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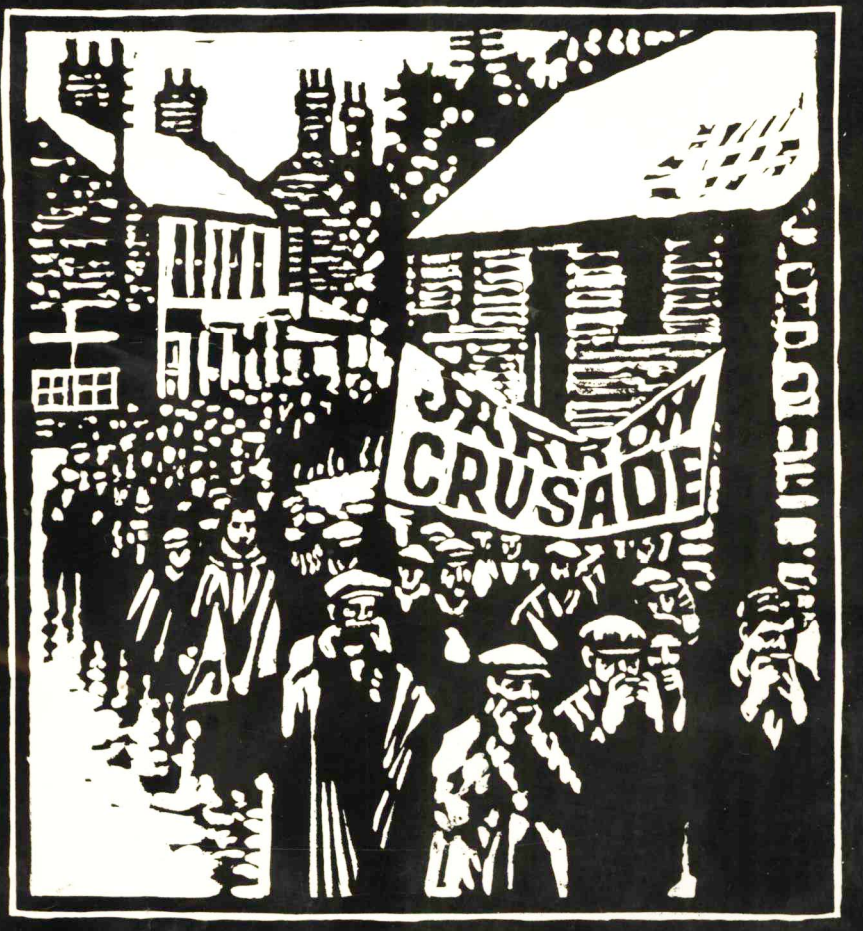
British Socialism

Socialist thought from the 1880s to 1960s



ANTHONY WRIGHT

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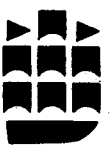
Anthony Wright



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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Students of political ideas will be familiar with the debate among their teachers about texts and contexts, whether the study of political ideas primarily concerns the meaning of a text or an understanding of the main ideas of an epoch. Both should be done but not confused; and texts need setting in their context. But it is easier for the student to find and to read the texts of political philosophers than to be able to lay his hands upon the range of materials that would catch the flavour of the thinking of an age or a movement, both about what should be done and about how best to use common concepts that create different perceptions of political problems and activity.

So this series aims to present carefully chosen anthologies of the political ideas of thinkers, publicists, statesmen, actors in political events, extracts from State papers and common literature of the time, in order to supplement and complement, not to replace, study of the texts of political philosophers. They should be equally useful to students of politics and of history.

Each volume will have an authoritative and original introductory essay by the editor of the volume. Occasionally instead of an era, movement or problem, an individual writer will figure, writers of a kind who are difficult to understand (like Edmund Burke) simply by the reading of any single text.

B. R. C.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This book contains a selection from the vast literature produced by British socialists over the last century. Its aim is to give a sense of what 'British socialism' has come to mean at the level of ideas and theory. It is not, therefore, about policy debates or political organisations. Although its emphasis is predominantly upon what it regards as mainstream British socialism (and so does not deal with some socialist traditions that have had a presence in Britain), the harsh disciplines of selection and compression have meant that many subsidiary figures have not found a place here. This is regrettable, but I hope that enough remains to fulfil the purpose of the book.

An important feature of this anthology is that the extracts from key texts are of substantial length. They are designed to be long enough to allow their authors to present an argument with sufficient coherence and example. In addition to these substantial extracts, shorter items are also included to fill out the historical picture or to illustrate other tendencies. At present there is no source book on British socialism of this kind, and it is hoped that it will fill an important gap – especially at a time when there is so much discussion about the nature of British socialism. It remains, of course, only an introduction to a political tradition and not a substitute for independent exploration. If this is a standard warning from all compilers of anthologies, it is because they are most aware of what they have done and they want to share the responsibility.

I am very grateful to Bernard Crick for asking me to undertake this work and for encouraging me along the way; to my wife, Moira, for taking on an unfair share of the domestic routine while it was being completed; and to Audrey Elliott, who typed the whole text with her usual cheerful efficiency and never complained once. Finally, I dedicate this book to my two small sons, Benjamin

Tomos and Timothy Rhys, so that when they can read what it contains they may at least understand their father a bit better.

Anthony Wright

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Ideas are consequences, but also have consequences. They are shaped by experience, but also shape experience. This is just a way of saying that political ideas are important and deserve to be taken seriously, and this includes those ideas (of the kind represented here) that are associated with particular political traditions and experiences. Political ideas of this kind provide a bridge between past and future, and between pure reflection and unreflective action. However, they may of course perform other functions too. They may, for example, serve as obfuscating ideology, or attain the status of myth. They also have their characteristic limitations, preferring to address themselves to the historically specific rather than the philosophically universal and often being less concerned with theoretical precision than with political relevance. It is also useful to remember that the dominant ideas of a political movement or tradition may find their source in the movement's inarticulate major premises (or 'ethos'[1]*) as well as in its more formal doctrines.

With these preliminaries in mind, it is possible to turn to the political tradition that is represented in this anthology. To write of 'British socialism' (thus acknowledging its status as a distinctive tradition) is to refer both to a political movement and a body of ideas. The concern here, rather unfashionably, is with the latter more than the former. Herbert Morrison's immortal formulation that 'socialism is what Labour Governments do' was designed to close down any distinction of this kind in favour of a necessary fusion. A recent literature has been organised around a new formulation and a necessary fission: socialism is what Labour Governments

* References to material in this anthology are given in the text inside [square] brackets, indicating the number of the document in this book in which the extract occurs. Other references are given in the normal way, and are listed at the end of this introduction.

fail to do.[2] Yet this represents its own form of closure, in this case a closure of any serious exploration of the theoretical tradition of British socialism. Certainly there has been a remarkable paucity of historical and critical studies in this area, while a striking feature of much of the contemporary argument within the Labour Party is its divorce from any real encounter with its own intellectual tradition. Yet it is still possible that it is Tawney rather than Trotsky who has more to contribute to these arguments.

The centenary of modern British socialism, the passage from the 'socialist revival' of the 1880s to the ideological controversies of the 1980s, invites retrospection and reassessment. What are the distinctive characteristics of the tradition represented here? What has 'British socialism' come to denote in the wider universe of political ideas? There are a number of more or less familiar answers to questions of this kind. Perhaps the most familiar concerns the reputed moralism of British socialism, its preference for presenting the socialist argument in 'the language of moral revolt' (Thompson, [4.8]) rather than in the categories of economic analysis or of historical determination. This does not mean that British socialism 'owes more to Methodism than to Marx' (as that misleading adage would have it), but it does mean that it has consistently insisted that the world of political economy should be regarded as an arena of moral choice. The 'ethical socialism' associated with Keir Hardie and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) gave early popular expression to this approach, although its influence was still more pervasive. Perhaps its most eloquent and compelling statement is to be found in the work of R. H. Tawney. Tawney always insisted that social institutions had to be subjected to the test of moral purpose; and this sort of 'Tawneyism' shaped and expressed the thinking of a whole generation of British socialists.

The centrality of moralism carried with it a cluster of associated characteristics and consequences. Socialism was envisaged not as an era of abstract economic justice but of a remoralised social order in which a new moral life could be practised. Significantly, this emphasis was also shared by such creative British Marxists as William Morris and Belfort Bax, and expressed in their concern with the development of a 'socialistic ethics' [1.6]. The language of fellowship and fraternity within British socialism was employed both to express this general conception and to prefigure the new society. The Continental 'comrade' became the British 'brother'. Not merely was a socialism of fellowship often out of sympathy with the politics of class warfare, but an ethical socialism tended to make its

appeal to the moral conscience of all individuals and not merely to the self-interest of a particular class, even if in practice one class was likely to be more responsive to the socialist call. This mode of thought testifies of course to the failure of Marxism to establish a central presence within British socialism during its formative period, a failure that is properly regarded as a British idiosyncrasy in the context of the development of European socialism as a whole.

This British idiosyncrasy has been reflected in other familiar characteristics of the tradition. It has been, overwhelmingly, a reformist tradition, expressed in its commitment to a parliamentary Labourism. The State was not to be smashed from without but captured from within, and parliamentary elections on the basis of universal suffrage and democratic procedures were regarded as the key terrain of socialist struggle. Aneurin Bevan recorded how, as a young Marxist auto-didact, 'quite early in my studies it seemed to me that classic Marxism consistently understated the role of a political democracy with a fully developed franchise'.[3] The ascendancy of this view meant that British socialism escaped the pitched battles between revisionism and orthodoxy that marked the growing pains of Continental social democracy. It also meant that, once established, the Labour Party won the allegiance of almost all the figures represented here, despite the tensions inherent in their attachment. This dominance of the British Left by the Labour Party, and in particular the acceptance of this dominance by such key intellectuals as Cole, Laski and Tawney, has been significant in defining the context in which theoretical inquiry has taken place and, perhaps, in closing off alternative theoretical explorations.

Yet a tradition takes its shape from the materials that are at hand (and, of course, from the use that is made of these materials). Thus, modern British socialism drew upon the materials that were available in British society of the late nineteenth century. Its moralism, for example, drew heavily upon its inheritance of a Ruskinian tradition of ethical protest and aesthetic criticism, as well as responding to the religious crisis of the period which was providing an increasing audience for a secular message in a religious idiom. Bernard Shaw described the contemporary appeal of a socialism of this kind: 'The working-man who has been detached from the Established Church or the sects by the Secularist propaganda, and who, as an avowed Agnostic or Atheist, strenuously denies or contemptuously ridicules the current beliefs in heavens and devils and bibles, will, with the greatest relief and avidity, go back to his old habits of thought and imagination when they reappear in this secu-

lar form. The Christian who finds the supernatural aspect of his faith slipping away from him recaptures it in what seems to him a perfectly natural aspect as Christian Socialism.'[4]

A fashionable social Darwinism provided materials for biological, organic and collectivist modes of thought, while positivism exercised a diffuse influence.[5] An older radical democratic tradition also made itself available (old Chartist symbols were raised at a miners' rally attended by Keir Hardie in 1880[6]), as did an earlier Owenism. Then there was the pervasive influence of English liberalism, and of its advanced radical varieties such as that of Henry George. Eric Hobsbawm has written of 'the broad and generic sense in which virtually all Englishmen of the left were at least the illegitimate offspring of the radical–liberal tradition'.[7] Finally, there was the fact that an accommodative ideology of 'labourism' was already securely established in the consciousness of the British working class by the time of the socialist revival of the 1880s, so that 'when socialist ideas and a socialist movement returned to Britain in the last twenty years of the century, the most serious obstacle to the acceptance of a position of intellectual and political independence was the strength and tenacity of this labourist tradition.'[8] Even a brief inventory of this kind cautions against any surprise that British socialism should have expressed itself in a distinctive idiom rather than simply borrowing from socialist materials that were already available, in different form, elsewhere.

It is certainly the case that British socialists have generally wanted to recognise, even assert, the distinctiveness of their own national tradition. This is as true for William Morris as for the Fabians, for the Guild Socialists as for George Orwell. The latter described a British socialist future that would 'not be doctrinaire, nor even logical', abolishing the House of Lords but probably preserving the monarchy [3.7]. In the hands of a Ramsay MacDonald the domestic credentials of British socialism, its separateness from a 'foreign' Marxism or syndicalism, could be invoked as a propaganda weapon both in internal socialist arguments and in the presentation of socialism to a wider public. Nor is it without significance that the pioneer of British Marxism, H. M. Hyndman, first tried to fuse a Marxist with a national tradition and finished up by abandoning the former because of the pull of the latter. Tawney expressed a general view when he insisted, against the background of the ideological controversies of the 1930s, that British socialism had necessarily to 'wear a local garb'.[9] In more recent times there have been those who have wanted to disrobe British socialism of its

shoddy local garb and replace it with purer material of foreign importation. This was evidently necessary because of its contamination by a diseased history and culture that had produced the ascendancy of a sterile bourgeois empiricism.[10] However, there remained those who were unconvinced by both the analysis and the prescription when set against 'the peculiarities of the English'.[11] The lack of theoretical sweep and philosophical grandeur within British socialism has been apparent enough of course, and in some respects has undoubtedly had disabling effects. In general, though, British socialists (at least until recently) have felt little inclination to be apologetic on this account. As Keir Hardie wrote to Engels: 'We are a solid people, very practical and not given to chasing bubbles.'[12]

So far this characterisation of British socialism has been in general terms and, if left there, would be seriously misleading. Indeed, it may be suggested that part of the neglect and misreading of British socialism derives from the easy attribution to it of such familiar labels as reformism, moralism, labourism, empiricism and collectivism.The point is not that such labels are inaccurate but that they are inadequate. They do scant justice to the actual historical contours of the tradition and reduce a diverse tradition to a unitary one. Perhaps most serious of all, this has the effect of silencing arguments and blocking off alternative traditions and, in doing so, making them less available to us today. A relevant example here is the historical treatment of William Morris whose political legacy, ignored or dismissed by the wider society, was generally compressed either into an 'orthodox' Marxism or an 'ethical' anti-Marxism; until Edward Thompson presented Morris in terms of a critically important fusion of traditions ('a transformed romantic', 'a communist utopian'[13]) that enabled him to escape from the historical closet and become an active presence within British socialism and within the wider socialist tradition. The argument here is that this sort of open and critical approach should be brought to bear on the actual historical experience of British socialism itself.

If this approach is adopted, the distinctiveness of British socialism will remain, but it will be less easy to regard it simply as a unitary tradition. Instead, areas of significant argument will emerge and subsidiary (sometimes conflicting) traditions will surface. Just as socialism in general may be regarded as having presented itself in a number of different forms and tendencies,[14] so too with British socialism. Thus, even if it has often expressed itself in the language of moralism (capitalism is immoral), it has also expressed the socialist argument in other terms too: for example, in the language of

rationalism (capitalism is inefficient) and of historical determinism (capitalism is doomed), or as a fulfilment and extension of other traditions, notably the democratic and the liberal. Not only has the socialist argument taken different forms at different periods, but different forms in the same period and this frequently, because of the eclectic character of British socialism, from the same pen. An extensive and varied typology could be constructed of the modes in which the socialist argument has been articulated in Britain.

It is possible to offer further examples of the benefits that accrue from a more open (and historical) approach to British socialism. For example, the 'absence' of Marxism within British socialism has to take account of its very real presence at crucial periods (the 1880s, 1930s), the nature and impact of this presence, and the general treatment of Marxism by British socialists. Similarly, any account of the parliamentary reformism of British socialism would be inadequate if it failed to take account of the serious engagement with the dilemmas of a reformist strategy on the part of some British socialists (as in the early 1930s, in the wake of the demise of the Labour Government) and their discussion of the conditions in which a radical gradualism might succeed. So too with the collectivism of British socialism, expressed in the familiar Fabian inheritance of bureaucratic centralism. So familiar is this account that it overlooks the fact that even Fabian collectivism (like much early British socialism) was predominantly localist and multiform rather than centralist and uniform in orientation. In 1890 that arch-Fabian, Sidney Webb, was to be found trying to disabuse people of the 'misapprehension' that socialism implied 'a rigidly centralised national administration of all the details of life', whereas socialists had 'as yet contributed nothing to the difficult problem of political science as to the proper line of division between the functions of the central government and those of the local authorities'.[15] What the familiar account of British collectivism also misses is the existence of an important tradition of socialist pluralism and participatory democracy (associated especially with G. D. H. Cole and the Guild Socialists)[16] within British socialism. These examples could be extended and multiplied: the point is simply that it is necessary to come to terms with an actual tradition and not merely with one of its familiar caricatures.

The material collected here, though necessarily small in size and selective in scope, provides an introduction to some of these matters. It covers the period from the 1880s, which is the period during

which socialism in Britain has had a continuous existence. Its focus is what it takes to be the mainstream and distinctive tradition of British socialism, therefore does not deal with those other traditions (such as syndicalism and communism) that have their own derivation and continuity. The material has been ordered chronologically and grouped into a number of broad periods. The chronological presentation is intended to give a sense of a tradition in development and debate in its actual historical context, and this would be difficult with a more abstracted thematic treatment. The periodisation is not intended to indicate rigid lines of historical or theoretical demarcation, merely to suggest some staging-posts at which it seems appropriate to pause for reflection on the journey so far. Some preliminary and necessarily brief observations on the route to be followed are offered here.

The starting-point is the decade of the 1880s, which marked the revival of socialist ideas and popular agitation after the long interlude of mid-Victorian quiescence. There was little expectation at the beginning of the decade that such a revival was imminent. Then Marx was still railing at the suffocating grip of 'Brit. Philistinism' and Engels was writing from London to disabuse those who might be 'deluded into thinking there is a real proletarian movement going on here'.[17] However, by the end of the decade the 'collection of oddities' (as the early pioneers were once described to Morris) had become an incipient mass movement and Engels could now announce to the world that the English proletariat had finally awakened from 'its long winter sleep'.[18] Not only were the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), Socialist League and Fabian Society already in existence, but the 'new unionism' was spreading the movement throughout the country and preparing the way for a genuine workers' party, in the shape of the Independent Labour Party that was founded in the mid-1890s and which, at the turn of the century, combined with the trade unions to form the Labour Party. However, the concern here is less with the organisational history of Labour and socialist politics in this formative period, which is richly documented elsewhere,[19] than with the character of socialist thought at the time.

The material anthologised here opens appropriately with H. M. Hyndman, a reminder that Marxism established its presence in Britain at the very beginning of the socialist revival but also raising questions about why that presence did not prove more secure and influential thereafter. Hyndman has had a bad press, getting off to a poor start by earning the wrath of Marx and Engels (the latter de-

scribing him as 'an arch-conservative and an extremely chauvinistic but not stupid careerist'), and his domineering manner has generally been linked to those characteristics of the SDF (for example, its sectarianism, and neglect of the trade unions) that have been held responsible for the failure of the SDF to become a mass Marxist party on the model of European social democracy.[20] Yet individual Marxists (as Hobsbawm and Cole pointed out[21]) could have assumed leadership roles in the working-class politics of the 1890s if possessed of a better political sense, for the movement was still sufficiently open for that to happen, and Hyndman had done more than anyone else to make Marxism (or at least 'Anglo-Marxism' as it has been called) available to British socialists at a crucial period. As the extract included here shows, his *Historical basis of socialism in England* was intended as a 'really scientific' [1.1] presentation of the socialist argument, wholly different from an earlier utopianism, and its account of historical development and of the theory of surplus value made it a respected source of information and argument even among those British socialists who preferred to state their socialism in a different idiom. Yet Hyndman's schematic account also reflected a narrowed Marxism and one which had undergone no creative adaptation to British conditions. It sat uneasily alongside his political strategy, which was a 'curious blend of political opportunism and theoretical dogmatism'.[22] Indeed, at times it seemed that Marxism was invoked to press home a message about the irresistible march of history that was designed to frighten the English governing class into abdication as an alternative to inevitable 'national decrepitude and decay' [1.1] accompanied by bloody class warfare. Not for nothing did Hyndman warn that the centenary of 1789 was fast approaching.

It was William Morris who offered a more creative fusion of Marxism with a domestic tradition. Unversed in the intricacies of Marxist economics and philosophy although mastering what he could (and assisted in this by his regular 'Baxination', as he called it, at the hands of his friend and Socialist League comrade, the philosopher Belfort Bax), Morris nevertheless effected a remarkable marriage between Ruskin and Marx, romanticism and rationalism, moralism and materialism, and utopianism and scientific socialism. This was a heady mixture that exercised a wide influence upon British socialists, coupled with a deep personal respect for Morris himself, even though his political strategy of socialist purity and the 'making of socialists' left him organisationally isolated. No mere utopian, Morris found in Marxism a secure theoretical and histor-