

ENGLISH EDUCATION AND THE RADICALS

1780–1850

Harold Silver

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Harold Silver



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Education does not only go on in schools, colleges and universities; social, political and religious movements in the wider society may often have a profound educative effect—shaping new outlooks, patterns of living, human aspirations. This is certainly true of the period Harold Silver covers in this book. Economic and technological change in the early nineteenth century profoundly affected social relationships, disrupting traditional forms of pre-industrial society, and bringing into being new social classes whose interests sometimes appeared to coincide, more often to stand in opposition to each other. Education now began to be seen as a weapon through which specific class interests might be realised. In this period the relation between education and politics was, perhaps, closer and more explicit than at any other period in our history.

In this volume, Professor Silver interprets these developments, clarifying the complex relationships, changing over time, between different social classes and their educational

theories and initiatives. It is, in some respects, a dramatic story, reflecting the harsh conditions which gave rise to Peterloo, the earlier Owenite movement and culminating in Chartism. Such a study casts light on the crucial question of the relations between education and society.

It is to an understanding of this complex issue, as well as of the background to educational changes in the mid to late nineteenth century, that this book makes an original contribution.

BRIAN SIMON

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Note

Attempts are often made to distinguish between radicalism as a general term and Radicalism as a specific nineteenth-century political movement. Radicalism is, however, too complex a phenomenon for differentiation by capital letter to have much meaning, and all distinctions are therefore indicated in this book by the use of an adjective where necessary—for example, political radicalism, working-class radicalism, Benthamite radicalism.

The references given in brackets in the text indicate the date of first publication of sources. Page references are sometimes those of a later edition—in which case the date of such editions is given in the bibliography.

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Root and branch reformers

A pioneer study of early radical politics traced the 'dawn of radicalism' in the period from the 1760s to the 1790s, the activities of Wilkes and Horne Tooke and Major Cartwright, the crusade for parliamentary reform and freedom of the press, Tom Paine, and support for the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. It described the early radicals as 'those who fought the good fight of Reform', to change a corrupt and ossified Parliament and constitution. The nineteenth-century radical reformer was—in the eyes of the defenders of the existing system—'a mixture of fiend, fanatic and felon, constantly plotting how he may overturn the institutions of society'. The radical, or 'root and branch reformer', was in reality, however, 'a politician who does effectually whatever he attempts, going to the root of the matter' (Daly, 1892, I, 112-13). At the end of the eighteenth century the 'root of the matter' was seen as the need to reform Parliament, though political radicals always saw more or less clearly that other social improvements would flow from successful political reform. Through the reform of Parliament lay the extension of liberty and social justice, freedom from one or another form of social

ROOT AND BRANCH REFORMERS

oppression or corruption. The radical, said G. J. Holyoake in the 1880s, was 'a man who has heroic unrest under injustice', even if he did not always have a coherent policy for ending oppression (Holyoake, 1881, 185). Radicalism, wrote one of the pioneers of modern British socialism, 'in its genuine sense of opposition to all class domination and a thorough organisation of the collective power of the people', had made great headway in the early nineteenth century (Hyndman, 1883, 206-7). The radicalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was, in fact, the harnessing of energies in protest against injustice and oppression, the pooling of effort to transform society.

Organisation for effective reform is neither uniquely British nor a product of the past two centuries. As a modern, continuous tradition, however, it can be identified clearly in Britain from the beginning of the 1780s. Out of a diffuse and unstable urban radicalism that had existed from the 1760s a new form of political organisation began to emerge:

Horne Tooke and Major Cartwright may be said to have been the first who endeavoured to organize for practical purposes those who held Radical opinions. Major Cartwright ... in the year 1780 founded the Constitutional Society ... to give the public political information, and particularly to promote a recovery of what they conceived to be the lost rights of the people; meaning the right of representation in the House of Commons (Daly, 1892, 114).

The society for Constitutional Information, to give it its full title, followed the publication of Major Cartwright's *Take Your Choice!* in 1776, with its emphasis on political equality, on the need to eliminate political distinctions as 'causes for the elevation of some above the rest, prior to

mutual agreement' (Cartwright, 1776, 3). Out of the search for effective organisation and clear objectives emerged not a radicalism, but *forms* of radicalism. Cartwright himself divided reformers into two camps, those who wanted modest reforms and those who wanted a thorough reform to permit 'a constitutional representation of the people in parliament', in other words the 'moderate reformists, and the constitutional reformists'. The moderates he also described as 'mock' or 'gradual' reformers; the constitutional reformers he also described as 'radical' reformers (Cartwright, 1812, 5, 21-2, 31). 'Radical', as an adjective to describe this type of reformer, had established itself in this way by the 1780s, though as a noun it was not to gain common currency for another forty or so years.

The distinction between radical and moderate reformers was intensified in the 1790s after the French Revolution and with the emergence of a distinctively popular radicalism in the first phase of the social changes accompanying the Industrial Revolution. From this point radical reform acquired a new content:

The question posed in Great Britain up to 1789 was almost exclusively one of political rights ... and not of a change of social system. Not until we arrive at the second part of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* do we find the first fundamental social programme put forward on behalf of the people since the days of Winstanley and the Diggers (Cole, 1953, 2-3).

Cartwright and his associates continued to assert that 'reform must be radical' (Union for Parliamentary Reform, 1812, 2), but during the Napoleonic wars new radical objectives began to be defined. To the left of the Whigs appeared the Benthamite (or 'utilitarian' or 'philosophic') radicals. From the 1790s, in the writings of Tom Paine,