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978-0-521-08250-1 - G. D. H. Cole: An Intellectual Biography

L. P. Carpenter

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

As interest revives in G. D. H. Cole, scholars find themselves questioning his motivation. What made him devote so much time and energy to socialist commentary and research? To many, his activity appears abnormal, implicitly requiring a psychological explanation. I do not give a psychological explanation, because I believe none is called for.

The most promising psychological models for historical and political analysis are developmental. Early Freudian developmental models placed much emphasis on the first five years of life. We know very little about Cole's early years. But this is not as great a handicap as it would appear. Erik Erikson places his greatest emphasis on the 'identity crisis' of adolescence, and argues that the identity shaped then must bind together and satisfy personality characteristics formed earlier.¹ In order to argue that early developmental stages uniquely shaped Cole's intellectual development, problems arising in these early stages would have to remain visible in adolescent and adult behaviour. Reading backwards from Cole's adolescence, revealed in his conversion to socialism and in his undergraduate essays and articles, we do not find him having to deal with awkward residues of previous developmental stages. He does not appear crippled by mistrust, or agonized by guilt, or overwhelmed by his relations with father figures. His relationship with his father apparently stayed amicable, and he did not go through a period of hankering for messianic religion. His relationship with the Webbs did culminate in Cole's storming out of the Fabian Society in 1915, but Cole surmounted this crisis and managed to preserve friendly relations with them. As a Guild Socialist, Cole was antagonistic to the state. This may owe something to adolescent rebellion but it stopped short of a romantic urge to create revolution, and was offset by his appreciation of the importance of community. The suspicion of centralized power which Cole carried over from his

¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, Norton, 1950); Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth* (New York, Norton, 1969); E. Victor Wolfenstein, *The Revolutionary Personality: Lenin, Trotsky, Gandhi* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1967).

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earliest days fell within the liberal tradition and was healthy. Thus a developmental approach does not seem necessary to explain how Cole's socialism developed, or able to reveal a crisis that 'made' him a socialist, although a developmental approach might shed light on how Cole became receptive to socialism.

Through interviews and in his large output, it becomes clear that Cole was a highly sublimated person who put little energy into sexuality after the age of forty. But I do not feel that this indicates a major psychic disturbance that would explain the content of his socialism. Unlike Gandhi, Cole did not take a vow of chastity, or develop an ascetic position either in private life or in his view of human needs. In connection with his sublimation of sexuality, one should mention his serious illness in 1930; but the more basic point is the combination of satisfactions and disturbances coming from the objective world. Teaching was obviously something Cole did well, as were journalism and popular political writing; all were creative and rewarding. Large-scale public events – depression, the agonizing experience of the MacDonald Government, the need for creative rethinking of socialism, and the rise of Fascism – round out the picture.

The identity that Cole formed was not a rigid 'purified identity', an intolerant sense of right that artificially blocks out the perception of awkward facts and sources of claims.¹ Cole's identity was pluralist. He was a socialist, but not simply or monochromatically socialist. As a young socialist, at Oxford and in the Guild Socialist movement, he mixed research and propaganda with sheer fun and with teaching for the Workers' Educational Association. His later life resembled an ellipse with its foci at Oxford and in the London of the *New Statesman* and Labour politics – with a bulge for the writing of murder mysteries. The same pluralism marks his socialism. Guild Socialism attempted to reconcile claims of workers' control with consumer and community participation, and grew as new claims were brought to Cole's attention. When Guild Socialism became unwieldy and failed to keep step with British political reality, Cole looked for a less confining picture of the world. From 1920 onwards, he tried to mediate between left-wing opinion and the bulk of the Labour movement, rather than developing

¹ Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

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a rigid policy all his own and insisting that the movement accept it. But this flexibility did not mean that his identity had come unstuck. His Socialism continued to function as a backbone, rather than fragmenting or solidifying into a ramrod.

Thus we come to the picture of Cole given in this book. We see a socialist responding to his world. His socialism was humanistic, emphasizing major liberal values such as democracy and freedom, integrating them into a value structure that was comprehensive without being rigid. His value structure and his personal experience in the Labour movement gave him an understanding of human needs. Interlocking with that value structure was his perception of human needs. His background – St Paul’s School, Oxford, and the Webbs – taught him the importance of research. Any policy that Cole considered had to satisfy both his values and his practical side. A third factor, closely related to these two, was his desire to serve the Labour movement. Service was heavily stressed in the late Victorian professional bourgeoisie, the social stratum in which he was educated. It was reinforced by his awareness of others’ claims to freedom, respect, and basic necessities, and by his research and experience. All this helps explain why Cole was often considered as a ‘secular saint’, for they prevented him from developing an inordinate desire for fame or power. Cole is noteworthy for his understanding of the limits on the intellectual within the working-class movement. Finally, his prolific output may seem compulsive; but compulsive people usually are much more out of touch with reality. A nearly-compulsive level of output was necessary to express the varied parts of his identity. Academic scholarship alone, political research alone, propaganda alone, teaching alone, would not have satisfied him. In a passage about William Morris, Cole revealed how his voluminous output related to the pluralist identity he had formed:

... though a man’s work may fall short of greatness if he attempts too many things, it does not at all follow that he would do better in attempting less. For the truth may be that he wants to do and say so much that he is much more concerned to get it done and said than to do one thing, or a few things, supremely well. He may have the power of expressing himself, and of serving his fellow-men, rather in many things than in a few; and though no one thing mark him out as master, his mastery may appear none the less plainly in all . . .¹

¹ G. D. H. Cole, ‘William Morris and the Modern World,’ in *Persons and Periods* (London, Macmillan, 1938), pp. 288–289.

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CHAPTER I

JOINING THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

I became a Socialist as a schoolboy a year or so before the General Election of 1906, which first put the Labour Party firmly on the parliamentary map . . . My conversion to Socialism had very little to do with parliamentary politics . . . I was converted, quite simply, by reading William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, which made me feel, suddenly and irrevocably, that there was nothing except a Socialist that it was possible for me to be . . . I became a Socialist, as many others did in those days, on grounds of morals and decency and aesthetic sensibility.¹

This conversion placed Cole on the road which he was to follow all his life. Not that socialism was Cole's whole life; his work in education, and the murder mysteries he wrote in his spare time, testify to his versatility. He tempered the strength of his conversion to Socialism through his participation in non-political activities. He sought to avoid fanaticism: 'I distrust the man for whom the Socialist ideal, or any other ideal, looms so large as to cover the whole of life.'² As a political man, he often avoided taking a stand that would limit him to being a partisan of one fragment of the Labour movement. Yet in a broad sense he was converted to socialism. What he meant by socialism lay behind all his public activities, and pervaded his personality. Socialism formed his academic interests in trade unionism and Labour history, his democratic educational practices. As he wrote in 1956, 'I can still feel the glow of that conversion . . .'³ Socialism united Cole's life and attitudes in the same way that Morris's socialism united his.

At a first glance, one would not have expected Cole to become a socialist. Socialism was still in its heroic infancy in many parts of England, and especially in the South where Cole grew up. The impetus given to trade unionism by the strikes of 1889 had petered out during

¹ G. D. H. Cole, 'British Labour Movement – Retrospect and Prospect', *Ralph Fox Memorial Lecture, Fabian Special, No. 8* (London, 1952), pp. 3–4.

² G. D. H. Cole, 'The Inner Life of Socialism', *The Aryan Path*, I, No. 2 (February 1930), p. 7.

³ G. D. H. Cole, 'World Socialism Restated' (*New Statesman Pamphlet*, London, 1956), p. 5.

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his childhood. Meanwhile, socialist ideas had only made sporadic inroads into the middle classes and the intelligentsia. Cole appears to have had little direct contact with the effects of industrialization while he was young. G. N. Clark, one of his oldest and best friends, said very aptly, that 'Cole became a Socialist from the back seat of a car' rather than from direct experience.¹

Cole was born on 25 September 1889, the youngest child of a rising self-made man. George Cole was an estate agent, whose firm in Ealing Broadway still prospers. By the time that G. D. H. reached adolescence, his father had become a Tory and a member of the Church of England. There is no evidence that Cole became a socialist in reaction against this traditional background. While he found Samuel Butler's protests against late Victorian family life appealing, Cole always took care to explain that his father did not resemble Canon Pontifex.² The Coles stayed reasonably close as a family. Margaret Cole recalls that they were kind to her when she married Douglas in August 1918, at a time when her father largely broke off social relationships with Douglas and Margaret Cole, and with her brother Raymond Postgate, who had also become a Guild Socialist.³ Even in the 1930s Cole continued to visit his father, and they would argue politics without acrimony.⁴ They had much in common. Cole shared the *laissez-faire* liberal's strong belief in liberty, while differing from his father in his application of the principle. Cole failed to learn the traditional middle-class identification of freedom with the right to property. Despite his radical politics, his personal tastes remained conservative. He especially enjoyed Victorian fiction, even having a good word to say for Charlotte M. Yonge; he never enjoyed motion pictures. The presence of these traditional elements in his beliefs and habits kept Cole from developing the bitterness one sometimes sees in left-wing Socialists. Although he disliked many aspects of capitalist society, his was not a socialism of hatred, but one which emphasized what had to be done to liberate the tendencies he loved in English society.

¹ Interview with G. N. Clark.

² G. D. H. Cole, *Samuel Butler* (Writers and Their Work, No. 30, London: Longmans Green, 1952), p. 41.

³ Margaret Cole, *Growing Up Into Revolution* (London: Longmans Green, 1949), p. 77.

⁴ Interview with J. G. K. Kennedy, Cole's nephew and the owner of Cole and Hicks, the estate agency founded by Cole's father.

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Cole was educated at St Paul's School. It provided him with an urban and intellectual environment, in which the traditional values of 'empire' and social position were not as overwhelming as they were at other public schools. In 1913, he wrote that Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street*, with its descriptions of mental and social adventures outside of the heavy academic curriculum, was a realistic description of the school. Cole emphasized that 'St Paul's draws on a mixed urban population that is predominately professional and artistic or literary'. He contrasted the atmosphere of 'spiritual adventures' with Harrow's 'empire building'.¹ Unlike Mackenzie's protagonist, Cole belonged to the University Sixth form, and his advanced education consisted almost entirely of Greek, Latin, and classical history. From the beginning, however, Cole wished to investigate a great variety of subjects on his own. He won prizes in English verse, history, and English essay, in addition to Latin prose and elegiacs. He edited *The Pauline*, the school newspaper, and became a prefect; he mocked both activities in *The Octopus*, a humorous paper whose distinguished ancestors included one edited by G. K. Chesterton. An anonymous reviewer in *The Pauline*, perhaps even Cole enjoying the chance to criticize his own efforts, said that *The Octopus* 'dealt blows on tender spots with a persistence which is not generally credited, even to the most savage of marine monsters . . . the humor was crude, the cynicism immature. . .'.² The judgment will certainly stand the test of time. Cole contributed some savage remarks about himself and others, a variety of short stories (one of which is a parable in the fashion of Morris), some doggerel and parodies,³ and mockery of the cant of moral theology.

¹ G. D. H. Cole, 'School Stories', *The Northerner* (Newcastle, December 1913), 42-3. He compared Mackenzie's book with Arnold Lunn's *The Harrovians*.

² *The Pauline*, Vol. xxvi (April 1908), pp. 48-9. Surmaster F. C. Comings of St Paul's allowed me to consult the St Paul's Union Society Minute Book and *The Pauline*, and discussed Cole's curriculum and prizes with me. Copies of *The Octopus*, ed. A. L. Johnson and G. D. H. Cole (London, November 1906-June 1907) are at Nuffield College.

³ Cole's parodies were generally the best of his poetry. Many of them were written for and with the Guild Socialist movement. See *The Bolo Book*, ed. G. D. H. and M. I. Cole (London: Labour Publishing Co. and Allen & Unwin, 1921), which includes the songs from 'The Mysterious Homeland', a musical comedy about Soviet Russia conceived and presented at the 1920 Fabian Summer School. 'The Striker Stricken', a musical written about the 1926 General Strike, is at Nuffield College, and one hopes that it will be published. It has been sung privately, at meetings of the Cole Group in Oxford, but has been considered libellous. Cole published two volumes of poetry

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He appears to have developed a taste for shocking the bourgeoisie which he never lost.

At St Paul's, Cole and his friends considered themselves 'the brainy', and waged war on the athletes. His interests at this time lay chiefly in literary and artistic subjects. In the Union Society, of which he became president, Cole was often to be found debating topics such as 'That this house considers modern drama degenerate'. Cole moved that resolution, and supported his stand by arguing that Shaw was a great author but not a great dramatist.¹ The Union Society offered opportunities for the aspirant to fame and public office, even one who developed as unconventionally as Cole. One debate, on the House of Lords, even drew Chesterton as a spectator. In his column in *The Daily News*, Chesterton commented that Cole (who drew the assignment of defending the Lords' existence) and his opponent 'were learning to be a politician – that is, they were being taught not to care about politics'.² Cole only learned part of the lesson; he came to take political ideas more seriously than Parliamentary politics.

Cole's circle at school appears to have been politically progressive; it approved minimum wage legislation and included several socialists. However, Cole was hesitant to commit himself publicly to socialism; no record exists of his intervening in Union Society debates on municipal socialism and the Progressive Party, the Webbs' effort to permeate London municipal politics. He was also slow to realize the connection between his socialist ideals and existing political institutions. The success of the Labour Representation Committee in the 1906 elections does not seem to have impressed him. He first joined a socialist organization in the spring of 1908, just before going up to Oxford; yet he had first read Morris late in 1905.

Cole was introduced to William Morris by one of his friends at St Paul's. He began with *The Defense of Guenevere*. He felt the appeal of the 'rich, luscious beaker of Victorian medievalism'. He pursued this

¹ St Paul's School Union Society Minute Book, 24 October 1907.

² G. K. Chesterton, *The Daily News* (5 October 1907).

before the First World War: *The Record* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1912) and *New Beginnings* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1914); and *The Crooked World* (London, Gollancz, 1933).

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spirit in the pictures of Rossetti and Burne-Jones, 'made pilgrimage to Kelmscott Manor and to Hammersmith Hall, and set out to read every work of or about William Morris on which I could lay hands'.¹

The picture of the place of the artist in society which Morris associated with the middle ages formed the bridge between the aesthetic interests which he outgrew and his developing social consciousness. He was ready to agree that art grew out of society, and that the separation of art from craftsmanship was morally and psychologically wrong.² Starting from these premises, Morris's writings taught Cole

that the quality of work and the quality of living could not be dissociated, and that men whose daily labours were to them no better than an irksome round of toil, and satisfied no part of their natural impulses, could by no means live happily or fruitfully in the rest of their existence. The quality of their working hours would penetrate and poison their lives, making them worse and less happy as friends or lovers, as citizens and as men. Can anyone deny that this is true, or that the irksomeness and strain of much modern factory labour are powerful causes of unhappiness, ill-temper and thwarted or twisted personality in the world of to-day. The happiest of us, I verily believe, and the most at peace with the world – however much we find ourselves at war with its abuses – are those who are able to enjoy our work.³

This argument was of infinite importance to Cole for all his political life. It gave him a purpose for which he could fight. Morris taught Cole that a whole life depended upon the expression of oneself in work; Cole built his faith in industrial democracy and Guild Socialism around this perception. He associated the meaning of work with another phrase from Morris which he loved to quote: 'Fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell.'⁴

¹ These quotations are taken from an article on William Morris, published in *Revisions and Revaluations* (1931). There is a galley proof in a volume of Cole's articles at Nuffield College; I have not been able to locate a published copy.

² Cole avoided the crudities that can come out of the argument that art reflects the society in which the artist works. He would not have agreed fully with Morris that good art could come only out of a good society. See 'Art and Socialism: A forgotten incident of the Paris Commune and other matters', Manuscripts and Proofs, Box 7, folder 93, Cole Papers, Nuffield College. Probably written in 1911.

³ G. D. H. Cole 'William Morris and the Modern World', in *Persons and Periods* (London, Macmillan, 1938), p. 293.

⁴ William Morris, 'A Dream of John Ball', in *William Morris: Prose, Verse, Lectures and Essays*, ed. G. D. H. Cole (London, Nonesuch Press, 1934), p. 212.

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These beliefs, to which Cole responded in Morris, became the basis of his attempts to improve the world. From Morris, he learned what a good society felt like and what values were involved. Thus Morris's egalitarian, energetic, and libertarian spirit exerted more influence on Cole than the details of *News From Nowhere* or 'A Factory as it Might Be'.¹ Morris himself remained a figure of veneration for Cole. He owned one of Morris's best cretonnes, 'The Woodpecker', and kept a marble bust of Morris in his library. Cole responded to Morris's goodness; and in many ways he came to resemble Morris. Thus, in one comment on Morris, he offered the definitive answer to those who rebuked him for having written too much:

... though a man's work may fall short of greatness if he attempts too many things, it does not at all follow that he would do better in attempting less. For the truth may be that he wants to do and say so much that he is much more concerned to get it done and said than to do one thing, or a few things, supremely well. He may have the power of expressing himself, and of serving his fellow-men rather in many things than in a few; and though no one thing mark him out as a master, his mastery may appear none the less plainly in them all. This, I think, is true of William Morris. He is greater as a man and as an influence than in any one part of his work.²

Cole, converted to socialism by reading Morris, entered the Labour movement in a most idealistic fashion.

I became a Socialist because, as soon as the case for a society of equals, set free from the twin evils of riches and poverty, mastership and subjection, was put to me, I knew that to be the only kind of society that could be consistent with human decency and fellowship and that in no other society could I have the right to be content. The society William Morris imagined seemed to me to embody the right sort of human relations, and to be altogether beautiful and admirable...³

He suddenly saw an entirely different, morally superior way of living, and called it socialism. 'Socialism presented itself to me, not as an

¹ G. D. H. Cole, untitled paper on Morris, in 'Manuscripts and Proofs', Box 7, folder 91, Cole Papers, Nuffield College. Dated 17 November 1910.

² 'William Morris and the Modern World'. Cole wrote a similar passage at the start of his career: 'William Morris', *The Blue Book* (June 1913), 355–66. The decision to do a workmanlike job on many things rather than an artful one on a single task was one of the most important he ever made.

³ G. D. H. Cole, 'World Socialism Restated' (*New Statesman Pamphlet*, London, 1956), p. 5.

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economic or political doctrine, but as a complete alternative way of living – as I still regard it'.¹ Thanks also to Morris, Cole saw socialism as a truly free way of living. One might argue that Cole could never have become a socialist without discovering that his own firm belief in freedom could be expressed through socialism. In this important sense, Cole's socialism was the heir of the Edwardian Liberalism in which he grew up. He argued that socialist measures were necessary to bring freedom, and the argument clearly carried tremendous weight with him. But Cole did not resemble the majority of the Liberal recruits to socialism. He lacked the classical Liberal's paramount belief in the 'principles of the English constitution'. For Cole, freedom was a basic human demand, a way of treating people and of providing them with all the opportunities they needed to govern and express themselves. In his conversion to socialism as Morris had described it, Cole entered the socialist movement on the libertarian wing.

That Cole was converted by Morris, rather than by Marx or by the speakers of a particular political sect, had another important effect on his socialism. He always devoted himself directly to the socialist movement as a whole, above and beyond any particular manifestation of it. While choosing to support certain sections rather than others, he never developed a narrow sectarianism. He spread his efforts across the movement's activities; even when he was attacking the Webbs in his early days, he could see the usefulness of groups opposed to the ones he formed or joined. He often felt that dissension was a sign of growth, not of weakness. And so he was above the sectarian politics of 'divide and conquer'. He would go to tremendous lengths to create unity by a brilliant composite resolution, or disband his own organizations when he felt that two organizations could not serve in the same functional area. This devotion to socialism as a whole placed him in awkward, and from some perspectives even naïve, positions at certain points in his career; yet one could argue that sectarianism would have entailed even worse dangers. Thus he never questioned Russia's claim to be socialist, and he refrained from responding viciously to the British Communists' taunts. Even after the Russians suppressed the Hungarian revolution, he refused to be drawn into anti-Communist

¹ 'British Labour Movement – Retrospect and Prospect', p. 5.