypt. It was an experience he greatly enjoyed but also one that sharpened his awareness of social, cultural, and economic constraints upon growth. That subsequently became one of the themes of his stimulating lectures, both at the post-war LSE and at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, on comparative colonial economic development.

On that subject, one of the few economic historians to win his unqualified praise was Alexander Gershenkron, especially for his magisterial 1952 essay on ‘Economic Backwardness in Comparative Perspective’.¹⁶ There, universal models of growth were explicitly rejected. ‘The iron necessity of historical processes has been discarded’, wrote Gershenkron. Earlier generations had enjoyed an untroubled intellectual confidence about the links between past and future. But ‘modern historical relativism moves gingerly’.¹⁷ Gershenkron’s viewpoint was certainly revisionist, in denying the inevitability of either Whiggish linear progress or a Marxist sequence of revolutions in the mode of production. But it was neither anti-growth nor anti-change. If unromantic and cautious in comparison with the great ideologies of the nineteenth century, it was still optimistic that even the complex past could be unravelled.

This approach was equally characteristic of Fisher, who also adopted the concept of economic backwardness in his own reinterpretation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England as a pre-industrial economy.¹⁸ [*Additional note by PJC (2018):* Fisher would have been equally critical of the emergent right-wing ideology from the 1980s onwards, which credited all best forms of growth to the untrammelled powers of the free market. As that view became a new dogma, his argumentative hackles would certainly have risen.]

Furthermore, Fisher’s astringent style of analysis and distrust of ‘grand theory’ had found theoretical sanction in the sceptical philosophy of Karl Popper. In responding to that, of course, Jack Fisher was far from alone. Popper’s study in political theory, entitled *The Open Society and its Enemies*

(1945), and – especially – his critique of universal models of historical change in *The Poverty of Historicism* (published as essays in 1944-5; as a book in 1957) have proved seminal contributions to twentieth-century intellectual life.¹⁹ The impact of this passionate and liberal scepticism was particularly heady in the aftermath of the Second World War, when totalising ideologies were at a discount. And at that time, Popper was himself appointed first as Reader (1945-9) and then as Professor of Logic and Scientific Method (1949-69) at the LSE, which he later was to term a ‘marvellous institution’.²⁰

Although Fisher was not interested in philosophical detail, he found the general thrust of Popperian ‘critical rationalism’ intensely congenial.²¹ It certainly encouraged his readiness to challenge historians who based their proof on no more than assertion, or even upon assertion plus a Gilbertian profusion of corroborative detail for artistic verisimilitude. After Popper’s invitation to trial by ‘falsification’, he remarked, such a procedure was inadmissible.

If the past could not, by definition, be submitted to experimental scrutiny, at very least arguments about the past could be critically tested by evidence, logic, and opposition: the ancient Greek art of dialectic, or critical examination by contradiction. It was important to know and refute the case against, as well as to make the points for any given proposition. Fisher’s own capacity to assess the overall strengths and weaknesses of an argument and to pounce upon the vulnerable points was one of his most formidable powers as a critic.²² Indeed, but for a few trifling obstacles – such as an aversion to argument based upon accumulative precedent – he would have made a daunting forensic lawyer.

All these influences crystallised in Jack Fisher’s problem-solving approach to history. He did not either seek or supply a grand theory or general synthesis. That was for weaker brethren, for whose needs he remarked that religion had been invented. Economic history was, however, ideal terrain for sceptical but earnest enquiry, where historical data and economic theories jostled in constant dialectical tension. For, although wary of ideology, he was

certainly no mere empiricist. He welcomed the use of theoretical models, but models were to be tested rather than embalmed. The more elaborate the methodology – as in the new econometric history – the more crucial it was to contest the basic assumptions built into the exercise. Conversely, he enjoyed the quest for new historical data, but the sources were to be probed rather than revered. Borrowing a sardonic joke from Popper, Jack Fisher once defined as *mystics* those historians who claimed that they were interested only in getting ‘all the facts’.²³ Instead, the important thing was to test theory against evidence, and *vice-versa*; and to pose the most interesting and not merely the most readily answerable questions.

Reprinted in *London and the English Economy* are ten essays by F.J. Fisher, written over some forty years between 1933 and 1971. Although not designed as a collection, they display a common focus upon the social and economic history of London and England from 1500 to 1700. They are remarkable essays, not only for their past contribution but also for their topicality. The issues they address are still very ‘live’ ones. Indeed, the history of London is only now getting the detailed research scrutiny it deserves.

Certainly, the essays fulfil Fisher’s first requirement by being interesting. He enjoyed the abbreviated format, which suited his wry, concise style. His prose is pellucid and has dated very little. Indeed, he always urged that historical writing should be accessible as well as logical and learned. He avoided hyperbole, and, although not averse to confident assertion, he also enjoyed the English art of meiosis, or emphasis by understatement. The analytical tone throughout is positive. Unlike some essayists, he was not inspired to write in order to refute a heresy or to condemn a heretic. References in his work to the work of other historians are relatively rare (and then usually friendly), and his footnotes are informative rather than combative, although when his work did generate controversy his published response to challenge was tersely dismissive. In general, he followed the tenets of critical rationalism,

in being his own best critic. That capacity may have inhibited his pen but fortified him against external criticism. ...

[Omitted here are fourteen paragraphs, in Corfield and Harte (eds), *London and the English Economy*, pp. 10-16, and fn. 24-52, discussing the specific import of eight classic Fisher essays on London and English commerce. The text resumes with the remark that Fisher's views on economic growth had less scholarly impact than did his analysis of economic constraints].

There was a yet more important reason why Fisher on growth had less resonance than Fisher on constraints upon growth. That was his own earlier success in fostering a powerful new interpretation of the overall economic context of Tudor and Stuart England. He had jettisoned the old view that the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were years of emergent 'capitalism', a term he notably avoided.²⁴ Rather, he suggested that England then exhibited many of the characteristic signs of economic backwardness. Therefore, the relevant concept was not 'capitalism' but 'underdevelopment'.

That case had been made in two bravura essays in interpretation. One was based on his 1956 inaugural lecture at the LSE, which was recalled by many as one of the most amusing inaugurals ever given. It was pruned for publication as 'The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: The Dark Ages in English Economic History?'²⁵ He defined the period between 1450 and 1750 as one of statistical and analytical nescience. But the intellectual darkness was not impenetrable. Reviewing the countervailing evidence of growth and constraint, he developed the argument that the Tudor and Stuart era, particularly before the 1640s, was one of relative economic underdevelopment. The Third World provided instructive parallels, citing here R.H. Tawney not on early agrarian capitalism but his work on *Twentieth-Century Land and Labour in China*.²⁶

Returning to the discussion in 1961, Jack Fisher renewed the case, in perhaps his single most elegant formulation. Entitled 'Tawney's Century' and appearing in the *Festschrift* for Tawney's eightieth birthday,²⁷ this essay

confirmed Fisher's dissent from Tawney's classic interpretation of a burgeoning capitalism, spear-headed by a rising landed gentry.²⁸ Not that the rupture was at all polemical. The essay contained a felicitous tribute to Tawney's inspirational role as teacher and scholar, and the difference in their views was never stressed by Fisher, either then or subsequently.

Yet in his analysis, relative backwardness was again the keynote. Hence, the busy sixteenth-century land market was taken to indicate not the rapidity of growth but its sluggishness, which left capital without investment outlets in manufacturing or trade. Similarly, the flourishing London theatre and professions were nurtured by the entrepreneurial talents of thwarted businessmen, although Fisher noted wryly that 'it would be ludicrous to dismiss the works of Shakespeare as products of the mis-allocation of economic resources'.²⁹

Collectively, these essays succeeded because, with their panache and lucidity, they combined much accumulated research in economic history with new theoretical perspectives from development economics. In particular, they opened up new directions for enquiry by cutting through old assumptions, often implicitly held rather than explicitly substantiated, about the basic chronology of English economic growth,

Karl Marx had synthesised classical economics with Hegelian dialectic into a majestic dynamic of historical change through socio-economic conflict. In application to England, that postulated a decaying fifteenth-century feudalism, which was increasingly undermined by a nascent sixteenth-century capitalism, whose contradictions finally culminated in a mid-seventeenth century 'bourgeois revolution'.³⁰ This was a bold interpretation, which had considerable impact in setting the general chronology, particularly in the case of English economic history.³¹ It was by no means universally adopted but its influence spread well beyond the ranks of declared Marxists, and, although some non-Marxists preferred to shed the distinctive Marxist vocabulary,³²

others found it possible to use the concept of ‘capitalism’, while rejecting the political philosophy of communism.³³

Increased research, however, generated increasing doubts about this general chronology. Evidence for Tudor economic growth in *per capita* terms was hard to come by, while the undoubted quickening of economic activity in post-medieval England could be explained logically enough as no more than the corollary of renewed population expansion. More specifically, it was difficult to perceive a new capitalist ‘mode of production’ in the sixteenth century, or yet a triumphant urban bourgeoisie on the scale required for revolution in the seventeenth. On that point, Tawney had already provide a heterodox alternative, substituting a rising gentry for the rising middle class.³⁴

Yet, even with that adjustment, there were still problems. Not only was the timetable for the advent of capitalism uncertain,³⁵ but it was also difficult to match with the late eighteenth-century advent of industrialism.³⁶ One solution was by sub-division. ‘Merchant’ or ‘commercial’ capitalism could be seen as the necessary prelude to a subsequent ‘industrial’ capitalism, as the eminent Russian Marxist historian, Mikhail Pokrovskii, had argued in the 1910s.³⁷ But that was subsequently denounced [by Stalin and orthodox Marxists in his train] as revisionism. It diluted the coherence of what was held to be one basic ‘mode of production’, matching with one key stage in the revolutionary dynamics of historical development.

Fisher, impatient with the whole Marxist problematic, simply by-passed it. His stance was sceptical and ultimately revisionist, but was not presented as a polemic. There were plenty of others who waged outright war against Marxism, sometimes very bitterly. Their battles were, however, fought on rather different terrain. Eric Kerridge, the most explicit anti-Marxist among the economic historians of Tudor England, was a leading exponent of the case for economic growth. He analysed the ‘agricultural revolution’ of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and fully accepted the terminology and chronology of

‘capitalism’. His fierce disagreement with Marxism focused instead upon the social implications of these economic changes. Kerridge denied that growth was harmful and denounced Tawney’s ‘socialist dogma’ that gave a ‘wholly untrue picture of early capitalism as cruel and greedy’.³⁸

Many, however, sympathised with Fisher in seeking critical distance from all debates that appeared to assume concepts of built-in growth, whether via revolutionary dialectics or by progressive evolution. He did not create this change single-handedly; but his essays helped to crystallise a trend. Gradually therefore, and without much direct controversy, the alternative interpretation became quite widely adopted, stressing instead England’s relative underdevelopment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁹ By the 1970s, ‘pre-industrial’, an adjective borrowed from comparative economics and already with some circulation among historians, became popular to describe the economy of Tudor and Stuart England,⁴⁰ while ‘capitalist’, although not disappearing, was much less pervasive. It cannot be said that the new viewpoint became settled into a formal orthodoxy, still less that it ousted all the old ones. Marxist economic historians continued to study agrarian capitalism,⁴¹ and endorsed the revolutionary, although not specifically ‘bourgeois’, nature of seventeenth-century change. At the same time, the expanding fields of social and urban history set their own agendas, unworried by the problems of economic nomenclature. Yet the ‘underdevelopment’ thesis proved successful in fostering fresh perspectives and research – as well as highlighting still-unresolved questions about concepts and chronologies of change. [*Additional note by PJC* (2018): these continual disputes over the chronology and terminology of fundamental change – and not just between Marxists – triggered my own interest in seeking a new approach to historical periodisation.]

One historian does not of course, make a subject. As already noted, Jack Fisher did not propound his own conceptual synthesis, become a departmental empire-builder, or found a new subject specialism or school of thought. He was

not without his critics, for these and doubtless other errors. Furthermore, he did not make any claims for his own work, and would almost certainly have found this retrospective review to have detected too orderly and coherent an intellectual pattern among life's contingencies and contradictions.

None of that can obscure Fisher's pervasive influence. He exerted sway as a scintillating teacher and as mentor to other teachers, for in the post-war years a remarkable number of his LSE graduates went on themselves to become eminent economic historians.⁴² He also influenced others by the challenging style and content of his essays. Specifically, therefore, he helped to bring about a fundamental reconsideration of the nature of the Tudor and Stuart economy as well as the role of the metropolis. More generally, he jolted people into thought as a meta-critic at conferences and seminars, where he was one of the generation of scholars that followed the early pioneers in economic history and brought the subject to its 'high noon'.⁴³ Yet more broadly still, he can be seen as one of many exponents of mid-twentieth-century relativistic scepticism before 'grand theory', particularly as mediated through the ferment of ideas from left and right at the London School of Economics.

Meanwhile, history and its debates move on. The current plethora of concepts and chronologies certainly needs critical re-examination. After the thematic diversification and analytical eclecticism of economic and social history in its 'boom years', there have come increasing calls for resynthesis of the myriad of approaches within the subject, and its reintegration into a broader history. Fisher was cheerfully sardonic: more holism, more *mysticism*, more triumph-of-hope-over experience. But he relished the continuing dialectic of economic history, in which he had himself proved no mean practitioner.

Additional note from 1990. In the same volume, colleagues were invited to contribute personal memories, including (pp. 26-7) the following tribute from PJC:

‘I know nothing about this BUT ...’ I can’t resist starting with one of Jack Fisher’s most famous opening gambits, at which strong academics blanched. For, with characteristic understatement, it was the prelude to a comment or critique that invariably proved to be at once combative, wittily iconoclastic, and deeply incisive. Any of those qualities alone would be pretty powerful; but, in combination, they were devastating. But devastating in a positive way: opening up new areas of the subject for analysis and debate. Indeed, it is a real loss to economic history that Jack Fisher never found his academic Boswell – for many of his throw-away remarks could in themselves have launched a thousand research projects.

These qualities made Jack Fisher not only a brilliant *extempore* debater but also a most exhilarating and remarkable teacher. He liked to use shock tactics to startle people into thought – and he was merciless with loose generalisations and sloppy remarks. It must be admitted that this pedagogic style was not to everyone’s taste. But for those who enjoyed his training course in intellectual analysis and combat, there was really nothing quite like it. Jack Fisher was a man for whom, in other words, the dialectic might have been invented. He loved a ‘thesis’ which gave him a proposition to analyse and challenge. He was equally at home – if not more so – with ‘antithesis’, the more iconoclastic the better. And he was prepared to contemplate the possibility of ‘synthesis’ – well, as he used to say in characteristic phrasing, *one* half of that could be fun.

But this intellectual rigour and combativeness was not bad tempered, mean, or hostile. On the contrary, it was accompanied by a great personal kindness and leavened by a stream of constant, unforced wit. The flow of

laughter was a constant element in his teaching and company. He often stressed that history had to remain part of the entertainments industry – and he hated pretension and jargon as much as he tilted against conventionality and stuffiness. His own lucid essays were exemplary in their clarity and power of communication, and his wit was similarly designed to startle and stimulate people enjoyably into thought. It was said, in the early nineteenth century, that ‘laughter is an involuntary action of various muscles, developed in the human species by the progress of civilisation’. That was based upon the proposition that ‘the savage never laughs’. It was meant jestingly; but, by the laughter criterion, Jack Fisher was a very civilised historian indeed.

Above all, he had a brilliantly critical and analytical mind, allied to great erudition, bringing concepts from development economics and sociology to bear upon the study of economic history. That led him to break from the conceptual framework of his own mentor, R.H. Tawney, whom, nonetheless – of course – he deeply revered and admired personally. By the same token, Jack Fisher as a teacher followed the same policy. He did not seek to impose his own views upon his students, but rather to encourage them to identify, develop, clarify, and criticise their own. A supervision session with Jack Fisher was therefore an exhilarating experience: starting with morning coffee, sometimes continuing literally all day. And he was equally generous with time and attention to those, at all levels in the profession, who sought his assessment of their work. No wonder that his colleagues sometimes complained that his administration was in arrears; they were right, as it often was.

Yet for Jack Fisher, the intellectual quest for historical understanding was the really important thing; and none of us – variously and alternately teased, challenged, refuted, goaded, stimulated, and provoked by Jack Fisher into joining that quest – none of us can ever forget.

[*Final note by PJC* (2018): Twenty-eight years later, I stand fully by that verdict. Jack Fisher remains, out of all the people I've ever met, the one with the greatest sheer intellectual voltage. Not necessarily the best historian, since I've met many different but equally brilliant scholars who could be entered into competition with Fisher in the 'best' historian category. But, for sheer intellectual voltage, he holds the palm. For those could cope with his argumentative style, it was magic.

In longer retrospect, however, I have come to think that, for Jack Fisher himself, there may have been a personal downside. His powers as a critic and auto-critic were so formidable that he may have inhibited himself from writing his *magnum opus*. If that were so, it was characteristic of the man that he made no mention of any academic regrets on his own account.

When I last saw him, shortly before his death in 1988, his chief expressed academic concern was the decline in the appeal and status of economic history, which began in the 1960s, with the rise of social and urban history, and intensified from the 1970s onwards, with the specialist shift to quantitative economic history [see above fn. 2]. Today he would be pleased to know that economic history is making something of a comeback, in some cases reappearing lightly disguised under the trendier label of 'global history'. And he would be loudly cheering those economics students (and a few of their teachers) who today are calling for the discipline of economics to incorporate the teaching and testing of streamlined economic theories against the real-life 'lumpiness' and intractability of past economic history and current civics.

ENDNOTES

All works cited are published in Britain, unless otherwise specified.

With thanks especially to Donald Coleman, Walter Elkan, Barbara Fisher, Negley Harte, Barry Supple and Jay Winter for references, and comments on these comments.

- ¹ In 1926, Fisher went as an undergraduate to the London School of Economics, where the Economic History Society held its inaugural meeting that same year. Publications of the *Economic History Review* followed in 1927: see T.C. Barker, 'The Beginnings of the Economic History Society', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 30 (1977), pp. 12-14; and N.B. Harte, 'Trends in Publications on the Economic and Social History of Great Britain and Ireland, 1925-74', *ibid.*, pp. 40-1.
- ² This meant that he also shared the later disappointment when economic history became more introverted and technical in the 1970s. For a full critique by Fisher's close friend and former pupil, see D.C. Coleman, *History and the Economic Past: An Account of the Rise and Decline of Economic History in Britain* (1987); earlier prefigured in Coleman's *What Has Happened to Economic History? An Inaugural Lecture* (1972).
- ³ Eileen Power (1889-1940), Lecturer (1921) and later Professor of Economic History (1931) at the LSE, was author of *Medieval People* (1924) and *Medieval Women* (ed. M.M. Postan, 1975); she also edited with R.H. Tawney the staple *Tudor Economic Documents* (1924), 3 vols.
- ⁴ R.H. Tawney, 'The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640', *Economic History Review*, 11 (1941); reprinted in E.M. Carus-Wilson (ed.), *Essays in Economic History: I* (1954), pp. 173-206. F.J. Fisher supplied the case histories of some 2,500 gentry manors from seven counties between 1561 and 1640, as extracted from the relevant volumes of the *Victoria County History* (see Carus-Wilson (ed.), *Essays*, p. 192 fn. 59 and p. 202 fn. 90), while Tawney used a further 800 cases from another three counties for his final tabulation (*ibid.*, p. 174 fn. 3 and p. 204 fn. 97). Tawney's robust defence of his methods and conclusions was presented in 'A Postscript', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 7 (1954), pp. 91-7; also reprinted in Carus-Wilson (ed.), *Essays*, pp. 206-14, including a recalculation of the data from Fisher's seven counties (*ibid.*, p. 210). For criticisms of this approach, see H.R. Trevor-Roper, 'The Gentry, 1540-1640', *Economic History Review*, Supplement I (1953), esp. pp. 4-8; and, with greater lethality, J.P. Cooper, 'The Counting of Manors', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 8

(1956), pp. 377-89; reprinted in J.P. Cooper, *Land, Men and Beliefs: Studies in Early Modern History* (eds, G.E. Aylmer and J.S. Morrill, 1983), pp. 1-16; a note (*ibid.*, p. 7 fn. 18) indicates that Cooper had corresponded with Fisher about the composition of Tawney's data.

⁵ R.H Tawney (1880-1962), who was appointed to a personal chair in economic history at the LSE in 1931, had an extremely wide-ranging influence, in adult education, politics and civic philosophy, as well as in his subject specialism. For fruitful studies, see J.R. Williams, R.M. Titmuss and F.J. Fisher, *R.H. Tawney: A Portrait by Several Hands* (1960), pp. 33; R. Terrill, *R.H. Tawney and his Times: Socialism as Fellowship* (1974); D. Reisman, *State and Welfare: Tawney, Galbraith and Adam Smith* (1982), pp. 19-130; A. Wright, *R.H. Tawney* (1987); and N. Dennis and A.H. Halsey, *English Ethical Socialism: Thomas More to R.H. Tawney* (1988), pp. 149-69, 184-98. Tawney's impact upon social policy is noted in R. Titmuss, 'Introduction' to R.H. Tawney, *Equality* (5th edn. 1964), pp. 9-24; and his historical essays sympathetically analysed by J.M. Winter, 'Introduction: Tawney as Historian' in J.M. Winter (ed.), *History and Society: Essays by R.H. Tawney* (1978), pp. 1-40; and in *idem*, 'Introduction: Tawney on Labour and Labour Movements' in J.M. Winter (ed.), *R.H. Tawney: The American Labour Movement and Other Essays* (1979), pp. ix-xxiv.

⁶ For a preliminary survey of Thompson's fusion of history, theory, and praxis, see B.D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History* (Toronto, 1981). Thompson, a heterodox Marxist, is sometimes bizarrely caricatured by his critics as a crude economic determinist, but his own historical and theoretical writings have explicitly insisted upon the active role of social consciousness, as well as upon the pluralism of modern Marxism, stressing the bifurcation between the Stalinist and anti-Stalinist traditions: see esp. E.P. Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory: Or, an Orrery of Errors' (1978) in *idem*, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978), pp. 380-4. [Additional note from PJC (2018): the comparison between Tawney and E.P. Thompson is explicitly pursued in T. Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton, 2017).]

⁷ Nef paid generous tribute to many helpers, especially to R.H Tawney, and thanked his young proof-reader, F.J. Fisher, for his zeal, patience and 'valuable suggestions': J.U. Nef, *The Rise of the British Coal Industry* (1932), Vol. 1, p. xiv.

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- ⁸ Petegorsky recorded warm thanks to Harold Laski, plus FJ. Fisher's assistance with 'scholarship and good nature in lengthy and frequent discussion': see D.W. Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War: A Study of the Social Philosophy of Gerrard Winstanley* (1940), p. 7.
- ⁹ A.R. Bridbury, *Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages* (1962), p. 8.
- ¹⁰ The London School of Economics – always more left-wing by reputation than in actuality – enjoyed considerable intellectual vitality in the post-war era, when a variety of subjects and approaches cross-fertilised each other. These included the sceptical philosophy of Karl Popper, the economic liberalism of Friedrich von Hayek, the evolving traditions of welfarist Fabianism, the new insights of development economics, and the cultural pluralism of social anthropology. For the early years, see F. von Hayek, 'The London School of Economics, 1895-1945', *Economica*, new ser. 23 (1946), pp. 1-31. And for some flavour of the immediate post-war era, see J. Abse (ed.), *My LSE* (1977), esp. pp. 64-103, for essays by J.W.N. Watkins and Robert McKenzie, both subsequently Professors at the School; and pp. 104-62 for essays by R. Moody, J. Wheldon and B. Crick.
- ¹¹ L.P. Mair, whose mother had been Secretary at the School in the 1930s, was LSE Professor of Anthropology (1963) and author of *Studies in Applied Anthropology* (1957), *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (1965), *Witchcraft* (1969) and *Marriage* (1971). For an appreciation, see J. Davis (ed.), *Choice and Change: Essays in Honour of Lucy Mair* (1974), pp. 1-6.
- ¹² D.V. Glass, a friend of Fisher from their postgraduate days, became Professor of Sociology at the LSE in 1948 and pioneered the study of both modern and historical demography. *Inter alia*, he wrote *The Town and a Changing Civilisation* (1935); edited *London Inhabitants within the Walls, 1695* London Record Society, 2 (1966); and co-edited with D.E.C. Eversley, *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (1965), which reprinted Glass's two important articles on Gregory King as demographer.
- ¹³ See T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York, 1899) and for Veblen's own conspicuous unorthodoxy in ideas and life-style, see C. Wright Mills, 'Introduction' to New American Library edition (New York, 1953), pp. vi-xix.

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- ¹⁴ F.J. Fisher, 'The Development of London as a Centre of Conspicuous Consumption in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th ser. 30 (1948), pp. 37-50. Reprinted in E.M. Carus-Wilson (ed.), *Essays in Economic History, II* (1962), pp. 197-207; in I.R. Christie (ed.), *Essays in Modern History* (1968), pp. 75-90; and again in Corfield and Harte (eds), *London and the English Economy*, pp. 105-18.
- ¹⁵ H. Myint, *The Economics of Developing Countries* (1st pub. 1964 and many later editions).
- ¹⁶ A. Gershenkron, 'Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective', first pub. in B. Hoselitz (ed.), *The Progress of Underdeveloped Countries* (Chicago, 1952); reprinted in A. Gershenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (New York, 1962), pp. 5-30.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ The first of these seminal essays is F.J. Fisher, 'The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: The Dark Ages in English Economic History?' *Economica*, new ser. 24 (157), pp. 2-18. Reprinted in N.B. Harte (ed.), *The Study of Economic History: Collected Inaugural Lectures, 1893-1970* (1971), pp. 181-200; and again in Corfield and Harte (eds), *London and the English Economy*, pp. 131-47. The second is F.J. Fisher, 'Tawney's Century', in idem (ed.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England in Honour of R.H. Tawney* (1961), pp. 1-14. Reprinted in M.E. Falkus (ed.), *Readings in the History of Economic Growth* (Nairobi, 1968), pp. 51-61; and again in Corfield and Harte (eds), *London and the English Economy*, pp. 149-62.
- ¹⁹ See K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol. 1: The Spell of Plato* and *Vol. 2: The High Tide of Prophecy – Hegel, Marx and the Aftermath* (1945); and idem, 'The Poverty of Historicism', 3 pts. in *Economica*, new ser. 11 (1944), pp. 88-103, 119-37; and 12 (1945), pp. 69-89; later published as *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957). B. Magee, *Popper* (1973), pp. 9-10, stresses the extent of Popper's impact in political and academic circles as well as among professional philosophers.
- ²⁰ K.R. Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (1974; in 1976 edn), p. 121; and, for a comment on Popper's lectures at LSE, see Watkins in *My LSE*, pp. 76-7.
- ²¹ A passage in Popper's 'Knowledge without Authority' (1960) in D. Miller (ed.), *A Pocket Popper* (1983), p. 52, gave the following definition: 'The proper answer to my

question: “How can we hope to detect and eliminate error?” is, I believe, “By *criticising* the theories or guesses of others and – if we can train ourselves to do so – by *criticising* our own theories or guesses This answer sums up a position which I propose to call “critical rationalism””.

²² It is difficult to write about someone as a critic without conveying a negative impression; and undoubtedly some people had negative experiences, especially if they found that criticism had come too close to home. But many found that Jack Fisher’s analysis of their work was exhilarating in its clarity and objectivity, as he identified the internal logic of the argument and the explicit or (usually) implicit assumptions upon which it was based, reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation, and finally suggested ways of improving the whole.

²³ Popper, *Historicism*, pp. 76-8, argued that all knowledge, whether intuitive or discursive, had to be selective; and (p. 78 fn 3) he specifically criticised the search for both ‘reality’ and/or holistic knowledge: ‘The doctrine that we may obtain a kind of concrete knowledge of “reality itself” is well known as part of what can be technically described as *mysticism*; and so is the clamour for “wholes”.’ Similar criticisms of pure fact-seekers were voiced by M.M. Postan, iconoclast among medieval economic historians: see his ‘Fact and Relevance in Historical Study’ (1968) in idem, *Fact and Relevance: Essays on Historical Method* (1971), pp. 48-9. In return, some of Postan’s more conventional Cambridge colleagues regarded him as a charlatan, as reported in Coleman, *Economic Past*, p. 91.

²⁴ [This is fn. 53 in original text, so that fn. 24-43 here are fn. 53-72 in first iteration].

A few references to ‘capitalists’ can be found in Fisher’s early essays but even that term disappeared in his later writings and conversation.

²⁵ Fisher, ‘The Dark Ages’, pp. 131-74.

²⁶ R.H. Tawney, *Land and Labour in China* (1932). Tawney’s study had itself pointed to the parallels between twentieth-century China and sixteenth-century England. For the evolution of Tawney’s own historical analysis, see Winter, ‘Introduction’, in idem (ed.), *History and Society*, pp. 25-9.

²⁷ Fisher, ‘Tawney’s Century’. It was reading this essay as an undergraduate that decided the author of these comments to apply for postgraduate study with Fisher at the LSE.

²⁸ Tawney in *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912), pp. 404-9, had identified an ‘agrarian revolution’ in sixteenth-century England, while still finding

many elements of continuity; and in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), pp. 225-6, 270, 280-1, had analysed Stuart England's intensification of an age-old capitalist spirit. To that he added a new social interpretation of the civil wars in 'The Rise of the Gentry' (see above, fn. 4) and in 'Harrington's Interpretation of his Age' (1941), both reprinted in Winter (ed.), *History and Society*, pp. 68-128. Tawney, who was not a Marxist, hoped to avoid both the under- and over-valuation of economic factors, seeking instead *l'histoire intégrale*: see R.H. Tawney, 'The Study of Economic History', in Harte (ed.), *Economic History*, p. 106. Incidentally, Tawney's own mentor, George Unwin, used the term 'industrial capital' but in application to developments in the later eighteenth century, following the earlier 'domestic system': see G. Unwin, *Industrial Organisation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1904), pp. 3-9, 225-6.

²⁹ Fisher, 'Tawney's Century', in Corfield and Harte (eds), *London and the English Economy*, p. 159.

³⁰ Marx did not, of course, set out to write an economic history of England but his general analysis drew considerably on the English experience and had interesting implications for the study of English history. See, for example, K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart edn, 1962), Vol. 1, p. 35: after the discovery of America, the growth of world-wide trade and new industry created an emergent bourgeoisie, which pushed aside the 'tottering feudal society' and made political advances to match its economic power. See also K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) in *Selected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 248, for a direct reference to England's 'bourgeois revolution' of the 1640s.

³¹ Its influence proved less overwhelming in studies of Stuart political history, where a Whig/constitutionalist interpretation has survived alongside Marxist views: contrast J.R. Tanner's Whiggish *English Constitutional Conflicts of the Seventeenth Century, 1603-89* (1928) with C. Hill's modern Marxism in *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714* (1961). In the 1970s and 1980s, Whigs and Marxists have together come under challenge from a neo-conservative 'revisionism' that stresses instead the survival of traditionalism: see B. Coward, *The Stuart Age: A History of England, 1603-1714* (1980). But these new debates also remain focused upon Stuart political and social life rather than upon its economic history.

³² A liberal-progressive alternative was to discuss late medieval England as a manorial system, whose use was ‘exhausted’, making way for the Tudor and Stuart ‘growth of trade, manufactures and colonisation’ that was necessary for modern ‘power, liberty and progress’: see G.M. Trevelyan’s influential *History of England* (1926; in 1960 illustrated edn), pp. 6-7, 242-3. ‘Feudal’ and ‘capitalist’, however, recur not infrequently as adjectives: see for example *ibid.*, pp. 236, 285.

³³ Non-Marxist studies of ‘capitalism’ published in the 1970s and 1980s include J.E. Vaizey, *Capitalism* (1971); R.H. Preston, *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism* (1979); M. Beaud, *Histoire du capitalisme* (Paris, 1981), transl. as *A History of Capitalism, 1500-1980* (1984); I.S. Michelman, *The Roots of Capitalism in Western Civilisation* (New York, 1983); E. Preteceille, *Capitalism, Consumption and Needs* (1985). There are also economic guides, such as P. Jalee, *How Capitalism Works* (1977); I.D.S. Ward, *An Introduction to Market Capitalism* (1977); or R. Lekachman, *Capitalism for Beginners* (1981).

[Additional note from PJC (2018): These publications were generally using ‘capitalism’ as shorthand for economic growth under private ownership of the means of production, rather than exploring comparative models of mixed economies – or redefining stages in economic history].

³⁴ Tawney, ‘Rise of the Gentry’ (above fn. 4). Most modern Marxist historians of England have followed Tawney in interpreting the events of 1640-60 as a successful gentry revolution, and the terminology of the ‘bourgeois revolution’ in the seventeenth century has gradually withered away.

³⁵ If English feudalism was decaying in the fifteenth century, was the Tudor state and society capitalist? And, if so, how did that tally with a bourgeois revolution in the 1640s? Conversely, if capitalism did not break through until the mid-seventeenth century, was the Tudor state feudal? And, if so, how did that tally with the decay of feudalism in the fifteenth century? For an explicit discussion of these and related questions by historians and economists within the Marxist tradition, see especially M.H. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946); R.H. Hilton, ‘Capitalism: What’s in a Name?’ *Past and Present*, 1 (1952), pp. 32-43; E.J. Hobsbawm, ‘The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century’, *ibid.*, 5 and 6 (1954), reprinted with postscript in T. Aston (ed.), *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660: Essays from Past and*

Present (1965), pp. 5-58; and essays in P.M. Sweezy *et al.*, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (1976).

³⁶ One answer was to postulate a discrete phase of ‘proto-industrialisation’ before full factory production; but that concept has been sceptically received, both within and outside the Marxist tradition: see overview in L. Clarkson, *Proto-Industrialisation: The First Phase of Industrialisation?* (1985), pp. 9-67. A later permutation has been to revive another old controversy by a wholesale rejection of the concept of Industrial Revolution: see for a vigorous attack, M. Fores, ‘The Myth of the British Industrial Revolution’, *History*, 66 (1981), pp. 181-98. That proposal certainly resolves any debate about the relationship between capitalism and industrialism, but the wholesale slaughter of old concepts without recourse to new ones leaves the historian with a distinctly weak analytical repertoire for interpreting development over time.

³⁷ M.N. Pokrovskii, an associate of Bukharin, had postulated a stage of ‘commercial capitalism’ in sixteenth-century Russia, but he was denounced by Stalinists in the 1930s for revisionism and, under pressure, recanted his view that commercial capitalism was a specific economic formation in its own right: see M.N. Pokrovskii, *History of Russia from the Earliest Times to the Rise of Commercial Capitalism* (Moscow, 1910-14; in Eng. transl. New York, 1931), 5 vol; and G.M. Enteen, *The Soviet Scholar-Bureaucrat: M.N. Pokrovskii and the Society of Marxist Historians* (1978), pp. 37-42, 48-9, 161-4, 179-84, 195-6. It was to this dispute that Fisher alluded in his inaugural lecture with a cryptic reference to ‘the Pokrovsky-bog of merchant capitalism’: see Fisher, ‘The Dark Ages’, in Corfield and Harte (eds), *London and the English Economy*, p. 135.

³⁸ See E. Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems in the Sixteenth Century and After* (1969), p. 15; and idem, *The Agricultural Revolution* (1967).

³⁹ For judicious discussion of this thesis and its problems, see D.C. Coleman, *The Economy of England, 1450-1750* (1977), dedicated ‘For F.J.F.’

⁴⁰ See, for example, L.A. Clarkson, *The Pre-Industrial Economy of England, 1550-1750* (1971) and B.A. Holderness, *Pre-Industrial England: Economy and Society from 1500 to 1750* (1976), although Coleman, *Economy of England*, p. 1 preferred ‘pre-industrialised’. An earlier application to urban history was proposed in G. Sjoberg, *The Pre-Industrial City* (New York, 1960)), prompting an effective critique from O.C. Cox, ‘The Pre-Industrial City Reconsidered’ in P. Meadows and E.H. Mizruchi (eds), *Urbanism, Urbanisation, and Change: Comparative Perspectives* (Reading, Mass.,

1969), pp. 19-29. The dichotomy between pre-industrial and industrial has parallels with other dualisms, including ‘pre-modern’ and ‘modern’, and the celebrated distinction, made in 1887 by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, between *Gemeinschaft* (traditional community) and *Gesellschaft* (contractual society). But, while often suggestive, all these binary pairings have analytical weaknesses particularly in presenting a very monochrome vision of the long centuries before ‘industrialism’, ‘modernism’ and/or ‘mass society’ are finally deemed to have arrived.

⁴¹ The works of I. Wallerstein offer one example among many: see idem, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy of the Sixteenth Century* (1974) and idem, *Historical Capitalism* (1983).

⁴² In 1976, thirteen colleagues and former pupils contributed to an aptly entitled *Festschrift*: see D.C. Coleman and A.H. John (eds), *Trade, Government and Economy in Pre-Industrial England: Essays Presented to F.J. Fisher* (1976). But the full number of teachers in economic history, whom he taught or influenced, was many times greater than that.

⁴³ In the immediate post-war years, the subject experienced an ‘astonishing surge’ in popularity: Coleman, *History and the Economic Past*, p. 94. Its impetus was sustained by the appointment of many economic and social historians to ‘orthodox’ history departments in British Universities and Polytechnics [as then entitled] and further institutionalised by the multiplication of specialist economic and social history departments in the Universities. By the early 1970s, there were ‘some fifteen’ such departments (old and new): *ibid.*, p. 106. Since then, a variety of changes – in University finances, in patterns of student demand, in the bifurcation of economic from social history – have put the subject and its institutional arrangements under acute pressure; so that the ‘high-noon’ of economic history in separation from history has proved unexpectedly brief. [Additional note from PJC (2018): today the LSE Department of Economic History is the last separate Economic History redoubt to survive within the British University system. It has resisted sundry attempts to merge it with the LSE Department of International History. That’s a great tribute to the power of continuity. Nonetheless, the chances of a future merger must be great. Of course, that’s heresy from an LSE Economic History graduate! But that’s the logic of the eventual broadening of History as a discipline, to re-embrace everything from kings/queens to economic history and all the other sub-fields which followed in its wake.]