John Atkinson Hobson (1858–1940) is one of the leading New Liberal political theorists and political economists. He was born on July 6, 1858, son of a newspaper proprietor in Derby, England. He was educated at Lincoln College, Oxford, before becoming a schoolteacher. Hobson moved to London in 1887, where he became involved with Marxists and other radicals. His first book, *The Physiology of Industry* ([1889] 1992), ended his chances of an academic career. Coauthored with Albert F. Mummery, the book denied some of the central tenets of the marginal economics that formed the orthodox position in British universities. Hobson's journalistic reputation grew as a result of his reports on the Boer War following an extended visit to South Africa in the 1890s. At the same time, his prolific output of books and articles started to earn him a significant reputation in radical circles. Together with the writings of Leonard T. Hobhouse, Hobson's vast output of books, articles, and journalism exerted a profound influence over the direction of political thought and practice in the early parts of the twentieth century, not least through his links to John Maynard Keynes. Even though Hobson was not a Marxist, Vladimir Illyich Lenin acknowledged Hobson's book *Imperialism* (1902) as having a very significant impact on his own *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917). Hobson continued to write and lecture almost until his death on April 1, 1940. He was a key figure in the important London society the Rainbow Circle, with some of his last lectures to the South Place Ethical Society published as late as 2011.

**Human Valuation, Social Organicism, and Imperialism**

Even though Hobson's thought drew on the British idealism of Thomas Hill Green, it found its most radical underpinnings in profound debts to the humanistic political economics of John Ruskin, on whom he published a book in 1898. Hobson reflected frequently on Ruskin's famous dictum, “There is no wealth but life.” Rather than focusing on the accumulation of money and finance, Hobson argued that true economic growth was found in the ability of individuals to lead happy and fulfilling lives. In fact, Hobson insisted that traditional measures of wealth had no intrinsic value, mattering only to the extent that they enabled individuals to realize those things that made them truly content as human beings. Hobson argued that one could promote real wealth only if one had a proper understanding of the wider contexts in which real individuals live. In advanced modern societies, that meant understanding the organic nature of contemporary capitalism. Rather than perpetuating the fiction of the self-sufficient entrepreneur or the self-made man, one should explore the ways in which all parts of society interact with one another. These parts interact well or badly to the extent that they promote or hinder individual happiness and contentment. Hobson exposed many ways in which modern capitalism worked very badly from this organic perspective. The same held true at the social and political levels, both of which were riven with artificial hierarchies, working in the interests of elites rather than the good of the whole society. A healthy society was an evolving natural organism, rather than a directed artificial one. Consequently, Hobson rejected both capitalist power and state socialism. Hobson wrote an impressive number of works analyzing the abusive multifaceted processes that characterize the actual workings of modern capitalism. He advocated the creation of a strong state that listened to the demands of society while making the final decisions of matters of public policy. Nevertheless, as a New Liberal, he argued that, while in many circumstances quite extensive state intervention would be needed to ensure
that economic and social relationships were nonabusive, the heart of a healthy society remained ultimately in the spontaneous interactions of free individuals and the groups they formed. Ultimately, it was essential that the people could vote out a misguided government.

Hobson never saw political and economic power as exclusively domestic affairs. Even his earliest writings were concerned with the effects of international linkages on the condition of the poor and marginalized around the world. Frequently, he traced these webs of influence to economic poverty and war, not least through the mechanisms of imperialism. He extended and revised the first comprehensive statement of his position, given in Imperialism (1902), in a series of South Place Ethical Society lectures given during the 1930s. Increasingly, he sought to develop and promote the possibilities for an international society through which humanity could achieve peace in ways that were not infected by imperialism.

See also Alienation; Capitalism; Darwinism and Social Darwinism; Economics and Political Thought; Empire and Political Thought; Green, Thomas Hill; Hobhouse, Leonard Trelawny; Keynes, John Maynard; Lenin and Leninism; Liberalism; Ruskin, John; Socialism; Twentieth-Century Political Thought

Further Readings


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