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Introduction

Readers fresh to this area of history will find this book relatively easy and be amazed to be told that much or even most of it is new to specialists. Until recently, historians had time and again picked over some vital features of the area while either blind or indifferent to those others whose relevance this book argues. True, during the last decade or so there has been work that touches on some aspects of our themes, but this has focused mainly on single organisations and particular regions – such as Dylan Morris's study of the ILP – or on very different problems – such as Duncan Tanner's important contribution to the debate on why and how Labour replaced the Liberal Party as the main alternative to the Conservatives. Like some other recent authors, such as Jon Lawrence, Tanner emphasises the overlaps between socialist and non-socialist radicalism. While these are hardly absent from our book, we focus almost entirely on the 'Labour movement' as traditionally understood – socialist organisations and trade unions: a different perspective.[1]

With concern over low participation in US elections, over the European Union's 'democratic deficit', with Central and Eastern Europe launching half-built parliamentary hulls into an economic hurricane blowing towards the whirlpool of authoritarian nationalism, with the uncertainties of post-apartheid South Africa, and a host of other developments worldwide, discussion of the nature and forms of democracy has never been more vital.

[1] Dylan Morris, 'Labour or Socialism? Opposition and Dissent within the ILP, with special reference to Lancashire', PhD thesis, Manchester University, 1982. Duncan Tanner, *Political change and the Labour Party 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990). Jon Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 31, April 1992, 163–86.

Other recent work in the general areas of our concern includes Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation 1880–1885. From O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, 37, 1992; David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888–1906* (Manchester, 1983); and Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), especially the contributions of Duncan Tanner and Pat Thane.

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In Britain from the later 1970s, the ideas of citizenship and universally available public services – even the validity of the concept of 'society' itself – were under attack from a new Right that combined free market dogmas with 'public order' authoritarianism. Why was resistance so feeble for so much of this time? Why was the Right allowed to hijack the rhetoric of popular accountability and conflate it with the rights of share-holders in privatised industries and more recently with the 'consumer rights' of the Citizen's Charter? Why was the Left so ineffective in counterposing democratic control to 'popular capitalism'? Why did it only belatedly – and still hesitantly – begin again to speak the language of democracy and 'enablement'? Partly because the Left had for so long abandoned the field that, during the period covered by this book, had formed a vital part of its territory.

Since 1918, as the *New Statesman* noted seven decades later (26 August 1988), there have been two main currents on the Left – '"reformers" and "revolutionaries"'. 'The first place faith in, the other pit [their] faith against, the traditional constitution. The first rejects and the second scorns constitutional change.' These twin exclusions are surely remarkable, given how wide the recognition now is that the British state is among the least democratic in the Western world.

This stalemate began to break up precisely with such late-1980s arguments. Within Labour there was an upsurge of concern reflected in a growing *Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform*, in motions on the annual conference agenda and in the Plant Report. More widely, there was the start of *Charter 88* addressing people of all parties or none. By the mid-1990s, with the Labour Party committing itself to 'an open democracy, in which Government is held accountable by the people', to devolution (known before 1914 as 'home rule all round'), and even the Conservatives appointing a 'minister for open government', the issues examined in this book are at least starting to reappear on the political agenda.

By contrast, during the two decades in which the research for this book was undertaken, interest in such matters was widely regarded on the Left as – at best – whimsy. Our concern with debates on representation or delegation, with ideas for making democracy more 'direct', with attempts to rid trade unions of bureaucracy and to place decision-making directly in the hands of their members, was, for one reader, to 'reify political theory'. The equivalent nineteenth-century verdict was more blunt: it was all disruption and 'mere politics'.

Such a response is far less likely today. Instead, the criticism is more likely to be that *circum*-1900 socialists and trade union activists (not all socialist) are irrelevant for our generation, however worthy in their own.

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For some, the spectacular collapse of 'actually existing socialism' in Eastern and Central Europe demonstrates conclusively that socialism – of whatever variety – is no longer an 'ism' but a 'wasm'.

Conceivably, in fifty years time, socialism will seem as strange and mystifying as the doctrine of the Muggletonians. Yet there are reasons for doubt. Even at the height of the twin-hegemony of Stalinism and of social democracy (or, as the latter's British version became, bureaucratic welfarism and nationalisation combined with constitutional do-nothingism) there were those ready to protest that both of these were travesties of socialism. Real socialism would be, above all, infinitely more democratic than either. Even for this reason alone, socialism, seen once more as a movement for ever greater democracy, may yet confound the sceptics.

'Democracy or reforming the structure of the state never ranked high on the socialist wish list', claims Will Hutton in his best-selling *The State We're In*.[2] This he rightly sees as a central weakness of Labour. While his criticism has been true, until very recently at least, of the 'head office' socialism he is discussing, it is not at all true of very many of the socialists who appear in this book. Here, our intention is to demonstrate that before 1918 the trade union and socialist movements were, in Britain as elsewhere, major arenas – indeed *the* major arenas – for arguments about democracy. This was not simply because commitment outside these movements – with the exception of Cooperators who overlapped with them overwhelmingly – was by comparison variable, reluctant and sometimes unreliable. It was also because democratisation – of existing working-class and socialist organisations as well as of the political processes of the state – was, for many decades, central for most socialist and many trade union activists. True, into the early 1900s, democratisers were repeatedly marginalised. We see this as partly their fault, conceptually as well as tactically. But by the 1910s, many activists had, consciously or not, left some of their mistakes behind. This time the forces for marginalisation came on a world scale: war and Bolshevism.

These changed not only working-class radicalism but also working-class moderation. On the Continent the impact was complex enough. But in Britain one further factor was at work. Eager, during the post-1918 generations, to 'win power' within the existing mechanisms, British Labour differed from many of its Continental cousins not, as universally assumed, in never having shared their concerns to widen and deepen democracy, but in forgetting that it ever had. That so much important evidence has until very recently been largely overlooked or ignored

[2] Will Hutton, *The State We're In* (London, 1995), p. 48.

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is remarkable. Only paranoids would imagine a vast conspiracy of suppression embracing several generations of historians, from Tories to Trotskyists. The likelier reasons are to do with the problems of writing history at all, within a first-past-the-post prime-ministerial absolutism which petrifies all 'less urgent' issues into eternal irrelevance.

Although, as we will note, oppositional voices were never quite stilled after 1918, they cried for the most part unheeded in the wilderness. Most historical work, naturally enough, took place within the new framework which, since it allowed disagreement or even bitter denunciation, did not seem restrictive. None the less, the last thirty or forty years have seen a gradual growth of perspectives 'from below' which helped bring about the collapse of that world of discussion in the late 1980s. Despite feeling isolated (and perhaps a trifle smug about this) we turned out unexceptional: none of us ever writes from outside history.

This has intensified our motivation to try recreating those aspects of the past with which we are concerned – with all its not-yet-discussed dead-ends and, above all, its confusions as open and fluid as they were at the time. We try to treat the preoccupations of the time from 'inside' that moment. We therefore try not to import anachronistic terminology. Our tariff-barrier carries, of course, a price. Our typical historians' preference for 'ordinary' language constantly risks blurring distinctions between meanings 'then' and 'now'. We hope to stay close to the usages of the time or, when we do import 'historians' words', to make this clear.

We begin by tracing the legacy of democratic ideas and practice in the late nineteenth century, focusing on the views held by working-class socialists in the 1880s about their democratic grandparents, the Chartists of the 1830s and 1840s, and how these views interacted with ideas on democracy. We go on to consider more broadly the range of strategies for increasing working-class power during the late nineteenth century. Parts 2 and 3 deal with two brief hinge-periods – around 1900 and 1910 respectively – in the development of democratic ideas among socialists and trade unionists.

The trade union movement during the 1890s saw a growing unease as to the effectiveness and justice of existing institutional arrangements. By the end of the decade, the 'employers' counter-attack', climaxing in the 1897–8 engineering struggle, produced a panic-fear in the unions that the basic structure of British industrial relations was to be swept aside. This panic was short-lived, but it reverberated long enough to help power two responses, one almost totally forgotten. This was the brief attempt to revolutionise the structure of the unions by absorbing them into an ultra-democratic 'fighting Federation'. The other was the strategy of independent Labour representation: sending working-class men to the

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Excerpt
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Commons independent of the non-working-class Tory and Liberal parties. These two efforts began side by side, but the first has been all but expunged from memory whereas the second – as the Labour Representation Committee – is well-known as the ancestor of today's Labour Party.

We have therefore dealt with the 'Federation' phenomenon in rather more detail than the 'political' because it was here that, most clearly, the would-be democratisers, represented in this case by the proponents of the *Clarion* Federation, came up against what the less sanguine would have called 'reality'. Here more than anywhere else, the conceptual and practical weaknesses of the 'ultra-democrats' were remorselessly tested to destruction.

But it was not, and is not, the end of the debate. There were signs of a more viable approach emerging by 1914 which drew on the most radical strains of democratic socialism. What might have developed subsequently is impossible to say. Within the British structures, the shocks of war and revolution changed almost everything. But perhaps only for the twentieth century.

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Part 1

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1 The survival of Chartist assumptions

This chapter discusses one small and one tiny organisation: the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and its short-lived child, the Socialist League. The importance of these organisations, into and beyond the 1900s, lies for us in the growing influence of those they helped to form. Originating in the 1880s – thus encouraging historians to talk of a socialist revival – they were self-consciously in the shadow of Chartism.

Just as the 1940s remain vital for many on the Left today, so the Chartist movement of around the 1840s remained the reference point for generations afterwards. Most relevant for this book, it had aimed to democratise parliament as a precondition for whatever social reforms working people (or rather working men) might next demand.

Into the new century, the SDF weekly *Justice* saw SDFers as Chartism's 'legitimate heirs and successors'.[1] Some of them had themselves been Chartists, among whom James Murray was on the SDF executive in the 1880s still demanding proportional representation and other democratic measures as a way towards the 'socialisation of production'.[2]

Not that these had necessarily stood still during the intervening decades. The Birmingham-based John Sketchley had gone through Owenism, freethought and republicanism. On the one hand they were open to Continental influences; Sketchley's 1879 *Principles of Social Democracy* is credited by E. P. Thompson with introducing European and particularly German socialist ideas to many future British socialists.[3]

[1] *Justice*, 1 August 1903.
[2] For James Murray and his brother Charles see Stan Shipley, *Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London*, History Workshop Pamphlet No. 5 (London, 1971), E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd edn (London, 1977), pp. 280–3, Alfred Plummer, *Bronterre, A Political Biography of Bronterre O'Brien, 1804–1864* (London, 1971), pp. 269–70. Two Northern SDFers imprisoned for Chartism: see *Justice*, 27 February 1885 (W. H. Chadwick) and 12 May 1888 (William Bell). For old Battersea Chartists, see William Stephen Sanders, *Early Socialist Days* (London, 1927), p. 21.
[3] Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 280.

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The French Revolution and 1848 both figured prominently in the socialist calendar. The Paris Commune of 1871 was celebrated as a socialist 'Easter', not least for showing how democracy inherently gravitated towards socialism.[4] On the other, the SDF itself had begun as a federation of London working-class Radical clubs, the Democratic Federation, and its programme had been mainly Chartist with only the demand for land nationalisation pointing towards the socialism of its main animator, the flamboyant stockbroker H. M. Hyndman. Hyndman had intended it as a revival of Chartism, or so he told Marx.[5] True, as early as 1883–4, it became officially socialist and added the word 'Social' to its title. But it never relinquished such concerns.

So, when historians talk of the 1880s socialists as distinctive 'precisely' because of their interest 'in social *rather than merely* political reform'[6] the words here italicised are tricky. By definition, socialists saw a new social system as fundamental, but democratisation remained crucial in principle and strategy.

Yet not for all of them. The leading lights in the Fabian Society, the third socialist organisation founded during the 1880s, quickly put away such things – not quite as 'childish' but certainly, in the words of Beatrice and Sidney Webb in the 1890s as 'primitive'. During the same period, their fellow-Fabian Bernard Shaw enjoyed sneering at the SDF as Chartism 'risen from the dead'.[7] Unlike most early local activists who understandably left, many of Fabianism's London intellectuals were inexperienced in plebeian democratic traditions, and proud to be.

The traditions, both British and Continental, to which the SDF most readily related were 'political' as distinct from 'industrial'. They were also predominantly male. When, in December 1888, *Justice* asserted that 'All history shows that it is *the organised force behind the ballot box* that puts the fear of man into the hearts of the oppressors'[8] (original emphasis) it seems odd in retrospect that, after a successful strike by 'matchgirls' at Bryant and May and at the end of a year which had seen the beginning of a major trade union upsurge, there is no hint that 'organised force' might take the form of industrial strength.

This is itself a sign of Chartist influence. Henry Collins has suggested

[4] *Justice*, 10 April 1886.
[5] Chushichi Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman and British Socialism*, ed. Henry Pelling (London, 1961), p. 33.
[6] Willard Wolfe, *From Radicalism to Socialism: Men and Ideas in the Formation of Fabian Socialist Doctrines, 1881–1889* (London, 1975), p. 64.
[7] George Bernard Shaw (ed.), *Essays in Fabian Socialism* (London, 1889), p. 186. See also *Labour Leader*, 31 May 1902.
[8] *Justice*, 8 December 1888.

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Excerpt
More information

that the SDF's low estimate of trade union potential may be attributed to the influence of the leading Chartist Bronterre O'Brien, transmitted through the Murrays.[9] More recently, Mark Bevir has traced the SDF's emphasis on the political, as distinct from social and economic, specifically to this source. He argues that, 'The socialism of the D.F. still embraced O'Brien's political strategy according to which the immediate need was political reforms which once introduced would enable the workers to initiate social reforms.' And though old O'Brienites modified their position to accept 'the need to collectivise the means of production', they 'retained much of their O'Brienism.'[10] Certainly, the SDF claimed O'Brien as a precursor. In 1889 *Justice* described him as

> the first man in Europe who used the name of Social-Democracy and more than fifty years ago, before Marx and Engels began to write, practically put in popular form, in conjunction with his colleagues, the views which the great German thinker placed on a scientific basis.[11]

In part this was an argument to ward off chauvinistic attacks on the SDF's apparent 'importation' of doctrines perceived as foreign. Yet, to its protagonists, Social-Democracy was not simply an alternative term for socialism. It had a definite meaning to which O'Brien's earlier formulations were crucial.

This can be demonstrated from a much later article by Hyndman in the SDF's monthly journal *The Social-Democrat*. Here, he defended the term 'Social-Democratic'; 'Socialist' was too vague and did not 'necessarily carry with it the notion of a democrat':

> Socialists are, indeed, frequently accused of wishing to impose their arbitrary will on the whole population. This is not true, as I believe, of the great majority of them . . . But nobody can truly say that State or Bureaucratic Socialism is not a danger of the immediate future in more than one country.

'Social-Democracy', he went on, had originated with O'Brien, 'in some respects the ablest and most far-seeing of the Chartists.' O'Brien had believed that trade unions 'being composed of what he called "the aristocrats of labour" . . . with a distinct desire to constitute a privileged

[9] Henry Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1971), pp. 47–69. For the influence of O'Brien and O'Brienites in the metropolitan ultra-radical milieu out of which the SDF emerged, see Shipley, *Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London*; Logie Barrow, 'The Homerton Social Democratic Club, 1881–1882', *History Workshop*, 5, Spring 1978, and Mark Bevir, 'The British Social Democratic Federation 1880–1885. From O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, 37, 1992, pp. 207–229.

[10] Bevir, 'British Social Democratic Federation', pp. 223 and 219.

[11] *Justice*, 6 April 1889. See also similar statement in *Justice*, 14 November 1885.

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Excerpt
More information

class among the workers' would develop into a 'more or less reactionary force.' Had not his fears been to a large extent justified?

> A Social Democrat, then, according to O'Brien, was a man who regarded social questions as of paramount importance, and desired to solve them by collectivist and democratic action. Democratic action might not by any means be collectivist; and collectivist action might not by any means necessarily be democratic . . .
>
> O'Brien took and used the term Social-Democrat to express the views of those who wished to bring about a complete social reconstruction under democratic forms.[12]

The SDF, thus, not only remained more at home in the Paris sections of the 1790s or among the radical artisans and depressed outworkers of Chartist days or of the Paris Commune than within an organised working class whose long-term leverage was growing. More specifically, it saw itself as inheriting an approach, crystallised by O'Brien in the term Social-Democracy, which was equally democratic and collectivist. If most Social-Democrats believed they were the true custodians of this tradition, in what ways did they seek to interpret, develop and embody the 'democratic forms' of which Hyndman wrote with such emphasis?

The development of Social-Democratic forms

Hyndman's assertive personality and his perceived 'dominance' of the SDF have tended to obscure the way his own ideas developed *within* the organisation into a pretty clear statement of what most of its members meant by Social-Democracy. We can see this by retracing Hyndman's own statements and the policy statements and programmes of the Federation in its formative years. In particular, we can see very significant changes of both language and substance when we compare his book, *England For All* (1881) with the manifesto *Socialism Made Plain* (1883)

The programme adopted in June 1881 at the foundation of the Democratic Federation comprised the following: (1) Adult Suffrage; (2) Triennial Parliaments; (3) Equal Electoral Districts; (4) Payment of MPs and official election expenses out of the rates; (5) Bribery, Treating and Corrupt Practices to be made acts of Felony; (6) Abolition of the House of Lords as a Legislative Body; (7) Legislative Independence for Ireland; (8) National and Federal Parliaments; (9) Nationalisation of Land.[13]

The demand for universal suffrage in point 1 was already more radical

[12] H. M. Hyndman, 'Social-Democrat or Socialist?', *The Social-Democrat*, 8, August 1897, pp. 228–31.
[13] Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman*, p. 41.

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