Citizens and saints

Politics and anti-politics in early British socialism

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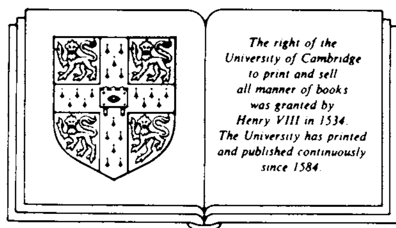

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Introduction: socialism and political thought

Two conceptions of government and politics dominate modern political thought. The first of these, the theory of republican, representative democracy, is often associated with the American revolution and its efforts to improve upon the British parliamentary model by establishing a commercial republic. This involved reconciling the goal of active civic participation associated with ancient Greek and Roman republicanism with the greater size, political lethargy, selfishness and luxury of modern commercial societies. Popular participation was now rendered sufficiently sporadic and indirect, and no longer inclusive of universal military service, such that public service was no onerous burden for the majority. This was intended in part to inhibit the tumultuousness to which republics were prone. Consequently the health of the body politic was no longer expected to depend primarily upon the robustness of public virtue. Individuals were instead assumed to be concerned predominantly with their occupations and the duties of private life. A relaxation of civic vigilance in commercial republics was thought possible partially because the sphere of executive government was to be reduced considerably while that of civil society was expanded correspondingly, and the mutual satisfaction of economic interests through freedom of commerce assigned some responsibility for providing social stability.[1] Associated with this notion of democracy, therefore, is the theory of what is usually termed 'negative liberty', where liberty is understood principally as the restraint of state power in order to guarantee individual freedom from political persecution, corruption and governmental economic interference.

The second revolution to define modern political thought began some forty years later and brought forth socialist democratic theory. Its origins have been considerably less well studied. But it is generally accepted that most early socialists condemned as inadequate the insti-

[1] See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977).

tutions and policies associated with commercial democracies. This book attempts to explain how and why this critique of liberal representative democracy emerged amongst the followers of the British reformer Robert Owen. Both the politics and what will here be termed the 'anti-politics' of early British socialism derived from the belief that representative institutions and popular sovereignty were incapable of resolving the complex and deeply divisive problems of a market-oriented and industrialising society, and that indeed they mirrored its more insidious vices. 'Democracy' itself was credited with great value, but its potential was not identified with existing forms of government. Moreover, socialism was sceptical of the ability of majority rule alone in parliamentary institutions to confer justice and social welfare while existing inequalities of wealth persisted. Accordingly it proclaimed itself from the outset to be the continuation and culmination of liberal democracy as well as its logical and spiritual successor. But socialists themselves were deeply divided on these issues. By about 1850, the spectrum of socialist political thought was bounded on the one hand by various forms of republican and more traditionally democratic socialism. At the other extreme was a more millenarian, anti-political ideal which assumed that most sources of social conflict would vanish once economic justice and a new social order had been introduced, and thought that many of the mechanisms usually associated with 'politics' and the coercive state might therefore be dispensed with. The republican and anti-political ideals, however, were not pure types, and assumptions from each were intermixed, as we will see, in a variety of ways. Nonetheless no early socialists expected that the future representation of partisan interests could be as sharply expressed as under the existing system of private property and immense class distinctions.

The distance between socialism and liberalism was especially conspicuous in the early nineteenth century. By 1900 practical compromises in continental as well as British politics created various forms of social democracy and social or 'new' liberalism. But for much of the nineteenth century, socialism accepted little of either the theory or the policies of liberalism (and vice-versa). Politically it was dismissive of the lesser virtues condoned by the loss of participation in representative democracy, and in some respects it harkened back to a more classical notion of participation – as had Rousseau, for example, in the eighteenth century – in its refusal to restrict decision-making to a narrow elite and its frequent insistence upon small-scale societies. Deeply dismayed at the effects of industrialisation, moreover, socialism juxtaposed to increasing degradation a vision wherein not only the means of labour but also culture and the means of self-cultivation were accessible to all. From its origins it was thus associated with the ideal

now termed 'positive liberty', where liberty is defined chiefly as freedom from want, but also as the freedom to attain a more harmonious and cultured personality than any system of great inequality has ever offered the majority. However, both of these demands have been clearly recognised to entail widespread assistance by both the state and intermediary organisations in order to furnish the means of subsistence as well as opportunities for self-development. The determination of the sphere of legitimate state activity, in turn, has remained the central point of contention between modern socialism and liberalism.

For socialists and liberals alike, two events in this period chiefly shaped thinking about the prospects of democratic institutions. The subversion of the ancien régime in France was at first a moment of enormous optimism and even millenarian enthusiasm for sympathetic onlookers. But it would too soon cast a pall upon radicalism for many reformers, to whom the emergence of tyranny and dictatorship from a democratic revolution had seemed preposterous. The spectre of the guillotine and the Napoleonic drive for imperial expansion convinced many that popular sovereignty could not be instituted prematurely. Some consequently urged a return to a pre-industrial, paternalist order in which landowners strictly fulfilled their responsibility for the poor, thus eliminating the need for wider political participation. Even those who conceded the eventual desirability of a much wider franchise acknowledged the problem of the degradation and necessary betterment of working class 'character', and correspondingly the duties of an elite or 'clerisy' who could champion the cause of gradual political reform until full popular participation was feasible.[2] Such concerns were never crucial to Painite, Cobbettite and other forms of plebeian radicalism in this period, though they too stressed the need for education and 'improvement'. But this approach was clearly mirrored in socialism, which emerged in Britain in the wake of Napoleon's defeat and was also unable to shake the imagery of the Terror and revolutionary conquest. Like most early socialists – Wilhelm Weitling and his followers are one exception – the Owenites would therefore declare violence abhorrent. But many socialists also concluded that the fate of the revolution indicated the instability of mass reform activity given the low level of education and political consciousness of the majority. Thus was also inaugurated a debate within socialism – many of whose adherents were skilled artisans at a considerable social distance from the mass of unskilled labourers – about the exigency of leadership by an advanced minority, or the prospect of the gradual, educational and

[2] On this theme see Ben Knights, *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), and Stefan Collini, 'The Idea of "Character" in Victorian Political Thought', *TRHS*, 5th series, 35 (1985), 29–50.

experimental extension of democracy to the working classes rather than the concession of universal suffrage all at once.

But popular ignorance alone did not make many socialists sceptical of the immediate advantages of increased representation. To some extent the outcome of the revolution was presumed to be inherent in republicanism itself as it had been traditionally understood. British socialism repudiated in particular what it deemed to be the overly martial, narrowly patriotic character model widely associated with ancient Greece and Rome, and sought to delineate a more benevolent and non-competitive character appropriate to the future polity. This course never involved the complete disavowal of republican and radical political thinking. But while it revived a more Platonic form of republicanism in its view of property and the family and also retained other republican interests, socialism discarded the notion that there should be any connection between the right of the franchise and the ownership of private property. Instead such ownership was perceived as itself a fateful source of social and political corruption, blinding the possessors to the suffering of the dispossessed, and with the increasing inequality of wealth gradually threatening the entire society with cataclysm. With this doctrine socialism thus broke sharply from the central assumptions of mainstream republicanism. To the extent that it also held traditional modes of representation in contempt, and commended unpolitical or anti-political forms of rule, it departed even further from democratic republicanism. Yet other socialists, as we will see, also sought to stretch the principle of participation into areas to which the concept had never been applied. Far less suspicious of popular sovereignty, they stressed instead that genuine democracy could not be confined merely to the parliamentary arena, but had to encompass other forms of organisation, notably the economic. The flaw of the French revolution, then, and the cause of all other forms of tyranny, was not that popular fervour had been unleashed but that majority rule was not sufficiently widespread.

The growing controversy about democracy was also modified by a second process. After 1815 industrialisation gave rise to what became widely known as the 'social' problem, industrial poverty and degradation. More directly inspired by the advent of the factory system than other early socialist school, Owenism increasingly conceded the value of the new techniques of production as well as the new needs which these engendered. As one of the greatest cotton spinners, Owen himself was well acquainted with the evils of both excessive *laissez-faire* and the overconcentration of factory labour. But a refusal to revert to subsistence agriculture meant that manufacturing also posed a particular political challenge. Correspondingly, it was first in Britain that

socialists were forced to consider what the collective, though not necessarily centralised, management of production and exchange would entail, and to understand this, at least in part, as involving an extension of the democratic ideal generally.

The problem of socialist politics

The political ideas and practices of the Owenites have never been defined as central to their experience and have therefore never been carefully studied. To many of their contemporaries, Owen and the Owenites were mere eccentrics, disguising immoral aims behind their overly liberal views on marriage, verging on sectarian enthusiasm and heresy in their religious beliefs, bent on berating the public with the notion that the self-formation of character was some kind of social Original Sin, and dedicated to forming experimental communities of a few thousand farmers, operatives and artisans at a time when many seemed willing to abandon the land for the joys, or at least the employment prospects, of urban life. Given the continuing pressures of industrial society, these communities have retained an abiding interest for later generations. But historians have acknowledged that Owenite interests were by no means confined to communitarianism, and that, for example, socialists made substantial contributions to the movements for factory and poor law reform, labour exchange experiments and trades' unionism. The social history of these aspects of Owenism has been well served by J. F. C. Harrison's pioneering work, though many more detailed local as well as biographical studies are still badly needed.[3] Other areas of Owenism have also undergone recent exploration. Important research has clearly demonstrated how highly female equality was regarded in the movement.[4] Owenism's relation to the history of radical and socialist economic thought has also been reconstructed recently in my companion volume to the present study.[5] But its attitude towards politics and its treatment of organisation and administrative problems have never been examined in depth. Even standard accounts of early British socialism hardly touch upon the subject.[6]

[3] J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

[4] Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Virago, 1982).

[5] See *Machinery, Money and the Millennium. From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815–1860* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987).

[6] G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought* (Macmillan, 1962), 1, p. 131, devotes scarcely a line to the subject. Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (G. Bell, 1929), 2, p. 45, is similarly uninformative, as is H. L. Beales, *The Early English Socialists* (Hamish Hamilton, 1933).

There are three primary reasons for this omission. The first proceeds from previous studies of Robert Owen himself. Owen's ideas on organisation and leadership have often been categorised as at best 'unpolitical', at worst conservative or even 'despotic'. His followers are credited with having had some contact with radicalism, but otherwise are frequently castigated for sharing a fundamental lack of interest in politics. However, this has not usually been seen as indicative of an interesting or difficult problem in the history of socialism. Several useful recent studies, notably by Keith Taylor and Barbara Goodwin, have begun to treat these wider questions more carefully, and with an eye to the evolution of socialism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But these have proceeded primarily by considering all of the early socialist schools at a more introductory level rather than by examining any in great depth, and have not attempted to trace the relation of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century lines of thought to socialism.[7]

In fact a renewed interest in early socialism from a modern perspective has also coincided with the reinterpretation of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century republicanism and radicalism. This line of inquiry has undoubtedly proven highly beneficial to our understanding of the transformation of political thought in this period, and can help to illuminate much of the language and programme of nineteenth century radicalism. Recent studies, however, have traced variations upon 'civic humanism' up to the French revolution without for the most part crossing the great divide into the nineteenth century or demonstrating any other than a negative interest in the history of socialism. J. G. A. Pocock, who has chiefly inspired this reconceptualisation of radicalism, has indicated in passing that Marx and Engels probably built upon some cardinal assumptions of late eighteenth century republicanism, particularly in relation to specialisation and the division of labour and the construction of their theory of alienation. But it remains unclear how their views may have been affected by developments during the first half of the nineteenth century, or the presence of other intellectual traditions. The eighteenth century thus has remained largely closed off to historians of socialism, the nineteenth to chroniclers of republicanism. Unless these periods are

[7] Keith Taylor, *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists* (Cass, 1982), pp. 69–99 in particular, and Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia* (Hutchinson, 1982); Barbara Goodwin, *Social Science and Utopia* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1978). A helpful overview of the subject is given in Richard Adamiak's, 'State and Society in Early Socialist Thought', *Survey*, 26 (1982), 1–28. There are also useful comments in William Stafford's *Socialism, Radicalism, and Nostalgia. Social Criticism in Britain, 1775–1830* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 31–98.

bridged adequately, however, their political thought and consequently the shaping of modern political debate can never be properly understood.

This points to the third reason why Owenite political thought has been hitherto neglected. Most of those concerned to explore modern socialist politics have begun their investigations, after a brief glance at the 'precursors', with the works of Marx and Engels themselves. These are sufficiently rich, perplexing and entertaining to engage large numbers of scholars and to furnish considerable scope for interpretative disagreement. The *prima facie* case for looking more intently at early socialism is not therefore immediately evident. A large literature about 'socialist politics' has thus grown up around the assumption that nothing very worthwhile or historically meaningful was written on the subject before Marx and Engels began their own explorations. Once we begin to realise, however, that early socialism in fact formed a vital link in the process of the development of one strand of late eighteenth-century radicalism towards Marxism, and that modern socialism too still stands with one foot in an earlier epoch – and these are points which must yet be proven – it becomes clear that adequately detailed studies which also rise above their narrative to ascertain the larger relevance of the subject to the socialist tradition and to the history of political thinking generally are badly needed.

There are considerable risks, however, in being overly attentive to the begging demands of either predecessors or successors. A teleological search for the roots of later ideas induces anachronistic distortions in interpretation, and here often the assumption that early socialism remained imprisoned within earlier patterns of thought, and failed to develop as it ought to have done. Similar judgements might result from the view that eighteenth-century republicanism or its most direct nineteenth-century descendants were a more satisfactory form of radicalism. My own assumptions, of course, are not unbiassed, and in exploring the variety of political positions examined here, some have appeared to me to be more plausible and reasonable than others. In particular, it is difficult not to conclude that the anti-political and perfectionist elements in early socialism evidence a mentality which has been the source of enormous difficulties for socialist governments and organisations. Nonetheless this is merely a reflection upon the potentially wider relevance of such a study and an acknowledgement of an important element of continuity, rather than a point which can be argued carefully here.

Within the historiography of socialism generally several dominant

interpretative premises have also inhibited more detailed studies of early socialism. Since the late nineteenth century, the almost universally accepted historiographic division of socialism into two chief phases – 'utopian', or early socialism, comprising Owenism, Fourierism, Saint-Simonism and other schools, and 'scientific' or Marxian socialism – has played a crucial role here. This classification – clearly a matter of the victors imposing terms upon the vanquished – originated with the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), and was sealed by Engels' reflections in *Anti-Dühring*, published separately in English as *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (1892). But despite the important differences between them, such a strict separation between earlier and later forms of socialism is no longer tenable in light of modern scholarship. Given Owen's adherence to a stadial conception of history derived from the Scottish writers and similar in many respects to some of Marx and Engels' later views, for example, it is manifestly an exaggeration to argue that the Owenites, in common with all other early socialist schools, believed that socialism was 'the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice', and had 'only to be discovered to conquer the world by virtue of its own power'. Nor do the articulation of the materialist conception of history, the choice of the industrial proletariat as the agency of historical change and of class struggle as its 'motor', and the predominance given to the theory of surplus value imply that Marxism lacks fundamental elements of continuity, even in these areas, with its predecessors.[8] It can certainly be argued, moreover, that many of the most essential apparent differences between early and later socialism – for example a focus upon communities rather than socialism at the level of the nation-state, or upon an economic basis of subsistence agriculture rather than increasing industrialisation – were in fact divergent trends within existing varieties of early socialism. From this viewpoint the latter became progressively more 'modern' (not always a beneficial development by any means) by the mid-1840s. It is no longer heretical to contend that, despite their considerable intellectual achievements, Marx and Engels stood much closer to their own times and to their own teachers than is usually assumed. Neither

[8] Frederick Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (New York, International Publishers, 1972), pp. 43, 53. John Plamenatz, *Man and Society* (Longmans, 1963), 2, pp. 83–93, also challenges the continuing utility of this distinction. See also Kurt Bayertz, 'From Utopia to Science? The Development of Socialist Theory Between Utopia and Science', in Everett Mendelsohn and Helga Nowotny, eds., *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1984), pp. 93–110 and Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism* (Methuen, 1987).

the cause nor the study of modern socialism suffers by such a concession.

For with respect to many of the most important questions of social and political thought, Marx and Engels were relative latecomers to a debate which was some thirty years old before they began to consider seriously its central issues. The point is not merely that they built upon previous discussions, but that in so doing they incorporated into their own thought many hidden assumptions and even covert first principles which occasionally emerged to the discursive surface, but as often as not remained half-disclosed if not well buried. It was, in fact, Marx and Engels' ability to by-pass many of the existing (and sometimes central) issues of socialist debate (about the malleability or even the existence of 'human nature' and the characteristics of the future communist society, for example) which in part allowed them to formulate their own intellectual strategy so quickly and succinctly in the mid-1840s. Among the issues Marx and Engels chose to ignore, however, but whose resolution was equally tacit in their own assumptions, were some whose implications for their own programme were threatening at the least. These underlying conceptions cannot be excavated through internalist investigations of the Marxist canon alone. Recourse, instead, must be had to the works of the early socialists, though to reason from these in order to generalise at length and in detail about Marxist and later forms of socialism would require a thorough investigation of other pre-Marxian schools as well, which is clearly beyond the compass of this book.[9]

Doubtless the most important such political ideal held by Marx and Engels and many of their socialist predecessors concerned the abolition of organised coercion in the future communist society, or in Engels' famous phrase, the 'withering away of the state'. Though its precise meaning is far from clear, this notion more than any other symbolised the aspirations of those for whom 'anti-politics', the restraint of all forms of conflict, even perhaps at the cost of not tolerating legitimate differences of opinion, represented a vital step towards a more harmonious and humane future. A century of experimentation has induced considerable scepticism about the practicability of this conception in its most extreme formulations. But its crucial relevance

[9] For more detailed studies of the political ideas of other early socialist schools, see George Iggers, *The Cult of Authority: The Political Philosophy of the Saint-Simonians* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1958), Gita Ionescu's introduction to *The Political Thought of Saint-Simon* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976), Christopher Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France. Cabet and the Icarians* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974), Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier. The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986), especially pp. 241–58.

to the socialist ideal historically remains undoubted.[10] For the normative goals of Marxism have never included only the provision of economic justice for all, but have also assumed a condition of political stability and political justice. The ending of undue coercion, war and social conflict generally, and the peaceful co-existence of a world of nations in mutual respect for one another's rights, have always been part of the vision shared by most schools of socialism. The belief in its probability of success has usually been based upon the assumption of technologically and commercially based opulence, with 'politics' becoming 'administration' (in Saint-Simon's famous phrase) in proportion to the correct application and guidance of industry. But socialists have also generally presumed that human behaviour would be vastly improved in a more humane and just future polity. Many, too, have associated such an ideal with earlier societies, as Marx did with ancient Indian communism and the Russian village community, and Engels the North American natives.

Moreover, Marxism, like Owenism from the outset, also viewed liberal, constitutional parliamentarism very ambivalently. As a means of achieving justice and equality, limited political reform was dismissed as no substitute for thorough social change, with the persistence of the juxtaposition of 'social' to 'political' reform within late socialism being the clearest indication of this line of criticism. As ends in themselves, too, parliamentary institutions were also often rejected, or at least regarded with considerable mistrust. The accusation that the parliamentary process merely reflected the competitive model of capitalist society generally was an element of this suspicion, as was the simple fear that too close an acquaintance with such procedures would corrupt those imbued with higher or broader ideals. Associated with this, throughout the history of socialism, has been a decided reluctance to adopt what has often been condemned as a 'bourgeois' – the word has a harsher, less neutral connotation in English than for instance in French – vocabulary of civil and political rights and liberties. Discussions of 'rights' among socialists, accordingly, have usually

[10] See generally William MacBride, 'Noncoercive Society: Some Doubts, Leninist and Contemporary', in J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman, eds., *Coercion* (New York, Atherton, 1982), pp. 3–26, Martin Krygier, 'Saint-Simon, Marx and the Non-Governed Society', in Eugene Kamenka and Martin Krygier, eds., *Bureaucracy* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1979), pp. 34–60, and Daniel Tarschys, *Beyond the State: The Future Polity in Classical and Soviet Marxism* (Stockholm, Läromedelsförlagen, 1971), pp. 1–45. A recent account which suggests that Lenin shared many of these assumptions is A. J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (Methuen, 1984). Here again, however, the model of the commune, which mixed seemingly 'utopian' with more traditionally democratic assumptions, loomed large. See further Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought* (2 vols., Macmillan, 1983). That the abolition of the state remains a viable socialist goal is suggested in Andrew Levine's recent *The End of the State* (Verso Books, 1987).

focussed upon economic claims, ignoring the notion of any original or subsequent binding contract between rulers and ruled, and frequently invoking concomitant social duties. This attitude also reflects a more general, depoliticising tendency in socialism, whereby, for example, parliamentary institutions are also categorised primarily in terms of economic interests of the various parties composing them, while the goal of all political and administrative institutions is often reduced to the creation and maintenance of economic justice.[11]

A parliamentary model of competing parties representing divergent interests similarly has been rejected by most later forms of socialism as embodying assumptions valid only for a society characterised by class antagonisms. The notion of a legitimate clash of, and the need to represent, interests based upon non-economic disagreements, has proven awkward and extraordinarily difficult to theorise. These as well as many other reasons have made it easier for the model of a single party, without identifiable factions dividing it, to prevail in socialist theory since the early years of the Russian revolution and throughout most actually existing socialist societies, though this is by no means an inevitable development from any form of socialism. But there have been of course many ideas as to how even a single party should best be constituted, and socialists have remained deeply divided, for example, on the issue of whether, or when, the guidance of an elite in possession of 'scientific' knowledge is required.

A conflict between demanding greater popular participation and desiring less 'politics' is evident here, whose origins clearly lie in early socialism. Recent interpretations of Marx and Engels' political thought have emphasised their democratic and anti-authoritarian leanings.[12] This does not necessarily place them closer to classical liberalism, however. Like many early socialists, they in fact conceived of 'democracy' in relation to forms and locations other than the solely parliamentary, such as workers' councils involving rotation, frequent election, and other forms of accountability. Both the encouragement of large-scale popular participation and the avoidance of the creation of a permanent, alien political caste or bureaucratic elite were underlying aims here. 'Politics', in this sense, was hardly to be abolished, but rather, as participation, to be diffused throughout other institutions and relations in civil society, with greater egalitarianism characterising the family, and collective control the economy. Socialism from this perspective continues to understand itself as the most political move-

[11] The large debate on the treatment of rights within socialism is examined in Tom Campbell, *The Left and Rights* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

[12] See Richard Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, *Classical Marxism, 1850–1895* (Macmillan, 1984).