

Democratic Socialism in Britain

Thomas Hodgskin & William Thompson
Ricardian Socialism

Edited by
David Reisman



**DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM
IN BRITAIN**



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DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM IN BRITAIN

Classic Texts in Economic and Political Thought
1825–1952

Edited by
DAVID REISMAN

VOLUME 1

THOMAS HODGSKIN & WILLIAM THOMPSON

Ricardian Socialism

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Alexander Pope in the *Essay on Man* (1732–4) had captured the Enlightenment optimism of Adam Smith's invisible hand: 'Thus God and Nature linked the general frame/ And bade self-love and social be the same.' The *Co-operative Magazine* in November 1827 took a less confident view of private vices made public virtues without any need for morality of intent or commitment to fellowship. Self-love meant aggressive competitiveness and limitless greed, the *Magazine* suggested; and with them a return to the zero-sum beastliness of the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* as if guided by an invisible market-maker with a sick mind's sense of welfare. In place of commerce the *Magazine* wanted to put collaboration. In place of emulative self-seeking in the sense of Adam Smith the *Magazine* wanted to put neighbourly co-operation in the sense of Robert Owen. The *Co-operative Magazine* in November 1827 identified itself strongly not with the speculators and the profit-maximisers but with the integrated humanitarians whom it christened the 'Communionsists or Socialists'. This was the first time that the term socialist had been used in the literature on the economic system.

On 13 February 1832 the new term first appeared in print in France. The occasion was an article in *Le Globe* that contrasted anomic individualism with a holistic collectivism that wisely refused to factor down. Pierre Leroux, editor of *Le Globe*, made the contrast between the part and the whole, between the individual-ists and the social-ists, the centrepiece of the influential article he contributed in 1835 to the *Nouvelle Encyclopédie*. By then some French socialists were calling themselves communists. The *commune* in France is a unit of locally-based self-government. The adjective *commun* conveys a message of sharing and pooling that is a world away from the economic possessiveness of Adam Smith's private enterprisers and from the political leaderliness of Saint-Simon's State planners alike. Leroux was in sympathy with Saint-Simon's post-market ideal, with the vision of a centralised, directed economic order run by an elite of learned experts guided by the best-possible perception of the common good. The communarians within the socialist movement preferred a

more spontaneous and more sociable alternative to egotistical capitalism such as they believed they had found in Godwin's natural anarchy or in Fourier's self-sufficient *phalanstères*. By 1841 when the Owenites decided officially to style themselves the Socialists, the church was already subdividing into a wide range of differentiated sects. A century after that Gray was issuing his magisterial study of *The Socialist Tradition* with the warning that it was by no means obvious what positive theme it was that brought together the Liberal-like reformers, the Christian fraternalists, the Marxian revolutionaries and Hitler's National Socialists behind the banner of a single movement: 'It is easier to say who are, by common consent, the "great socialists", than to give a neat definition of socialism which will embrace all socialists and exclude all non-socialists.' (Gray, 1946: 487).

Socialists are united far more by their shared opposition to anomic individualism than by their commitment to any single interpretive scheme or body of beliefs. As is demonstrated by the forty-two texts of the twenty-six socialists represented in this collection, however, there are – in spite of the striking differences – certain crucial similarities, certain points of convergence which indicate that the disparate sects do, after all, share the common ground of membership in one and the same broad church. *Democratic Socialism in Britain* shows that, at least in Britain, at least in the foundry years from 1825 to 1952, the democrats who called themselves socialist tended to concentrate their discussion of the *is* and the *ought to be* around four positive themes that were for them to serve as the hard core of their common cause. Those four themes were the quest for community, the institution of equality, the rehabilitation of the State and the transition by consent. Each of those themes will be considered in turn in the four successive sections of this Introduction.

I. Community

British socialists tended to emphasise the importance of community, of cohesion and solidarity instead of the separation and the isolation that had been the free gifts of atomistic exchange. Nowhere was their message of brotherhood and belonging more eloquently stated than in William Morris's *Dream of John Ball*: 'Fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell; fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death; and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them.' (Morris, 1888a:29). The merchant, the rival, the profit-grinder are in that sense

already in hell; for, starved of companionship and condemned to indifference, they are already in a strong position to suffer the frustration of Midas and the loneliness of Cain. They would have done better to have opted for the warmth of comradeship instead of selfish gamesmanship where even the winner must lose: 'Let us be *fellows* working in the harmony of association for the common good, that is, for the greatest happiness and completest development of every human being in the community.' (Morris, 1888b:177). Let us be *fellows* – and 'the substitution of association for competition is the foundation of Socialism' (Morris, 1888b:199).

The ideal is the 'We' of mutual obligation that is the sole gateway to the 'I' of personal contentment. As Denis Healey has put it: 'The essence of British socialism lies not in its contingent analysis or techniques, but in its determination to apply moral principles to social life. It belongs to that stream of Christian thought which, while insisting that the individual human personality is an end in itself – indeed the only temporal end in itself – believes that all men are brothers, and must realise their brotherhood in this world by creating a society in which they enjoy an equal right and duty to freedom and responsibility.' (Healey, 1952:165). It is precisely this felt symbiosis of whole and part, of right and duty, that modern business tends to block off when it makes economic life subject to nothing more other-encompassing than the law of the jungle. Then, Aneurin Bevan writes, 'the individual is reduced too often to a condition of war with society, and with his fellows', and the first consequence is that, cut asunder and afraid to trust, 'his group impulses are violated'. (Bevan, 1952: 70). Human beings, Bevan argued, have a 'craving for group action' – Titmuss associated it with 'a social and a biological need to help' (Titmuss, 1970:243) – which simply cannot be satisfied through the reductionist logic of an avaricious conflictualism. The fuller basket, Bevan insisted, can never be a tolerable substitute for the satisfaction of the higher need: 'The accumulation of material possessions is no compensation for the rupture between the individual and society that is characteristic of competitive society.' (Bevan, 1952:71). Disillusioned with the competitive society, Bevan, like Healey, looked forward to a socialist order in which the 'I' would be restored to its proper place as a producer and a consumer in the surrounding 'We'.

British socialists in the foundry years tended to idealise the interdependent communalism that transcends the legalistic impersonality of the classical liberals' *quid pro quo*. So too, however, did British conservatives, no less anxious about the fragmented identity in the new era of technological upheaval and narrow individuation that had been ushered in by the

French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, the urbanisation and the anonymity. Calculative rationality, achieved status and the survival of the fittest had a strong appeal to frustrated innovators like Cobden and Bright, convinced as they were that the homeland of the classical economics had the opportunity to become the workshop of the world if only the entrepreneurial and the alert could be freed from the fetters of social and political restriction. Cultural conservatives were less complacent about the collapse of the old order which to them meant the likely collapse of all order and the eternal kaleidoscope of dislocation. Thus Carlyle and Coleridge in Britain (like Hegel, Comte and Bonald on the Continent) were able to find much to praise in social harmony founded not on contract and interest but rather on ascription and tradition, blood and membership; while Burke defended intermediate associations against an ahistorical short-termism that sought 'to tear asunder the bands of their subordinate community and to dissolve it into an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles' (Burke, 1790:195). Most evocative is the verdict of Benjamin Disraeli on the poisoned harvest of the Age of Reason: 'There is no community in England; there is aggregation.... In great cities men are brought together by the desire of gain. They are not in a state of co-operation, but of isolation, as to the making of fortunes; and for all the rest they are careless of neighbours. Christianity teaches us to love our neighbour as ourself; modern society acknowledges no neighbour.' (Disraeli, 1845:75-6). Disraeli evidently shared the reservations about social bonding through supply and demand that is so important a characteristic of British socialism. Yet Disraeli looked to *noblesse oblige*, customary privilege and Tory hierarchy for the restoration of One Nation that market commercialism had put in jeopardy; whereas it was to labour and not to land that the socialists turned for the wholeness and the totality that served so poorly the revolutionary interests of capital.

Felt interdependence built around the labour input was a core concern. In that sense the socialist ought to be prepared to greet his neighbour not simply as his comrade (one with whom he shares accommodation) or even as his *copain* (one with whom he shares bread) but as his collaborator (one with whom he shares productiveness) as well. In the words of Frederick Denison Maurice, writing of the economics of intertwined destinies: 'The watchword of the Socialist is Co-operation; the watchword of the Anti-socialist is Competition. Any one who recognises the principle of co-operation as a stronger and truer principle than that of competition, has a right to the honour or the disgrace of being called a Socialist.' (Maurice, 1850:1). Maurice believed that the fellow toilers in The Master's vineyard

were not by nature rivals, and that it was the duty of a humane economic system to liberate the sociability that capitalism had dammed up. An advocate of stewardship and responsibility who affirmed 'God's kingdom to be on earth as well as in heaven' (Maurice, 1851a:24), Maurice made clear that the most devoted of economic service was not to be expected from the soulless cupidity of business run wild but rather from 'a set of men working together in the conviction that they are *not* sent into the world to strive against their neighbours' (Maurice, 1851b:29). Like his fellow Christian Socialists in the troubled Chartist years, Maurice therefore came down strongly in favour of the voluntary producer cooperatives that had been the ideal of Robert Owen and the London Co-operative Society.

First as a benevolent paternalist at New Lanark after 1799, then as a democratic community-maker at New Harmony after 1824, Robert Owen demonstrated that it might be possible (and not just utopian) to combine the Benthamite maximisation of happiness with a non-capitalist mode of production that was committed unreservedly to a growth-orientated future. As Max Beer writes: 'Owen was the first British socialist who did not turn to the past for inspiration, but attempted to put the productive forces, unlocked by modern science, into the service of collective production and distribution.' (Beer, 1919:162). Owen's vision of a non-selfish economics was shared by the 'Ricardian' socialist William Thompson, who saw in co-operative relationships a viable alternative to market haggling and the dominance of mean rapacity: '*Every man for himself*, is the basis of Individual Competition. Every man for every man (himself included) is the basis of Mutual Co-operation.' (Thompson, 1827:18). John Malcolm Ludlow was so convinced of the need for sympathy in place of advantage that, active in Britain in the foundation of the Working Builders' Associations and the Co-operative Association of Tailors, he travelled to France to study the *associations ouvrières* that had been formed by the followers of Fourier in that country in order to give material expression to the idea that society is nothing less than a destiny shared: 'The modern idea and word of "Socialism" could never have sprung up but from the forgetfulness of this great fact of human partnership.' (Ludlow, 1848: 273). Ludlow took the view that socialism 'is in essential antagonism to human discord and rivalry' (Ludlow 1851:11). He treated the cooperative workshop as a school of rights and duties and an architect of the cohesion and the community that had to be produced through economic restructuring.

Arthur Penty, in common with the advocates of the cooperative workshop, was committed to an economic solution to the problem of insufficient

overlap. A Christian like Maurice and Ludlow, his starting-point was ideals in general, Christian ideals in particular: 'All the great sociological principles are implicit in the Gospels' (Penty, 1932:15), he once wrote, while elsewhere he described the freedom from the dominion of private gain as 'the gospel of Christ in its social aspect' (Penty, 1920:35). His starting-point was common beliefs; but unifying institutions too were central to his vision of the mutually-supportive whole. Specifically, Penty was in favour of a return to the group loyalties of the Medieval guild system in which each corporate monopoly can be relied upon to integrate its members and to moralise their strivings: 'We are safe in leaving the production of craftsmanship in private hands when controlled by Guilds, for, as the craftsman comes to have a pride in the work of his hands, he naturally retains a high sense of honour in his trade relationship.' (Penty, 1917:131). Social contacts and customary procedures being the essence of the other-regarding mind-set, Penty believed that, while the mines and the railways were condemned to size by their economies of scale, whenever there is an element of discretion the rule will have to be that 'small units must be the basis of industrial reorganization' (Penty, 1917:66). Penty also believed in the decentralisation of industry and the revival of agriculture in order to produce a society in which personal ties would make possible a consensually-legitimated and a communal solution: 'A healthy public life is impossible when a man ceases to be known to his next-door neighbour.' (Penty, 1917:144). Thompson had expressed a preference for local communities that did not exceed two thousand souls in number: his mentor in respect of village-settlements had been Robert Owen, impressed by the closely-knit Shaker communes in the United States. Fourier had made clear that the phalanx had to close its list as soon as its membership reached one thousand eight hundred: this meant, he calculated, that the world would one day be peopled by precisely 2,985,984 phalanxes, ideally sited in beautiful countryside. Penty did not cite a figure but obviously shared the belief of his fellow communitarians that the smaller *polis* is the better guarantor of the common interest.

Penty concentrated on the revival of the trade-based guild. Harold Laski, entering political economy at the time when guild-based socialism was at its zenith, went even further down the road to the corporatised society, the envelope of its intermediate associations: 'Men are members of the State; but they are members also of innumerable other associations which not only exercise power over their adherents, but seek also to influence the conduct of government itself.' (Laski, 1925:59). Some economic (the trade union, the British Medical Association), some

educational (the Oxbridge college, the Workers Educational Association), some religious (the village chapel, the Roman Catholic Church), some territorial (the local education committee, the London County Council), these overlapping loyalties had the valuable function that they integrated and involved even as they democratised and pluralised. Laski, like Penty, was attracted by 'a corporate sense of responsibility' and 'a training in self-government' (Laski, 1925:61) that can serve so constructively as the defence of the autonomous in their struggle against the repressive: 'It confides the administration of powers to those who will feel most directly the consequences of those powers.' (Laski, 1925:61). Laski, more so than Penty, was, however, aware that the citizenship interest need not always be the same as the parallelogram of partialities that is the equilibrium of the scrupulously factored down. Stressing that central authority is always fallible because 'it can never genuinely know the wants of the many' (Laski, 1925:283), Laski acknowledged that a sensitive democracy simply could not 'leave the government of a Church solely to its priests, or the government of coal-mines solely to the miners' (Laski, 1925:64). Laski was in favour both of micro-community and of macro-community. Laski also recognised that the federalisation of commitment could on occasion be the socialist's polite name for the market capitalist's *bellum* to which the economics of belonging was intended to put an end.

Adam Ulam has written of the micro-socialists that their resolute dividing up need not be more productive of the harmony of interests than was the market capitalist's competitive *laissez-faire*: 'A loosely knit community in which various organized interest groups would battle each other would hardly be an improvement on [the] modern democratic State.' (Ulam, 1951:94). Arthur Penty would never have accepted that the towering State, manipulative and coercive because it was not organic, could act on behalf of the collective identity (Penty, 1917:170-1). Harold Laski was more willing to concede that, given the indispensable legitimization of the democratic consensus, the coordinating centre can safely be made 'the keystone of the social arch' (Laski, 1925:21), the responsible arbiter of conflicting interest: 'The State is thus a fellowship of men aiming at the enrichment of the common life.' (Laski, 1925:35). Fellowship and common life, Laski wrote, can safely be entrusted to the managing polity – provided only that it 'becomes ourselves as it seeks to give expression to our wants and desires' (Laski, 1925:35).

Laski could be a statist but preferred to factor down. Shaw, on the other hand, was a statist who, trusting the masses less than he trusted the experts, normally regarded the State 'as the representative and trustee of

the people' (Shaw, 1889b:168). His Fabian elitism was shared by Sidney Webb, keen wherever possible to identify democratic socialism with the leadership of the State: 'The inevitable outcome of Democracy is the control by the people themselves, not only of their own political organization, but, through that, also of the main instruments of wealth production.' (Webb, 1889:32-3). *Through that* – the essence of Webb's message is that the directed community is infinitely superior to the tyranny of small decision-makers, competitors and cooperators alike: 'Modern Socialismis a conviction.... that the lesson of evolution in social development is the substitution of consciously regulated coordination among the units of each organism for their internecine competition; that the production and distribution of wealth, like any other public function, cannot safely be entrusted to the unfettered freedom of individuals, but needs to be organized and controlled for the benefit of the whole community.... The best government is accordingly that which can safely and successfully administer most.' (Webb, 1896:5-6).

The early Fabians were State socialists and advocates of political guidance. Importantly, however, they were also social moralists who defended their commitment to collective intervention with reference to the whole national mechanism of which each humble citizen was but a part. Thus Sidney Webb was moved to write as follows about social duty and social function in the socialistic world of conscious adaptation: 'We must abandon the self-conceit of imagining that we are independent units, and bend our jealous minds, absorbed in their own cultivation, to this subjection to the higher end, the Common Weal.' (Webb, 1889:54). And Sydney Olivier accompanied his attack on rent and interest with an appeal to 'comfort in comradeship' and a 'happy social life' such as appeared to him to provide the nationalisation of the negators with its most fundamental purpose: 'In all societies those actions and habits are approved as moral which tend to preserve the existence of society and the cohesion and convenience of its members.' (Olivier, 1889:100, 104, 107). Of course the early Fabians were State socialists because they were in favour of efficiency and opposed to waste. Clearly, however, there was sociology as well as technology in the wholeness that justified the intervention.

The logic of democracy and consensus made State intervention a special topic in society and values. On the one hand the State was conceptualised as the responsive agent acting explicitly on the principal's instructions, the powerful engine that Bevan described as substituting a 'generalized purpose' for the 'multitude of individual strivings' (Bevan, 1952:68) of the rudderless market that charted no course: 'A good law', Tawney writes, 'is

a rule which makes binding objectively conduct which most individuals already recognize to be binding subjectively' (Tawney, 1972:76). On the other hand the State was acknowledged to have the functions of a social engineer, levelling in response to today's social consensus in order to bring into being a superior social consensus at some time in the future. Thus Douglas Jay intended that inheritance tax should help to break down the two-nations' barriers that meant 'a false servility and sycophancy' on the part of the poor, 'a false compliance' on the part of the rich (Jay, 1937:4); while Margaret Cole stressed the need for the 'comprehensive high school' that would 'bring children together in a common school life, whatever their parents' income or previous history' (M. Cole, 1952:108). Community the cause, community the effect – central to the dynamic of British socialism is the effect and cause of community.

II. Equality

Social betterment presupposes the *freedom to* of each individual citizen: 'It is not the pursuit of happiness but the enlargement of freedom which is socialism's highest aim.' (Crossman, 1952:29). Personal liberation in turn presupposes the non-market narrowing of perceived social distance: 'The socialist measures [the] progress of social morality by the degree of equality and respect for individual personality expressed in the distribution of power and in the institutions of law and property within a State. This standard indeed, is what we mean by the socialist ideal.' (Crossman, 1952:10). Thus did Richard Crossman single out the greater equality of opportunities, of outcomes and of social status as the bedrock and the essence of the socialist's mission. There is not an author in this collection of British theories of democratic socialism who would wish to disagree with Crossman's assessment. Socialism to the authors represented in this collection is about social justice and therefore about the social levelling that is the *sine qua non* for the establishment of the classless society. In the words of William Morris, attacking the 'anarchy in our commonest social relations' (Morris, 1884:54) that is the consequence of the uninstructed market's 'privilege for the few,... servitude for the many' (Morris, 1890a:3): 'It is not the dissolution of society for which we strive, but its reintegration.' (Morris, 1890a:5). In the words of Roy Jenkins, committed to a vision of the post-class community 'in which men will be separated from each other less sharply by variations in wealth and origin than by differences in character' (Jenkins, 1952:72): 'Where there is no egalitarianism there is