

A HISTORY OF SOCIALISM

BY

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A HISTORY OF SOCIALISM

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN ENGLISH SOCIALISM

THE fundamental driving force of modern socialism is the idea, however variously expressed, that democratic principles should be applied to economic affairs. Socialism desires that the ownership and management of land, capital, and public services should be placed under social control, instead of being in the hands of individual capitalists or joint-stock companies "with neither a body to be kicked or a soul to be damned." It is a school of political thought that has its exponents in every civilised country, that daily gains new adherents, and increases every year in power and legislative force.

In thus maintaining that society should assume the management of industry and secure an equitable distribution of its fruits, and so abolish social class, socialists are agreed; but on the most important points of detail they differ considerably. They disagree as to the form society will take in carrying out the socialist programme, as to the relation of local bodies to the central government—if indeed there is to be a central government—as to what may be regarded as an equitable system of distribution, and a hundred other points. The history of these differences, together with the story of the socialists' climb to power and what they have done when in power, is the history of socialism.

It is needless to say also that the theories of socialism vary so as to agree or conflict with almost every known form of

philosophy or religion. Much historic socialism is rightly regarded as Utopian, as chimeric, as "such stuff as dreams are made of"; much of it also is practical Christianity, the sincere desire to give whole-hearted service to the cause of humanity; but it must also be added that much of the prevailing socialism of the day is frankly materialistic. In any event socialism, while mainly economic, carries with it a change in the political, ethical, and artistic arrangements and institutions of society which would constitute a revolution greater than has ever taken place in human history, greater than the transition from the ancient to the mediæval world, or from the latter to the existing order of society.

It is amazing that such a tremendous idea for the changing of the whole order of civilisation should have had no great original exponent. Spence, Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier were perhaps the first, but little account is taken of their work nowadays.

Thomas Spence may be described as the first modern socialist: he flickered and glowed in Newcastle and London a century and a half ago. Born on 21st June 1750, this son of a Scottish netmaker and shoemaker flourished at the time when the gentry of England were rapidly seizing the common lands, the heritage of the villages, and turning them into their own preserves. It was a dispute over one of these enclosures or common land rights at Newcastle that led Spence to study the land question and subsequently to evolve a scheme for the municipalisation of land. His pamphlet, *The Meridian Sun of Liberty*, first appeared in London in 1793—Spence being his own pamphlet seller at a bookstall in Holborn. Such activities were not unnaturally distasteful to the authorities, and of the next year he spent six months in Newgate Gaol. Seven years later we find him again in prison—this time for seditious libel in connection with his pamphlet, *The Restorer of Society to its Natural State*. Thirteen years later he died. For some time a small band of admirers, "The Society of Spencean Philanthropists," kept his memory green, but his real influence was with H. M. Hyndman a century later, when land nationalisation

became a plank in the platform of the British Socialist Party.¹

It was while Spence lived and wrote that there came into being in England a far greater evil than the enclosure of common lands—the evil of an unbridled capitalist system. It was the horrors and degradation caused by this system that led men of greater intellect and ability than Spence to consider and to strive for what is now known as socialism.

The modern capitalist system—sometimes called the competitive system—began with the application of steam power to industry towards the end of the eighteenth century. The clever, the selfish, and the ingenious saw in the new development unlimited opportunities for making money, and before the nineteenth century was many years old there had sprung up, in parts of England, Scotland, and Wales, industrial towns in which squalor, depression, and misery were unequalled by anything in history. The introduction of the capitalist system undoubtedly brought wealth and other benefits to England, but the industrial worker's share in them was negligible: he was voteless, ignorant, wretched, and mercilessly overworked. Even the right of combination was denied him until 1824. Nor were the peasantry any better off: their wages were miserably low, and they were practically landless serfs. All these permanent causes of mischief were aggravated by special causes connected with the Napoleonic Wars, which are well known. Pauperism had become a grave national question, and the old English Poor Law was only a doubtful part of an evil system.

If the conditions of the *men* working in the factories were bad, those of the women and children were infinitely worse. In the mines, women and young girls, wearing only trousers, with a belt round their waists from which a chain passed between their legs, were utilised as truck haulers. In the factories young children worked for fifteen, sixteen, and even

¹ See H. M. Hyndman's *The Nationalisation of the Land in 1775 and 1882*; Davenport's *Life, Writings, and Principles of Thomas Spence* (London, 1836); and Harriet Martineau's *England during the Thirty Years' Peace*.

eighteen hours a day in "brisk time," for just over three shillings per week. And these were not children of twelve or thirteen years of age, but poor helpless little mites of five or six years and upwards. Such hours of work nowadays would be condemned as impossible for a man in the prime of life; but in the full liberty of the capitalist system, British working men, women, and children were treated worse than beasts of burden. Picture these children as they came home from their work, where they had been kept awake by the strap, by floggings, and other cruelties. Released from work they tried to totter home, but unable to endure any more, were found fast asleep in the ditches into which they tumbled! Imbecile and pauper children were legitimate machine fodder, and it is small wonder that the death-rate among these poor unfortunates was terribly high. Destitute as they so often were of parental protection and oversight, with both sexes huddled together under immoral and unsanitary conditions, it was only to be expected that these children should fall into the worst habits, and that in their turn their offspring should, to such a lamentable degree, be vicious, improvident, and physically degenerate. And Christian England endured this state of affairs for almost half a century with scarce a protest!

These facts are not horrors invented by socialist orators to make sob-stuff for political platforms; they are related coldly, without prejudice, in the Report of the Committee on Factory Children's Labour, published in 1831-2: they are unchallengeable and unchallenged. Another report of a Royal Commission in 1842 again revealed that the coal and cotton fortunes of Lancashire and Yorkshire were still being built up out of the inhumanely sweated labour of women and young children, while a further report on trades and manufacture in 1843 forced the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, to bring in a Bill to limit the labour of "young persons" to twelve hours a day. The young Lord Ashley (afterwards Lord Shaftesbury) fought strenuously for ten hours a day against not only Peel, the Prime Minister—a manufacturer's son, who calmly announced that unless twelve hours were accepted he would resign—but also against Cobden and Bright.

The capitalist system in England prospered through the tears and sufferings of little children, in the midst of an appalling immorality which it had helped to create. It may be asked why the mothers and fathers of these young girls and younger children did not protest: the answer is that the fathers had been put out of work by their own children and that they were dependent upon the earnings of the children for their daily bread. Those with large families were reckoned to be fortunate, and the population of England and Wales increased from 8,892,000 in 1801, to 15,914,000 in 1841, in order that the factories of England might have adequate child labour.¹ Mammon reigned supreme—the capitalist system was in full swing; the growing wealth and population of England testified to its economic success.

Meanwhile, the industrial revolution had slowly spread to France and Germany. Here the sequence of events followed those in England. Factories were started. Women, girls, and boys of tender years were herded into them and paid a miserable pittance for exhausting hours of soul-destroying toil. Here again the death-rate and the toll of maimed and crippled was appalling.

In this welter of squalor, inhumanity, and physical cruelty, modern socialism² found its first capable, if somewhat fantastic, exponent in the person of a Welshman, Robert Owen. Born in 1771, the son of a Newtown saddler and iron-monger, this fearless philanthropist became at nineteen years of age the manager of a Manchester cotton mill in which five hundred people were employed. Owen soon made this mill the best of its kind, and achieved remarkable improvements in the quality of the cotton spun. Early in his twenties he was probably the foremost cotton spinner in England—a position entirely due to his own capacity and knowledge of the trade, as he had found the mill in no well-ordered condition and was left to organise it on his own responsibility.

A few years later Owen, now manager and one of the

¹ The most prolific period was from 1811 to 1821, when the population increased at the rate of 18 per cent.

² There is, of course, state socialism in the *Republic* of Plato, but this work treats only of modern socialism.

partners of the Chorlton Twist Company at Manchester, made his first acquaintance with the girl who subsequently became his wife—Miss Dale, the daughter of the proprietor of the New Lanark mills. Owen induced his partners to purchase the New Lanark mills outright, and after his marriage in 1800 settled there as manager and part owner of the mills.

It was now that Owen resolved to put into wholesale practice those principles of benevolent paternalism which he had tried at Manchester. The employees in the Manchester factory had been well treated according to the standard then existing, but at New Lanark Owen decided to go much further. In his new factory there were about two thousand operatives, of whom five hundred were children, mostly brought at the age of five and six from the poorhouses and charities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Owen promptly set himself to improve the moral and material welfare of this population. Order, cleanliness, temperance, and thrift were encouraged, and he devoted special attention to the education of the children, creating the first infant schools in Great Britain. In all these plans Owen obtained the most gratifying success. Though at first regarded with suspicion as a stranger, he soon won the confidence of his people. The mills continued to prosper commercially, but it is needless to say that some of Owen's schemes involved considerable expense, which was displeasing to his partners. Wearied at last of the restrictions imposed on him by men who wished to conduct the business on the ordinary principles, Owen, in 1813, formed a new firm, whose members, content with 5 per cent. of return for their capital, would be ready to give freer scope to his philanthropy. In this firm Jeremy Bentham and the well-known Quaker, William Allen, were partners.

In the same year Owen first appeared as an author of essays, in which he expounded the principles on which his system of educational philanthropy was based. The chief points in this philosophy were that man's character is made not *by* him but *for* him; that it has been formed by circumstances over which he has no control; that he is not a proper subject either of praise or blame—these principles leading up to the practical conclusion that the great secret in the right

formation of man's character is to place him under the proper influences, physical, moral, and social, from his earliest years. These principles, of the irresponsibility of man and of the effect of early influences, are the keynote of Owen's whole system of education and social amelioration, and he embodied them in his first work, *A New View of Society ; or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character*, the first of these four essays being published in 1813. It is needless to say that Owen's views theoretically belong to a very old system of philosophy, and that his originality is to be found only in his benevolent application of them.

For the next few years Owen's work at New Lanark continued to have a national and even a European significance. New Lanark itself became a much-frequented place of pilgrimage for social reformers, statesmen, and royal personages, amongst whom was Nicholas, afterwards Emperor of Russia. According to the unanimous testimony of all who visited it, the results achieved by Owen were singularly good. The manners of the children, brought up under his system, were graceful and unconstrained ; health, plenty, and contentment prevailed ; drunkenness was almost unknown, and illegitimacy was extremely rare. The most perfect good-feeling subsisted between Owen and his workpeople ; all the operations of the mill proceeded with the utmost smoothness and regularity ; and the business still enjoyed great prosperity.

As yet, however, Owen was not a socialist ; he was a philanthropic capitalist, whose great distinction was the originality and the unwearying unselfishness of his methods. It was not until 1817, when the general misery and stagnation of trade consequent on the termination of the Napoleonic Wars were engrossing the attention of the country, that he first embodied his socialistic views in a written document, this being a report communicated to the Committee of the House of Commons on the Poor Law. In this document Owen, after clearly tracing the special causes connected with the war which had led to such a deplorable state of things, pointed out that the permanent cause of distress was to be found in the competition of human labour with machinery, and that

the only effective remedy was the united action of men and the subordination of machinery.

His proposals for the treatment of pauperism were based on these principles. He recommended that communities of from five hundred to three thousand should be settled on spaces of land of from 1000 to 1500 acres, all living in one large building in the form of a square, with public kitchens and mess-rooms. Each family should have its own private apartments, and the entire care of the children till the age of three, after which they should be educated and brought up by the community, their parents having access to them at meals and all other proper times. These communities might be established by individuals, by parishes, by counties, or by the State; in every case there should be effective supervision by duly qualified persons. Work, and the enjoyment of its results, should be in common. Such a community, while mainly agricultural, should possess all the best machinery, should offer every variety of employment, and should, as far as possible, be self-contained. In other words, his communities were intended to be self-dependent units, which should provide the best education and the constant exercise of unselfish intelligence, should unite the advantages of town and country life, and should correct the monotonous activity of the factory with the freest variety of occupation, while utilising all the latest improvements in industrial technique. "As these townships," as he also called them, "should increase in number, unions of them federatively united shall be formed in circles of tens, hundreds, and thousands," till they should embrace the whole world in one great republic with a common interest.

His plans for the cure of pauperism were received with great favour. *The Times* and the *Morning Post*, and many of the leading men of the country, countenanced them; one of his most steadfast friends was the Duke of Kent, father of Queen Victoria. He had, indeed, gained the ear of the country, and had the prospect before him of a great career as a social reformer, when he went out of his way, at a large meeting in London, to declare his hostility to all the received forms of religion. After this defiance to the religious senti-

ment of the country, Owen's theories were in the popular mind associated with infidelity, and were henceforward suspected and discredited.

Owen's own confidence, however, remained unshaken, and he was anxious that his scheme for establishing a community should be tested. At last, in 1825, such an experiment was attempted, under the direction of his disciple, Abram Combe, at Orbiston, near Glasgow; and in the same year, Owen himself commenced another at New Harmony, in Indiana, America. After a trial of about two years, both failed completely. Neither of them was a pauper experiment; but it must be said that the members were of the most motley description, many worthy people of the highest aims being mixed with vagrants, adventurers, and crotchety, wrong-headed enthusiasts.

After a long period of friction with William Allen and some of his other partners, Owen, after his return from America, resigned all connection with New Lanark in 1828. Most of his means having been sunk in the New Harmony experiment, he was no longer a flourishing capitalist, but the head of a vigorous propaganda, in which socialism and secularism were combined. One of the most interesting features of the movement at this period was the establishment, in 1832, of an equitable labour exchange system, in which exchange was effected by means of labour notes, the usual means of exchange and the usual middlemen being alike superseded.

It was now that the word "socialism" came into use. It appears to have been first used in the *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1833. In 1835, a society, which received the grandiloquent name of the Association of all Classes of all Nations, was founded under the auspices of Robert Owen; and the words "socialist" and "socialism" became current during the discussions which arose in connection with it.¹ As Owen and his school had little esteem for the political reform of the time, and laid all emphasis on the necessity of social improvement and reconstruction, it is obvious how the name came to be recognised as suitable and distinctive. The term

¹ Holyoake, *History of Co-operation*, vol. i. p. 210, ed. 1875.

was soon afterwards borrowed by a distinguished French writer, Reybaud, in his well-known work, the *Réformateurs modernes*, in which he discussed the theories of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen. Through Reybaud it soon gained wide currency on the Continent, and it is now the accepted name for the most remarkable movement of modern times.

Meanwhile, the Reform Bill of 1832 had been passed: it brought the middle class into power, and by the exclusion of the workmen emphasised their existence as a separate class, and their discontent found its expression in Chartism. As is obvious from the contents of the Charter, Chartism was most prominently a demand for political reform and not a socialist movement; but both in its origin and in its ultimate aim the movement was essentially economic. From the socialist point of view, the interest of this movement lies greatly in the fact that in its organs the doctrine of "surplus value," afterwards elaborated by Marx as the basis of his system, is broadly and emphatically enunciated. Briefly, the doctrine of "surplus value" is that while the worker produces all the wealth, he is obliged to content himself with the meagre share necessary to support his existence, and the surplus goes to the capitalists, who, with the king, the priests, the lords, and gentlemen, live upon the labour of the working man.¹

During these years, Owen's secularistic teaching gained such influence among the working classes as to give occasion, in 1839, for the statement in the *Westminster Review* that his principles were the actual creed of a great portion of them.

At this period Owen made some more communal experiments, of which the most important were those at Ralahine, in Ireland, and at Tytherly, in Hampshire. It is admitted that the former, which was established in 1839, was a remarkable success for three and a half years, till the proprietor who had granted the use of the land, having ruined himself by gambling, was obliged to sell out. Tytherly, begun in 1839, was an absolute failure. By 1846 the only permanent result of Owen's agitation, so zealously carried on by public

¹ *Poor Man's Guardian*, 1835.

meetings, pamphlets, periodicals, and occasional treatises, was the co-operative movement, and for the time even that seemed to have utterly collapsed. In his later years Owen became a firm believer in spiritualism. He died in 1858 at his native town, at the age of eighty-seven.

The causes of Owen's failure in establishing his communities are obvious enough. Apart from the difficulties inherent in socialism, he injured the social cause by going out of his way to attack the historic religions and the accepted views on marriage, by his tediousness, quixotry, and overconfidence, by refusing to see that for the mass of men measures of transition from an old to a new system must be adopted. If he had been true to his earlier methods and retained the autocratic guidance of his experiments, the chances of success would have been greater. Above all, Owen had too great faith in human nature, and he did not understand the laws of social evolution. He thought that he could break the chain of continuity, and as by magic create a new set of circumstances, which would forthwith produce a new generation of rational and unselfish men. The time was too strong for him, and the current of English history swept past him.

Even a very brief account of Owen, however, would be incomplete without indicating his relation to Malthus, who, in his famous *Essay on Population* (1798), had argued that the growth of the population must always press closely on the means of subsistence, and so cause widespread and acute poverty. Against Malthus, Owen showed that the wealth of the country had, in consequence of mechanical improvement, increased out of all proportion to the population. The problem, therefore, was not to restrict population, but to institute rational social arrangements and to secure a fair distribution of wealth—a truly socialistic theory. Whenever the number of inhabitants in any of his communities increased beyond the maximum, new communities should be created, until they should extend over the whole world. The period would probably never arrive when the earth would be full; but, if it should, the human race would be good, intelligent, and rational, and would know much better than the present

irrational generation how to provide for the occurrence. Such was Owen's socialistic treatment of the population problem.

Robert Owen was essentially a pioneer, whose work and influence it would be unjust to measure by their tangible results. Apart from his socialistic theories, it should, nevertheless, be remembered that he was one of the foremost and most energetic promoters of many movements of acknowledged and enduring usefulness. He was the founder of infant schools in England; he was the first to introduce reasonably short hours into factory labour, and he zealously promoted factory legislation—one of the most needed and most beneficial reforms of the century; he was, above all, one of the founders of the co-operative movement. In general education, in sanitary reform, and in his sound and humanitarian views of common life, he was far in advance of his time.

Still, he had many serious faults; all that was quixotic, crude, and superficial in his views became more prominent in his later years, and by the extravagance of his advocacy of them he did grave injury to the cause he had at heart. In his personal character he was without reproach—frank, benevolent, and straightforward to a fault; and he pursued the altruistic schemes in which he spent all his means with more earnestness than most men devote to the accumulation of a fortune.

Before Owen's death in 1858 there had begun in England the Christian Socialist movement, of which the leaders were the Rev. F. D. Maurice, the Rev. Charles Kingsley, and Mr. Ludlow, the economist. The abortive Chartist demonstration in the April of 1848 excited in Maurice and his friends the deepest sympathy with the sufferings of the English working class—a feeling which was intensified by the revelations regarding "London Labour and London Poor," published in the *Morning Chronicle* of 1849. In *Politics for the People*, the *Christian Socialist*, in *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*, and from the pulpit and the platform, the representatives of the movement exposed the evils of the competitive system, carried on an unsparing warfare against the Manchester school, and main-