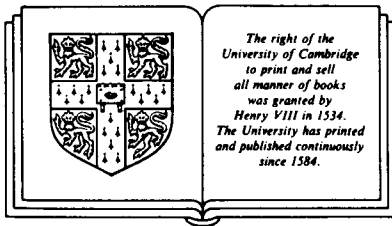


Socialism, radicalism, and nostalgia

Social criticism in Britain, 1775–1830

William Stafford



Cambridge University Press
Cambridge
London New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1987

First published 1987

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stafford, William.

Socialism, radicalism, and nostalgia.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Great Britain – Social conditions – 18th century.
2. Great Britain – Social conditions – 19th century.
- I. Title.

HN385.S762 1987 306'.0941 86–18774

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Stafford, William

Socialism, radicalism, and nostalgia:

social criticism in Britain, 1775–1830.

1. Great Britain – Social conditions – 18th century
2. Great Britain – Social conditions – 19th century

I. Title

941 HN385

ISBN 0 521 32792 X hard covers

ISBN 0 521 33989 8 paperback

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page	ix
1 Introduction		1
Part I Contexts and possibilities		
2 General context		11
3 Mental furniture		31
Part II Texts		
4 <i>The Real Rights of Man</i> , Thomas Spence, 1775		101
5 <i>An Essay on the Right of Property in Land</i> , William Ogilvie, 1782		107
6 <i>Enquiry concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness</i> , William Godwin, 1798		121
7 <i>The Effects of Civilization on the People in European States</i> , Charles Hall, 1805		146
8 <i>A Lay Sermon Addressed to the Higher and Middle Classes on the Existing Distresses and Discontents</i> , Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1817		164
9 <i>Report to the County of Lanark</i> , Robert Owen, 1821		181
10 <i>A Few Doubts as to the Correctness of Some Opinions Generally Entertained on the Subjects of Population and Political Economy</i> , 'Piercy Ravenstone', 1821		195
11 <i>An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness; Applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth</i> , William Thompson, 1824		214

12	<i>Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital or the Unproductiveness of Capital Proved with Reference to the Present Combinations amongst Journeymen</i> , Thomas Hodgskin, 1825	232
13	<i>Rural Rides</i> , William Cobbett, 1830	250
14	Conclusion	270
	Notes	275
	Index	299

Introduction

Between 1775 and 1830 occurred a remarkable flowering of radical social criticism in Britain. The best writings are lively, original, powerful, and moving; when we survey them, we can see the gradual emergence of ways of thinking that have subsequently been labelled 'socialist', but also radical critiques that do not belong under that heading. I propose to examine ten representative texts. Texts, not authors: my concern is the range of socially radical ideas recorded in print, rather than writers and their careers. But let me begin by introducing the books and their authors.

Thomas Spence will always have the fame of a pioneer; for who is there before him? We have to go back a century and a quarter to the Diggers to find anything comparable. *The Real Rights of Man* was first published in Newcastle in 1775; no copy of this edition survives. The earliest we have is from 1779; there were several later editions, with minor changes, under different titles.¹ It is a slight thing, in the quality of its argument and in length—less than three thousand words. Still, it arrests our attention. It calls upon the people, organized in parish associations, to expropriate the landlords. The democratic parishes will lease the land in small parcels, using the rents to pay national taxes and welfare benefits. Spence was untiring in promoting his plan. In 1792 he moved from Newcastle to London, there to be a notorious political activist until his death in 1814. From 1793 to 1795 he published a radical weekly with the immortal title of *Pig's Meat; or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*. The government thought him sufficiently troublesome to arrest him several times. Eventually he acquired a small following, some of whom were involved in the Spa Fields riot of 1816 and the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820.

William Ogilvie's book has one of those long titles so popular at the time: *An Essay on the Right of Property in Land, with Respect to Its Foundation in the Law of Nature, Its Present Establishment by the Municipal Laws of Europe, and the Regulations by Which It Might be Rendered More Beneficial to the Lower Ranks of Mankind.*² Published in 1782, it is the only known publication of its author. It contains a vigorous condemnation of the injustice and evil consequences of unequal property in land and argues that every adult male should be allowed to take a farm sufficient to support his family from uncultivated wastes and large estates; in the latter case the landlord would receive compensation. Ogilvie was no egalitarian, but his plan would have entailed a massive assault upon property and was judged visionary and impractical at the time;³ the 'Scottish Enlightenment' produced no other text of comparable social radicalism.⁴

William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* was first published in 1793; a second, much revised edition appeared in 1796 and a third with lesser changes in 1798. I shall consider the last.⁵ It is the richest and most substantial of the ten texts, the only one to create a sensation among intellectuals. But its fame was brief. By the late 1790s, Godwin's reputation had fallen, never to recover; ever since, this overlong, repetitive book, written in a clear but formal style, has not received the recognition due to its provocative originality. It argues for anarchism⁶ and equality, to be achieved not by violence nor even by political action, but as the culmination of a long period of education and enlightenment. It was not his first book, nor his last; Godwin was a professional writer, publisher, and bookseller who wrote novels and plays as well as works of political theory.

Charles Hall's *The Effects of Civilization on the People in European States* was published in 1805; bound in with some copies of the first edition are his pamphlet of the same year, *Observations on the Principal Conclusion in Mr. Malthus's Essay on Population.*⁷ I shall consider the two together. No other work of social theory by Hall is known; but in 1785 he published *The Family Medical Instructor*. Our information about this West Country doctor is exceedingly scanty. It seems unlikely that he was much known even among radical circles of his day, and he has subsequently received minimal attention from scholars. Yet of all the texts we are to

consider, his is the most likable and, if we except Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, makes the greatest impact. It sets out a theory of exploitation of the poor by the rich and proposes ways towards equality.

Coleridge's *Lay Sermon Addressed to the Higher and Middle Classes on the Existing Distresses and Discontents* was published in 1817.⁸ Though it is the poet's most concentrated work of social commentary, it is only one of a succession of political writings, from the moderately radical lectures of 1795, through the pro-war, anti-French journalism of the first decade of the new century, to the *Constitution of Church and State* of 1830, which speaks against Catholic emancipation and for a conservatism with a conscience. The *Lay Sermon* is by no means egalitarian, but it is predominantly anti-market. It reasserts an idealized, hierarchical, agrarian society that is Christian, organic, and caring. Weighed against this ideal, the landed gentry are found wanting, but Coleridge does not propose to force them into better ways: as befits one speaking from a pulpit, he relies upon an appeal to individual conscience. The *Sermon* calls to mind Carlyle's remark that the poet in his latter days was 'a mass of richest spices putrefied into a dunghill'. There are flashes of deep insight and passages of memorable prose; but the whole is poorly argued and remarkable for the tortuousness of its sentences. His criticisms of his political and religious opponents are unforgivably unsympathetic and intolerant, the pages reek of social and intellectual snobbery, and there is a surfeit of high-minded, antisensual moralizing. Nevertheless the *Lay Sermon* and the later political writings have rightly been admired for introducing and exploring the concept of culture,⁹ and for initiating a cultural critique of market society.¹⁰

Robert Owen's *Report to the County of Lanark*¹¹ of 1821 has the advantage of being a short work from the pen of a writer who tended to prolixity and repetition. It is only one of his many books and pamphlets, but it is probably the best summary of his main ideas. It recommends cooperation rather than competition as the principle of social organization, it develops Owen's highly optimistic views on the malleability of human character, and it describes his proposed 'utopian' communities, the villages of cooperation or 'parallelograms of paupers', as Cobbett dubbed them. Owen was famous in his day and has been prominent in the history books. He rose from shopboy to wealthy factory owner and manager; he

rubbed shoulders with princes, bishops, and peers. His factory at New Lanark was internationally renowned for its welfare arrangements. Owen initiated experimental model communities, inspired the cooperative movement, and was the figurehead of an attempt to transform society by means of a general union of the working classes in the early 1830s. It was in Owenite circles that the term 'socialist' first came into currency, in the 1820s and 1830s, as the opposite of 'individualist'.¹² Yet Owen's writings, when set beside those of Ogilvie, Godwin, and Hall, appear crude and exaggerated. This is a salutary warning to intellectuals; the best thinkers are not always the most influential.¹³

A Few Doubts as to the Correctness of Some Opinions Generally Entertained on the Subjects of Population and Political Economy is a book whose size corresponds more to the length than to the modesty of its title. It was published in 1821 by 'Piercy Ravenstone, M.A.';¹⁴ for the past twenty years it has been established that the true name of the author was Richard Puller,¹⁵ about whom very little is known. There is one other work by 'Ravenstone', a much shorter piece, *Thoughts on the Funding System and Its Effects* of 1824. The first part of the earlier book is designed to demolish the population theory of Malthus; Ravenstone scores many palpable hits.¹⁶ The remaining, larger part of the book is a critique of the 'idle' or 'unproductive' classes who live on rents, taxes, and capital. Capital receives the largest share of venom. Ravenstone is a friend of the poor and of democracy, but not of social equality. He exhibits nostalgia for an idealized, rural, paternalistic social hierarchy. He was not a conservative, for he regarded England as a desperately corrupt society on the brink of revolution.

William Thompson's *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness* of 1824¹⁷ is a prosy, repetitive work running to more than a quarter of a million words. It is a synthesis of Godwin, Benthamite utilitarianism, the Hall–Ravenstone critique of capital, and Owenite socialism. In it Thompson, who was prominent in the cooperative movement, defends cooperation with more system and argument than Owen provided. Thompson was an Irish landowner and capitalist, an anarchistic socialist, feminist, teetotaller, and vegetarian. He had travelled and was acquainted with the works of Sismondi, Saint-Simon, and Fourier. He wrote three other books: in 1825, a

work advocating equality for women; in 1827, a tract managing to be almost short enough to be termed a pamphlet, taking issue with some points in Hodgskin's *Labour Defended*; and in 1830, a book containing very detailed plans for the setting up of cooperative communities. Marx read him and refers to him in *Das Kapital* and other works.

Thomas Hodgskin's *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital* of 1825 is a pamphlet of about seventeen thousand words.¹⁸ Hodgskin wrote other works, including *Popular Political Economy* of 1828. In 1822 or 1823 he became a writer for the *Morning Chronicle* and continued as a journalist for the rest of his career. From 1846 to 1857 he worked on *The Economist*, where the leanings of this individualist towards free enterprise became most apparent. But his individualism did not prevent *Labour Defended* from being a powerful critique of the theory of capital of classical political economy, a theory that defended capitalists and the share they took of the nation's wealth. Hodgskin is not content merely to show that capital takes too much: he argues that capitalists, as capitalists, deserve nothing at all. Wealth is produced by labour, especially skilled labour. Justice requires that labour should obtain the whole product. This state of affairs is to be brought about by combinations of workers, sufficiently educated to understand the principles of the economic system. Alexander Gray wrote, 'Among the English forerunners of Marx, it is Thomas Hodgskin . . . who gives most clearly the impression of intellectual eminence and distinction',¹⁹ and the Webbs, in their *History of Trade Unionism*, referred to 'The illustrious disciple of Hodgskin, Karl Marx'.²⁰ Hodgskin has received more scholarly attention than Ogilvie, Hall, Ravenstone, or Thompson; but to the shame of his countrymen, the two chief studies have been French.²¹

Cobbett's *Rural Rides* was published in 1830.²² It is a selection, made by himself, from a series of articles that originally appeared between 1822 and 1826 in his weekly *Political Register*. *Rural Rides* is but a small part of Cobbett's total output: he published more than twenty million words. It is a lovely book by a brilliant journalist, a sustained and passionate denunciation of the unreformed political system. It is filled with a deep compassion for the suffering rural poor, and it breathes a nostalgia for a stable and happy countryside, vanishing before the advance of market relationships. Cob-

bett was no egalitarian; the organic society he idealized was a hierarchical one. But he was far and away the most influential advocate of political and social reform of his day; his writings achieved new publishing records, and his impression was stamped upon working-class radicalism well into the Chartist period.

Several of the texts considered here gave inspiration to the later socialist tradition. For example, Hodgskin's critique of capital anticipates that of Marx and itself continues lines of thought begun by Hall, Ravenstone, and Thompson. Coleridge's rejection of market society belongs to a tradition that includes R. H. Tawney.²³ Cobbett was admired by William Morris²⁴ and G. D. H. Cole. These apparent continuities should not be allowed to mask the fact that only Owen and Thompson would have been labelled as 'socialists' in the 1820s, when the word first appeared. Hall, Ravenstone, Thompson, and Hodgskin were critics of capital, but Hodgskin was an individualist, and Ravenstone, apparently, a radical Tory. Coleridge was a conservative, Spence and Ogilvie the most radical of land reformers. Godwin, in modern parlance, was an anarchist and an extreme individualist, Cobbett a populist. In talking about the past, we must for the most part use words in common currency today; but we must use them with care. Continuity must not be misread as identity. My list of texts coheres only under the very general description of 'critiques of society'. It is also a highly selective list. I might have considered other works by Owen, Thompson, or Hodgskin. I might have included texts by Thomas Evans, Spence's disciple, or by some of the followers of Owen such as John Minter Morgan; I might have chosen Southey, or John Gray, or John Francis Bray. But these would have added nothing of significance to the stock of ideas; and it is better to analyse a few texts with care, than many with haste.

My discussion of these texts will analyse them critically and will attempt to set them in context. The context will be approached by asking the question, what made radical social criticism *thinkable* at this time?²⁵ It requires an effort of imagination to pose and answer this question. Because socialism, for instance, is a commonplace doctrine today, it is easy to assume that it was possible as an idea at any time in the past, given a sufficiently original and daring thinker. But this is not the case; all thoughts have not always been thinkable. For example, Lucien Febvre's brilliant study of

Rabelais²⁶ demonstrated long ago that modern atheism was unthinkable in the sixteenth century. It was not just that sixteenth-century minds did not have at their disposal the theories of geological and biological evolution that enable us to envisage how our world and ourselves have come to be without divine intervention: they also lacked what would enable them to move from what we label 'magical' to 'scientific' conceptions. They lacked certain key abstract terms; they had an imprecise and fluid sense of time; their mathematical reasoning was primitive, their procedures for verifying and disproving hypotheses were, by our standards, wholly inadequate.

One aim of this study, therefore, is to decompose the texts – to lay out for inspection, as it were, the component ideas, propositions, attitudes, and to show how this intellectual furniture is assembled into social criticism. Before the analysis of the texts there is a long chapter that surveys this mental furniture. This order of presentation was not the order of my own investigation of the problem. I began with the texts, allowing them (or more accurately my reading of them) to point the way outwards to the intellectual equipment that conditioned their possibility. The list of things considered in the chapter entitled 'Mental Furniture' is therefore a selective list, and the selection was determined by my reading of the texts themselves. The chapter is also, of necessity, heavily reliant upon the work of other scholars. It is therefore stronger where there is a good and ample secondary literature. Classical economy and eighteenth-century political thought have been much studied, and there are studies of real excellence. Modern works on eighteenth-century religious ideas, by contrast, are thinner on the ground. Eighteenth-century sermons are a copious and important source for the mentality of the age; but they have hardly begun to be exploited in a systematic way. All I can claim to have provided, therefore, is an initial attempt at the question of 'thinkability' in the light of the present state of scholarship. Thinking does not go on in a vacuum; it is a response to events and conditions in the 'real' world. I have therefore provided a chapter on the general context – economic, social, political, and cultural. Once again, this chapter is not meant to be a complete brief survey of Britain from 1775 to 1830: its contents were dictated by what I found in the texts; it considers those events and situations to which the texts are a response. If it

is a shorter chapter than the one on mental furniture, this is not because I consider the general context less important than the intellectual, but simply because this book is a history of ideas.

The core of the book is the discussion of the texts in Chapter 4. In each case, I outline the argument and then analyse its structure, attempting to assess what made its point of view possible, what permitted its originality. I also consider the argument critically. If one cares about the subject addressed by a text (and why write about it otherwise?), one wants to assess its strengths and weaknesses. But more important than this, critical discussion is an essential route to fuller understanding. Only by dissecting a text, by probing its methods and assumptions, by testing its chains of argument, does one come to a firmer grasp of it. Just as I have asked what aspects of the general and intellectual contexts made the texts possible, so I have asked whether there were ways in which the available mental furniture limited and weakened the argument, causing it to be, from our point of view, inadequate and unconvincing.