I

The working class in British politics

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The social democratic theory of the class struggle

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I

There can hardly be a topic in the whole field of British labour history which has attracted less attention than the social democratic theory of the class struggle.* Nor is this neglect at all surprising. It may even be disputable whether such a theory (understanding this as a scheme or system of ideas held as an explanation or account) in fact exists. In the course of the first section of this essay, I acknowledge that the theory may not constitute much of an answer. What does exist, I maintain, and what cannot be wished away, is the problem to which it is addressed. In developing my theme, therefore, the starting-point must be a definition of terms.

The social democratic label became fashionable in British politics during the 1970s, chiefly as a pejorative description of the section of the Labour party which could not display either left-wing or trade-union credentials. Even the apostles of revisionism in the party have been uneasy with the term. Anthony Crosland's reported definition that a social democrat was 'somebody about to join the Tory Party',[1] shows that we are dealing with masked words. The force of his allusion to the procession of right-wing renegades in the late 1970s is undeniable. Yet if Crosland himself was not a social democrat, who was? There is no getting away from the fact that, historically, social democracy has not been easily adopted into the language of British politics.

Part of this historical uncertainty lies in the fact that in Britain, unlike most continental countries, the major party of the left did not call itself Social Democrat. This may be another way of saying that the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF), led by H. M. Hyndman, did not succeed in becoming the major party of the left. The SDF (or SDP from 1908) certainly tried to establish itself under the name in the years 1884–1911 with the result that

* The foundation of the Social Democratic party during 1981 has lent to my subject some current connotations which could hardly have been intended. My title was agreed with the editor in June 1979. A first draft of the paper was given to the Open University History Seminar in London, convened by Christopher Harvie, on 1 February 1980, and I benefited considerably from this discussion. The present version was written in September 1980 and, following helpful criticism from John Thompson, Stefan Collini and Jay Winter, it underwent a final revision in April 1981.

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'Social Democrat' was gradually appropriated as a term of art designating Hyndman's followers. In the early publications of the Fabian Society there was no such impediment to a more ecumenical usage, though in *Fabian Essays* (1889) Bernard Shaw talked of the socialists having 'fallen into line as a Social Democratic party'. On the other hand, we also find Graham Wallas proposing a 'tentative and limited Social Democracy', and in 'The Impossibilities of Anarchism' (1891) Shaw likewise refers to 'State Socialism, which, for the sake of precision, had better be called Social-Democracy'. By the time Shaw came to reissue this lecture sixteen years later, however, he had been forced to justify using the term.[2]

> The word Social-Democrat is used in these pages in its proper sense, to denote a Socialist who is also a Democrat. In England it has come to be used in a narrower sense, to denote doctrinaire Marxism and the characteristic propaganda of the Social-Democratic Federation. Whilst this transient misunderstanding lasts, my readers will have to allow for it by remembering that all Socialists who postulate democracy as the political basis of Socialism, including, of course, the members of the Fabian Society, are entitled to describe themselves as Social-Democrats.

Thus in the Edwardian period the connotations were often Marxist, even when Social Democratic was not being used as a formal title. 'In Germany,' Winston Churchill argued in October 1906, 'there exists exactly the condition of affairs in a party sense, that Mr Keir Hardie and his friends are so anxious to introduce here. A great social democratic party on the one hand, are [*sic*] bluntly and squarely face to face with a capitalist and military confederation on the other.' This sort of reference was plainly reinforced by the continental example. An explicit attempt at definition in an anti-socialist handbook sponsored by the Conservative party stated that 'the terms "Socialism" and "Social Democracy" ' were 'in practice to-day convertible terms'. It suggested, however, that Social Democracy, owing to its more recent introduction and its German origin, was the less commonly used and linked its currency with the activities of the SDP.[3]

Before the First World War a reference to Social Democracy would normally have carried the 'narrower sense' against which Shaw's protest was directed. Its flavour would have been revolutionary, and it would not, therefore, have been associated with the reformist ideology of 'Labourism' for which recent social democrats have been arraigned by Marxist critics. The historical development of Labourism may be taken, in John Saville's useful formulation, as 'a theory and practice which accepted the possibility of social change within the existing framework of society; which rejected the revolutionary violence and action implicit in Chartist ideas of physical force; and which increasingly recognized the working of political democracy of the parliamentary variety as the practicable means of achieving its own aims and objec-

tives'. When the young G. D. H. Cole wanted to describe contending forces in the Labour movement during the labour unrest, he naturally wrote: 'Syndicalism, in the widest sense, and the old Unionism confront each other in the industrial field just as Social Democracy and Labourism are opposed in the sphere of politics.'[4]

It may appear, therefore, that modern social democrats lack historical rights in their very name which was merely misappropriated on their behalf after 1917. Even so, there would still be some point in applying the term historically if a recognizable and continuous tradition could be identified, albeit one which only later became known as social democratic. This would cut through a quibble over copyright (Shaw's 'transient misunderstanding') with a freshly-honed analytical concept.

The social democratic tradition, on this reading, has been distinctively collectivist, seeking to use the state as the direct agent of social amelioration. It has been socialist chiefly in this rather restricted definition. It has been committed to parliamentary methods as the means of securing the agency of the state for these purposes. It has been reformist, in Lenin's sense, stopping short of revolutionary changes which were seen as neither desirable nor necessary. The social democratic slogan has therefore been social justice, with the dual implication that market forces will not produce it but that it is a feasible goal within 'the mixed economy' (as social democrats generally now term it, that is, what their opponents on the right usually characterize as 'socialism', and what their critics on the left persist in describing as 'capitalism'). This was surely the 'Gaitskellite' position in the 1950s and 1960s. Its key text in this period was Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956) which owed a considerable debt to Evan Durbin's *The Politics of Democratic Socialism* (1940).[5] The writings of R. H. Tawney, especially *Equality* (1931), lay, in turn, behind the restatements of the Gaitskellite generation, and Tawney was himself influenced by the early Fabians. But not just by the Fabians. The theorists of the new Liberalism, especially J. A. Hobson and L. T. Hobhouse, also have strong claims for being regarded as among the progenitors of British social democracy. This is true regardless of the language of political argument which sentiment, prudence, fashion or polemical advantage dictated at the time.

There is, however, evidence in contemporary usage, especially by Hobhouse, which establishes the origins of the term more directly. In May 1907, for instance, Hobhouse was urging the Liberal government to take up social and economic issues as the means of mobilizing the forces necessary to confront the veto power of the House of Lords. He could thus argue: 'the road to political democracy in England lies through what, in a broader sense than is usually given to the term, we may call social democracy'. He clearly wanted to employ this vocabulary but was inhibited from doing so more readily by the recognition that another sense held the field. Thus in *Liberalism* (1911) he loosely

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acknowledged contemporary usage in referring to the awkward position of Liberalism at the close of the nineteenth century as being 'between two very active and energetically moving grindstones – the upper grindstone of plutocratic imperialism, and the nether grindstone of social democracy'. Even here the word collectivism could probably be substituted without violating Hobhouse's meaning. A further reference in a passage written at much the same time suggests why Hobhouse kept toying with the term despite the risk of confusing his readers.[6]

> Political changes, then, which have given us constitutional democracy, have paved the way for what, if the term were not limited to a rather narrow theory, we might call a social democracy, what we at any rate call a democracy seeking, by the organised expression of the collective will, to remodel society in accordance with humanitarian sentiment.

Hobhouse's essential point was to connect the case for collectivism, about which Liberals might well be dubious, with the case for democracy, on which it was safer to appeal. This was a shrewd polemical strategy but it also reflected Hobhouse's own values. As he once put it, 'the extension of public responsibility under a representative system is one thing; under any other system it is open to quite another set of objections'. This was, in short, a distinctively liberal case for collectivism and one which implied, despite initial appearances, a fundamental congruity between the old Liberalism of *laissez-faire* and the new Liberalism of state intervention. On Hobhouse's view of the nineteenth century, 'the doctrine of popular liberty, which enshrined a social truth of permanent value, became identified with doctrines restricting collective action, which were of merely temporary value'. So when the people 'could look upon the Government as their servant and the acts of the Government as their acts, it followed necessarily that the antagonism between democracy and governmental action fell to the ground'.[7] If the characteristic achievement of the old Liberalism had been political democracy, what the new Liberalism sought was, given this connotation and cue, social democracy.

The logic of this approach was that social democrats claimed a prior commitment as democrats as a constraint upon their social measures. Since for them 'the system' was democracy, their analysis might well be at odds with that of socialists for whom 'the system' was capitalism. This raises, then, the second problem in my title. The socialist theory of the class struggle is well understood and may be quickly summarized. The system is capitalism, which comprises the ownership of the means of production by a privileged class. As the system works, it is necessarily exploitative, hence antagonism is the essence of relations between classes. The class struggle is not only inevitable; it is also desirable in that it is the only way of changing the system and thus remedying its inequities and malfunctions. Class *in itself* manifests the problem to which

class *for itself* provides the solution. These propositions constitute both an internally consistent theory and one which is ideologically effective in explaining and justifying conflict.

Social democrats, by contrast, seem to be committed to two incompatible positions. In the first place they deny the desirability or necessity of class conflict. Their leaders spoke of 'rejecting the class war' in 1980, whereas a quarter of a century previously Crosland had written: 'Nobody now rationally believes in a theory of irreconcilable conflict, or that anything which helps the management must *ipso facto* hurt the workers . . .' Durbin gave emphasis (literally) to the following proposition. 'The economic life of an advanced society is peculiarly the sphere of the most complex and successful kinds of co-operation.' Earlier references by Hobson to the rationale of the industrial system as 'a great co-operative society of consumers', and to the recognition of 'a harmony of interests' between capital and labour (at least over the division of the 'productive' surplus) suggest the same perspective.[8]

How far Tawney subscribed to these views is admittedly more open to question. In *The Acquisitive Society* (1921), his most radical book, there is a caustic reprimand implying that he did not. 'To deplore "ill-feeling", or to advocate "harmony", between "labour and capital" is as rational as to lament the bitterness between carpenters and hammers or to promote a mission for restoring amity between mankind and its boots.' No doubt. Yet there are similar passages in Hobson, which may only indicate that it is the appeal for harmony as a means of propping up the *status quo* which is scouted. Conversely, we can find Tawney in 1917 asking why 'the unity of the nation [should be] marred by ever-recurring conflicts between the two partners in the business on which, as they know when both sides stop to think, the future of the country depends?' Though it might fairly be said that this is the voice of the patriot in wartime, of the wounded soldier succoured on the goodwill of promises for reconstruction, it nonetheless seems a better representation of Tawney's considered view. It is part of his indictment of economic and social inequalities in 1938 that they produce 'a perpetual class-struggle, which, though not always obtrusive, is always active below the surface and which is fatal to the mobilization of co-operative effort'.[9] Despite the undeniable changes of tone, Tawney can be considered consistent in his view of the fundamental issue. He saw class conflict as the destructive and internecine result of existing injustice in society, not as the effectual means of its redress. Class for itself would not emancipate society from the chains of class in itself.

I hope that I have established the existence of a distinctive British political tradition prominently represented by the early Fabians, the new Liberals, Tawney, Durbin and the Gaitskellites; and that there are inescapable historical and semantic reasons for calling it social democratic. I hope that I have also shown that one of its foundation stones has been a rejection of the Marxist

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concept of the class war and an appeal instead to the interests of the community as a whole, to a model of economic cooperation and social harmony, immanent if not yet fulfilled. But we are heading here for an awkward corner, because social democrats have simultaneously held a second view. A question arises to which (historically) the social democratic theory of the class struggle has been the answer.[10] As an answer it may be dismissed (politically or philosophically) as a lacuna, as fantasy, as hypocrisy, or at best as a paradox. For the question is, how have social democrats squared their language of unity and consensus with their commitment to *class* parties? After the First World War the Labour party was their political home. Moreover, those like Hobson who had previously been Liberals had given their strongest and clearest support to the Liberal party in 1910, exactly at the moment when it acquired its sharpest image as a class party. How, therefore, could the belief that class conflict was a bad thing be reconciled with the knowledge that it was what democracy was really all about?

II

Social democrats characteristically argued the case for equality by reference to social justice. An important objective was thus the redistribution of wealth from rich to poor. As Hobhouse put it, 'let us consider the remedy, and admit, once for all, that whatever be the character of that remedy, it must fulfil this first condition of distributing the products of industry with more regard to the welfare of the masses than is paid by the blind and sometimes blindly adored forces of competition'. It was also generally assumed that the poor could be identified with the working class and more specifically with organized labour. Hobhouse again: 'the organised workmen are in a way the leaders of the working class as a whole'.[11] It may be felt, therefore, that there existed a simple way of resolving the whole problem, viz. that the efforts of the labour movement were motivated by self-interest but deserved support because of the justice of labour's claims. There is something in this. But the logic of this resolution prises apart the 'social' and 'democratic' ascriptions in a way that was resisted by the thinkers considered here, perhaps because their view of progress was 'moral' rather than 'mechanical'.[12] The engine of change, so they professed, properly lay in the social purchase of ideas, as norms and motives, rather than in the expedient implementation of prescriptive programmes and policies.

As the heir of political liberalism social democracy took over a view of politics which was already familiar. 'To those of us who were brought up in the liberal and democratic traditions of British political life,' Durbin contended, 'a certain form of utilitarianism is bred in our bones, and will not pass from us until we are dead.'[13] When he made out the case for democracy, he spoke, like Bentham and Mill, of making representative government responsible to the

popular will as the only means of promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The reality of this agency was not questioned. Such a pure and explicit avowal of intellectual pedigree may be unusual. Nonetheless, the foremost strand in the social democratic theory of politics has undoubtedly been the rational utilitarian view.

Benthamite man was a creature of solipsism. Self-interest was his invariable motive and his infallible guide. The greatest happiness of the greatest number was a legitimate sanction for public policy. Since the working class composed the greatest number of persons, and ultimately of electors, their collective self-interest might be expected to prevail through their parliamentary representatives. None saw this more clearly than utilitarian opponents of democracy, who rode hard on an argument which the Benthamites themselves tried to restrain. To the future Lord Salisbury it was evident that the struggle for power lay 'between the classes who have property and the classes who have none', which was a good reason to resist electoral reform in the 1860s. 'Wherever democracy has prevailed,' he warned, 'the power of the state has been used in some form or other to plunder the well-to-do classes for the benefit of the poor.'[14] From their own point of view social democrats readily accepted the class dimension of this fundamentally utilitarian conception of democracy. The rationale of the whole process was (positively) the maximization of happiness, and therefore (negatively) the redress of the grievances of a majority. This was rational insofar as the desired ends were self-interested and the chosen means appropriate. Since the insight of socialism was that the majority had rational grievances as an exploited class, it followed that socialism was the economic obverse of democracy.[15] The Fabian preference for parliamentary methods initially rested on this sort of reasoning.

The more the Liberal party took up issues of social reform, the closer it came to acknowledging that the people's cause really rested on class interest, at least in a certain sense. Winston Churchill, speaking in 1908, offered to tell the wealthy and powerful the secret of their security of life and property in Britain. It arose

> from the continuation of that very class struggle which they lament and of which they complain, which goes on ceaselessly in our country, which goes on tirelessly, with perpetual friction, a struggle between class and class in this country which never sinks into lethargy, and never breaks into violence, but which from year to year makes a steady and constant advance.

This was a rationalistic view of class interest in politics, the direct ancestor of the social democratic position, assuming that melioristic proposals naturally command majority support. Its commendation of the class struggle should be taken in conjunction with a slightly later comment. In July 1909 Churchill stressed the urgency of adopting welfare policies by arguing that otherwise the gap between rich and poor, in both wealth and outlook, would widen, in which

case 'I think there is nothing before us but savage strife between class and class'.[16] The implication was that the domesticated class struggle of democratic politics was the alternative to the real thing.

Put in this way, the argument was primarily directed as a warning to the class in possession against the dangers of a die-hard policy. But the virtue of liberal methods has been more positively urged by social democrats and firmly associated with the parliamentary road. They sought to set the processes of rational deliberation and decision-making in a social context which acknowledged their class aspect. It was Hobson's contention that every instalment of economic reform involved an attack upon vested interests. It was not so much a symmetrical class struggle as the opposition between the sectional interests of the possessing classes and the general principles of economic justice. 'The man who is surrounded by riches', according to Hobhouse, 'sees the world as through a glass darkly. He hears its cries as through a blanket . . .' Hobson was ready to admit that the parliamentary game had been deftly turned into a defence of the *status quo*. But the fact that, with the growth of political liberties, class ascendancy was increasingly preserved by ideological control rather than open menace, was in itself a sign of progress. It gave better ground to fight on. 'When the struggle is on the plane of brute force, numbers and justice may indeed be overborne, but every elevation of the struggle raises their power.' Ideas were the strongest weapons in the people's hands. Likewise Tawney's later assessment that 'unequal as the struggle is in the political field, it is less one-sided there than it would be in any other'.[17]

The case against a revolutionary alternative was double-barrelled, and shot at anything that moved. The first target was a spontaneous insurrection, of the sort generally envisaged before the First World War. This was shot down because it would enjoy no chance of success, Hobson seeing it as 'a conflict between the armed trained forces of the State defending the interests of capital and an unarmed, untrained rabble'. But a disciplined seizure of power by a dictatorship of the left, on the Bolshevik model, met the charge from the other barrel that it negated the very ends of social democracy. Durbin's case against it was that the minimum content of the idea of social justice was the combination of political liberty with economic equality. While 'a dictatorship of the Left might achieve a greater equality in the distribution of wealth', it could not achieve justice, 'because it cannot give freedom to those who do not like inequality, and dare not put to the test its claim that the great majority of mankind really want equality at all'. It was not just that bourgeois ideas of liberty would have to be subordinated to the general welfare: without liberty there would be no subjective test of the general welfare.[18] The interests of the working class were therefore just as keenly at risk from authoritarianism, as they well recognized. Tawney argued that the existence of a strong liberal tradition in Britain meant that there was widespread and deep-rooted support

for notions of fair play, with which he specifically identified parliamentary government. It had to be realized, he contended, 'that the class which is the victim of economic exploitation, instead of merely reading about it, is precisely the class which attaches most importance to these elementary decencies'. So socialists 'must face the fact that, if the public, and particularly the working-class public, is confronted with the choice between capitalist democracy, with all its nauseous insincerities, and undemocratic socialism, it will choose the former every time'. To Tawney, with social democratic priorities, this was 'a proof, not of stupidity, but of intelligence'.[19] Although couched in the language of utilitarian rationalism, this approbation of the wisdom of the working class verges on populism, of which more must be said later.

If the first strand in the social democratic theory of politics was utilitarian rationalism, it was often intertwined with a second, that of progressive élitism. It was in the Edwardian period that an incisive challenge was mounted to the conventional Benthamite assumptions about democracy, with important contributions from two Fabian essayists, Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas. According to Shaw, it was the hard experience of what he called 'proletarian democracy' that damned it. 'Only under depotisms and oligarchies has the Radical faith in "universal suffrage" as a political panacea arisen.' The flaw in representative government was not the exclusion of certain interests, as Bentham had supposed, but the inclusion of such poor human material in a mass electorate, merely changing the conditions under which the older wisdom of Machiavelli had to be applied. Instead of flattering kings, the politician now had 'to learn how to fascinate, amuse, coax, humbug, frighten, or otherwise strike the fancy of the electorate', as the courtier had been superseded by the demagogue. A far-seeing statesman was left with 'no chance unless he happens by accident to have the specific artistic talent of the mountebank as well, in which case it is as mountebank that he catches votes, and not as a meliorist'. This was the justification for the growing Fabian preoccupation with the manipulation of the political system at an élite level. Social amelioration was to come despite democracy, no longer because of it. Shaw's candid and amoral avowal of these views in *Man and Superman* helped to provoke Wallas into formulating a more dispassionate response. In *Human Nature in Politics* (1908) we have a classic exposure of the 'intellectualist fallacy' on which liberal democrats had been accustomed to rely. We move, with a compelling sense of immediacy, into the real world of democracy where Wallas had fought his many local electoral campaigns. No ideal citizen here, only the tired householder, whose political opinions were neither rational nor well-informed, but the results of half-conscious inference fixed by habit. How could such a figure be relied upon to perceive the true nature of his grievances, still less to bend the state to his will in effecting a remedy? This is the question which Wallas's work left hanging over the social democratic prospectus.[20]