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978-0-521-80017-4 - English Radicalism, 1550-1850

Edited by Glenn Burgess and Matthew Festenstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Glenn Burgess*

I

Radicalism is a term well-entrenched in the historian's lexicon. A search on the Royal Historical Society's on-line bibliography for British and Irish history retrieves nearly 300 books, essays and articles that use the word in their title.¹ The total rises to nearly 850 if the search term used is 'radical' rather than 'radicalism'. Radicals and radicalism are everywhere, at least from the sixteenth century onwards. They come in all sorts of varieties, popular and elite, of the left and of the right, Tory and Whig; British, English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh. But the word is, in many of its uses, curiously weak. We are likely to have a rough idea of the sorts of things that might be meant by calling someone a socialist, a conservative or a liberal, and a corresponding sense of what the equivalent 'isms' might look like, even if that sense quickly becomes complex and sub-divided. But what sense do we get from hearing someone described as a radical? We would assume that the 'socialisms' of different periods might show some resemblances (however forced or artificial), and there is a recognisable core meaning in describing Thomas More, Gerrard Winstanley and Karl Marx as communists. All of them envisaged an ideal society in which private property was abolished. They have all been described as radicals too, but it seems less clear what this label tells us about them.

The present collection of essays is a collaborative attempt to address three questions that are central to any understanding of the function of the terms 'radical' and 'radicalism' in the historian's conceptual toolkit. First, does it make sense to talk of the existence of 'radicalism' before that particular label was invented? (1820 is the first use of the term recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.) Second, do the various people, ideas and groups to which the label 'radical' has been given by historians have

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anything in common with one another? And, third, is there in any sense a 'radical' tradition in English political culture, constituted by the transmission of 'radical' ideas through time? The book does not claim to have answered any of these questions. They are the sort of questions unlikely to receive agreed answers. Indeed, it may not be desirable that there are agreed answers, for the heuristic value of the radical/radicalism vocabulary may well be great in some circumstances and little in others, depending on the precise questions being asked and the way in which definitions are being constructed. The purpose of the book, instead, is to explore the sorts of problems raised by 'radicalism', and to try out a variety of solutions to them, some broad, some narrower and more local. Historians should be as conscious of the implications of the language they use, and as self-aware and self-critical, as they can be, and the present book is intended to contribute to the achievement of these notions. Its authors would varyingly like to restrict, refine or qualify discussions of radicals and radicalism, but they do not by any means speak with a single voice, and one would not wish them to do so.

This introduction will chart the terrain, identifying the sorts of assumptions that underline historians' discussions of radicalism, and the sorts of problems that arise from the use of the term as a label for political ideas and activity.

II

Much of the historical interest in 'radical' political thought (and activity) has developed since the 1950s and 1960s, and much of this interest has taken the form of *recovery*. The effort at recovery certainly goes back much further, at least to the late Victorian period; but was greatly aided by the interest that historians have developed more recently in 'history from below'. In the 1930s and 1940s, when A. L. Morton and his fellow Marxist historians embarked on the search for 'a people's history of England', the discovery of popular radicalism was itself a radical activity with political purposes. That has remained true of later developments, like labour history and the history of working-class movements. Certainly, they have not been the province of Marxists alone; but they have remained areas of scholarship attractive to those with some sympathy for radical politics. As Bryan Palmer has said of E. P. Thompson, he 'staked a historical claim for his own allegiance to

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an antinomian tradition that reached through the ranting impulse of sixteenth-century dissent into sects such as the Muggletonians'.²

It would be pointless to bemoan this fact. New areas of history are generally opened up by scholars whose motivations lie in the present rather than the past. Were it not so, historical scholarship really would be the province of Scott's and Carlyle's 'dry-as-dusts'. But, of course, these motivations do not provide a justification for the field. History develops as scholars refract the past through the changing concerns of the present; but it is always necessary to judge and assess the results by proper scholarly means. Frequently the enthusiasms that create new areas of interest also distort them; and then a second phase gives way to the first. It is arguable that the history of radicalism has had that second phase artificially truncated. Shifting concerns have led to the decline of labour history, Marxist history, and so on, before the assessment and absorption of their results had been completed.

The Marxist recovery of English radicalism

Though the radical dimensions of the English past, and especially of the English Revolution of the 1640s and 1650s, never altogether disappeared from view, it was in the twentieth century, and largely by Marxist and socialist historians, that the history of radical groups was recovered and constructed.³ Central to this process (chronologically as well as in achievement) was the work of the Communist Party Historians' Group (CPHG), which flourished for a brief decade (1946–56), but had a remarkable impact on English historiography.⁴

Perhaps the most important thing to appreciate about the work of the British Marxist historians is that it is inspired by a good deal more than Marxist theory. In one of the bitter arguments that have from time to time fractured the British Left, Perry Anderson defended the claim that E. P. Thompson's work had 'cultural nationalist' elements.⁵ Thompson did not take the charge well; but it nonetheless identified a feature of his work, and that of other early Marxist historians, from which much richness, depth and resonance have been derived. One of the central achievements of the British Marxist historians, in Harvey Kaye's assessment, 'has been the recovery and assemblage of a "radical-democratic tradition" in which have been asserted what might be called "counter-hegemonic" conceptions of liberty, equality, and community'. This is 'a history of popular ideology standing in dialogical relationship to the history of politics and ideas', running from the peasants' rising of 1381, through

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Levellers, Diggers and Ranters, through Wilkes and the London crowds of the eighteenth century, to Chartism and beyond.⁶ Appreciation of this point has been best addressed in the literature about E. P. Thompson, in whose work it is unmistakable, and, whose final posthumous work on William Blake seems to have addressed at the end some of his own deepest inspiration. While his chief interest was in an antinomian 'tradition' originating in the seventeenth century, and in the radicalisms of romanticism, Thompson could also appeal to 'the long and tenacious revolutionary tradition of the British commoner', 'a dogged, good-humoured, responsible tradition: yet a revolutionary tradition all the same'. From Levellers to Chartists, this tradition was chiefly one of 'moral revolt'. Careless of theory but resilient and humane, it sounds a lot like Thompson himself.⁷

But the impulse to recover a radical tradition in the English past was by no means unique to Thompson. It lay behind much of the historical thinking that surrounded the formation of the Communist Party Historians' Group. The group began as a collective endeavour to update A. L. Morton's pioneering work *The People's History of England* (1938), and at the heart of this endeavour was the further recovery of a native English radical tradition.⁸ Dona Torr, reviewing an early edition of the writings of Gerrard Winstanley, proclaimed that 'the political history of the English working people began 300 years ago'. It was a slightly odd tradition that began in the mid-seventeenth century: 'The stream went underground. But many generations later the democratic demands of the Levellers arose again to powerful in Chartism, while Owen (through Bellers) recreated Winstanley's communism. This is our heritage.'⁹ One might wonder where, exactly, underground was, but the important sentence here is the last. The core historical project lay in the relationship of present to past embedded in the recovering of a radical or revolutionary heritage that could make communism not an alien, foreign and unpatriotic implant into the green and pleasant lands of the sceptred isle but a suppressed, native tradition. Daphne May made the point emphatically:

The Levellers were defeated. Two hundred years later, however, the working class, the Chartists, put forward similar demands which, as the result of hard prolonged struggle, have been substantially realised. In face of the workers, the capitalists have had to retreat. Bourgeois historians have tried to gloss over the revolutionary struggles of our people, and to present the growth of democracy as the story of 'freedom broadening slowly down, from precedent to precedent', thanks to our enlightened rulers. That leads to the conclusion, so convenient for

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the ruling class, that the Communists with their nasty talk about class struggle are 'alien' to English politics. The fight of the Levellers (and many similar battles) demonstrate the opposite: that it is precisely the Communist Party which is the true heir and successor of the most heroic champions of liberty in the past.¹⁰

Christopher Hill pushed back further. 'The people of England', he maintained, 'have a past of which they may be proud – a history of working-class struggle... and of struggles for democracy earlier'. They should celebrate in remembering 1649 'the creative vision and capacity of the common people of England'. But the Levellers did not invent English radicalism *ex nihilo*, for they 'inherited... the medieval peasant tradition of revolt against landlords'. It was important to Hill, too, to be able to deny the claim that 'when twentieth century democrats or Communists claim kinship with Lilburne or Winstanley... we are like *nouveaux riches* trying to establish "a spurious pedigree"'.¹¹ His early essay on 'The Norman Yoke', first published in 1954, identified a distinctively native tradition of opposition and subversion, rooted in the continuity of the Norman Yoke motif and its account of a lost age of freedom and well-being. Hill traced this tradition from the late middle ages, through its heyday in the seventeenth century, and then into the nineteenth century, when it was to be replaced by modern socialist ideas.¹² The people's history that Hill and others in the CPHG were building, one recent and largely sympathetic commentator has noted, was one 'in which the class character of earlier rebels, revolutionaries and popular leaders was obscured by regarding them all as representatives of a national revolutionary tradition'.¹³

These views and this aspiration to a revolutionary heritage are embedded in some of the most widely read Marxist historical writings. The source of the spring that nourished the recovery of England's revolutionary past was A. L. Morton's *People's History*, but it must be admitted that this book itself did relatively little to identify a radical tradition in the English past. It was more concerned to tell the history of England as a history of class struggle, and to assess the changing character of social classes over time.¹⁴ Some of Morton's later work, though, sounds a note that echoes in the writings of Thompson, Hill and others. His study of English utopian writing linked ideas across time in a variety of ways, indicating, for example, the persistence of ideas about Cockayne (the land of plenty) through time, and finding that its late medieval form 'anticipate[s] some of the most fundamental features of modern socialism' as well as 'foreshadowing... Humanism, the philosophy of

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the bourgeois revolution'.¹⁵ Links could be drawn between the 'simple men' who had written of Cockayne, and future utopian writers, including Thomas More and William Morris.¹⁶ Morton was not insensitive to intellectual change, generated by changing class structures and alliances, but there were important lines of continuity running through the dialectical history that he wrote. Thus, in one formulation, Thomas More is said to bring together Plato's 'aristocratic communism' and the 'primitive communism' of the medieval peasant, and is the link that binds both to modern 'scientific socialism'. More and the utopian socialism that he represented formed only one of the sources of modern socialism; but the other, a popular socialism, also had a long tradition from Munzer, through the Levellers, the French Revolution and the Chartists. One of the key differences between modern socialism and earlier socialism was that the latter could exist only in dream; but for modern socialism, the dream had become realizable. Fantasies were now being translated into facts.¹⁷ In his study of William Blake, Morton delineated a broadly similar pattern. Blake himself was firmly located in an 'antinomian' and Ranter tradition, and the essential ideas in his writings could be found in the pamphlets of the English Revolution. But there was a much broader tradition than this, European as much as English, and 'with a continuous existence of several centuries':

It was a revolutionary tradition, tenaciously held by the descendants of the small tradesmen and artisans who had formed the extreme left of the Commonwealthmen: few things are held more tenaciously than such a tradition with the vestiges of a past glory about it, and if it was dying in Blake's time, this was only because it was being replaced by the more positive, powerful and apposite radicalism of Wilkes, Paine and Place. Blake's life and work, among other things, illustrate the conflict between these old and new trends in English radicalism – he himself attempted but never quite managed to reconcile them.¹⁸

Christopher Hill's major study of the radicalism of the English Revolution, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), though it continued the search for a radical pedigree, beginning with the proud boast that 'popular revolt was for many centuries an essential feature of the English tradition',¹⁹ was largely unconcerned with issues of continuity and transmission. Assessing the impact of earlier ideas on the eighteenth century, he remarked, 'We need not bother too much about being able to trace a continuous pedigree for these ideas. They are the ideas of the underground, surviving, if at all, verbally: they leave little trace.'²⁰ This was a dangerous position, for Hill had little doubt that there was a continuous pedigree, and his remark might be read as an attempt to insulate that

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belief against the demand for evidence. He returned to the theme, although a few years later, in an essay 'From Lollards to Levellers', published appropriately in a collection honouring A. L. Morton.²¹ This was, as Hill acknowledged, an inconclusive sort of essay – evidence again proved more elusive than he would have liked – but it was nonetheless alive with the possibility that an underground heretical and seditious tradition stretching from the later middle ages to the end of the eighteenth century might have existed.

Three approaches to radicalism: critique of the Marxist recovery

Historians should always be on the lookout for 'how' questions: take care of the 'hows', and the 'whys' will look after themselves. The people's (radical) history that emerged from the work of the CPHG and the historians associated with it raises a number of important 'how' questions.

It is possible to define at least three different approaches to radicalism, all of them with very different implications for our understanding of the subject.

The approach that has dominated the field, especially amongst the British Marxist historians, has constructed radicalism as an ideological tradition that has existed since (perhaps) the late middle ages. It rests upon a *substantive* definition of the term, in which radicalism is defined by identifying its core content. This remains relatively unchanged over time, and is transmitted from generation to generation. Witness, for example, E. P. Thompson's claim that 'it is above all in Bunyan that we find the slumbering Radicalism which was preserved through the eighteenth century and which breaks out again in the nineteenth'.²² There is an assumption that radicalism is a consistent ideology with an underground existence over many centuries. Earlier and later radicals, who believe and do recognizably the same things, are part of the same tradition. So committed was Thompson to this view that he was able to suggest that, because antinomianism is found in the age of William Blake, then it must have existed amongst the radicals of the English Revolution. On that basis one could dismiss Colin Davis's arguments for the non-existence of an antinomian Ranter sect.²³ The argument is extraordinarily revealing of the depth of Thompson's commitment to the existence of a radical tradition, which here becomes an article of faith, in proud defiance of the historian's usual sense that you need contemporary evidence to prove that something happened.

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This approach to radicalism usually gives it a class location. The continuous history of the radical tradition could, for those who adopted this approach, be rooted in the life-experience of peasants, proletarians and other subaltern classes, and so in class analysis could be found the natural explanation for it. Thus Christopher Hill could write, as we have seen, of a popular underground tradition of protest in ways that assumed hidden links and continuities between particular outbreaks of radical protest from the Lollards to the Levellers, and (no doubt) beyond. This is so in spite of two things (a) that Lollards and Levellers are as dissimilar as they are similar; and (b) that there is at best very limited evidence to support the idea of an historical continuity between the two.²⁴

A second approach has been developed out of dissatisfaction with the first. It rests on a *functional* definition of radicalism, and has perhaps been most explicitly formulated by Colin Davis.²⁵ This approach defends the application of the term radicalism to diverse phenomena, even before the term itself became current in the early nineteenth century; but it need not assume any real historical connection between different examples of radicalism. It need not link them into a single continuous tradition of popular protest. Rather, it lays down basic functional criteria for recognizing radicalism, and suggests that any political ideas or activity that matches them can be understood as an instance of radicalism.

In Davis's early formulation a radical ideology needs to do three things. (1) It must delegitimize an old socio-political order; (2) it must re-legitimize an alternative or new socio-political order; and (3) it must provide a transfer mechanism that will change things from the old to the new. Many of the papers that follow are written with explicit or implicit acceptance of an approach like this, though not necessarily with any debt to Davis's work, and it has arguably become the most common of all outside Marxist circles.

However, functional approaches are not beyond criticism. Conal Condren is, perhaps, the leading theorist of a third approach, and he roots it in a critique of both substantive and functional understandings of radicalism.²⁶ We might term this third approach *linguistic*, for it rests heavily on a close study of word usage. Ultimately, it suggests that we should not use the term radicalism to describe any phenomena before the term was invented. To do so obscures the historical significance of the emergence of the word. But, beyond that, it misdescribes earlier ideas. Condren has especially emphasized the fact that, while the term radical suggests the willing and enthusiastic acceptance of innovation, pre-modern societies were more or less universally hostile to innovation,

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and thus to 'radicalism'. Those whom we call radical are the ones who have failed to make themselves look acceptable to their contemporaries, though invariably they have tried hard to do so. They have, in other words, tried hard not to be radicals. The key point in this is that any description of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century people as radical must misdescribe their language – and possibly as a result (though Condren is more cautious) their *intentions* too. They cannot and did not intend to be what we mean by the term radical. They thought of conserving and renovating, not of innovating. On the whole, they did not believe that change – fate or providence – was something amenable to human control. Thus, there is a dramatic difference between pre-modern ideas and modern ones, and applying the term radical to them (still more, linking them into a common tradition) obscures this fact altogether. In the essays that follow, Jonathan Clark, in particular, has given an historical exemplification of this approach.

III

Four particular problems

The three approaches outlined carry with them different attitudes to four topics that have been central to the history of radicalism, and it is worth identifying and commenting on each of these topics because they run in various ways, through many of the essays that follow. The key purpose is to identify the questions with which to interrogate the histories of radicalism that have been produced through the twentieth century.

Historical transmission

There has been a marked tendency, especially with the substantive approach, to understand the transmission of radicalism through time as a relay race, in which the baton of radicalism is passed on, hand to hand, down the generations. The baton, of course, stays the same, while those who carry it change. Certainly, some continuities can be found in 'radical' protest (the demand for universal manhood suffrage or for frequent parliamentary elections); but a number of points can be made. First, to concentrate on similarities can be to ignore even greater differences. Second, it is possible that 'radicals' at various times actually picked up ideas not from those before them in the radical tradition, but from the political culture that surrounded them. One of the effects that comes from postulating a radical tradition is that it divorces those in it from

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their contemporaries; yet, from the Levellers onwards, there is evidence to suppose that most 'radicals' relied on the exploitation of a common stock of ideas that they shared with 'non-radicals'.

A third point might be to consider an alternative mode of transmission altogether. This might draw upon the recent historical interest in reading habits and memory. It might stress the iconic significance of radical figures and a radical tradition. The key point is that, simply because later radical writers looked back on their predecessors and constructed a tradition in which to place themselves, there is nonetheless no reason to accept this as a real historical tradition. People remember the past inaccurately; they read creatively. What is particularly needed is a history of the way nineteenth-century radicals looked at the past. In so far as we have this, in Timothy Lang's book, we discover that when early Victorian radicals looked at the English Revolution, they tended to admire Hampden and Pym, not Lilburne and Winstanley.²⁷ The radicals, in their eyes, were Cromwell and the Independents, not Christopher Hill's plebeians. This changed over time, and we need to understand the changing status of iconic figures in this process. Very likely, in the end, we shall discover that the radical tradition identified by the British Marxist historians is but the last of a long series of attempts by radicals to identify a self-justifying tradition for themselves. Each of the attempts is of historical importance; but none of the traditions constructed actually existed until remembered and invented by politician or historian. Tradition has become mythology. A canon of radical writers is created, and the works in it read, reread, and misread.

This leaves us with the possibility that there was no significant continuity or transmission in the past – no radical tradition – and that such a thing has been created only in retrospect by radical historians writing their own pedigree. The result is history written with passion – but is it history that is reliable? Alternatively, is all historical writing prone to the same problem?

Radical ideas and social history

The history of radical thought and activity has been closely associated with social history, in the belief that radicalism was a class ideology. A number of difficulties immediately arise. In particular, when did class societies emerge? When is it appropriate to discuss politics in class terms? Whatever answer we give to that question, a good many historians (other than Marxists) might be prepared to believe that at least at the