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The Infancy of Socialism

Bertrand Russell

Russell's review of the first volume of Max Beer's A History of British Socialism was published in The Athenaeum in 1919. This first volume of Beer's History, with its introduction by R.H. Tawney, was republished by Spokesman in an illustrated edition in 1984 (price £11.95, available from www.spokesmanbooks.com)

This is an extraordinarily good book, the outcome of many years of patient research. Mr. Tawney's Introduction informs us that the second volume was nearly completed at the outbreak of the war, and will, it is hoped, appear on the return of peace. Mr. Beer has performed a labour of love in rescuing the work of many British pioneers from the oblivion to which the carelessness of their countrymen would confine them. 'From the thirteenth century to the present day,' he says, 'the stream of Socialism and social reform has largely been fed by British thought and experiment. Medieval schoolmen and statesmen, modern political philosophers, economists, poets and philanthropists of the British Isles have explored its course and enriched its volume, but left it to writers of other nations to name and describe it.' His preface, evidently written before the outbreak of the war, takes a view of our mental character which is flattering and somewhat unusual:

'The English intellect, from its sheer recklessness, is essentially revolutionary, probably more so than the French intellect. But since 1688 it has been the endeavour of English statesmen and educators to impart to the nation a conservative, cautiously moving temper, a distrust of generalisation, an aversion from carrying theory to its logical conclusions ... In periods of general upheavals, however, when the dynamic forces of society are vehemently asserting themselves, the English are apt to throw their mental ballast overboard and take the lead in revolutionary thought and action. In such a period we are living now.'

The first and shorter Part of this book deals with medieval ideas and their collapse, down to the year 1760. Mr. Beer complains of the lack of a book on the English schoolmen, of whose political ideas he gives a concise account. We wonder how many of the inhabitants of the village of Ockham are aware that it gave its name to one of the great minds of the world. Mr. Beer suggests that perhaps Hales, Duns Scotus and Ockham are 'regarded as foreigners because

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the first died at Paris, the second at Cologne, and the third at Munich'. Duns Scotus has left no trace in the national life beyond the word 'dunce' – a warning to philosophers as to what the English think of thought.

It is and always has been the practice of the human race to put to death those who first advocate the ideas which are afterwards found most conducive to the welfare of mankind. About half the pioneers mentioned in this book were executed by due process of law; most of the rest underwent long terms of imprisonment. We learn, incidentally, that an ancestor of Keir Hardie was hanged for high treason in 1820 because he advocated a general strike for the purpose of obtaining universal suffrage.

The book is a history of ideas rather than of political movements. The ideas that underlie Socialism are explicit in More's Utopia, and Mr. Beer shows that they were common among men of learning throughout the Middle Ages. What makes the political difference between one age and another is not the ideas of the thoughtful minority, but the occupations and economic interests of the ordinary men and women. The fact that Socialism is no longer a speculation of the few, but a powerful force capable of dethroning monarchs and altering the constitution of society, is due to the progress of economic, political and military organization. The ideas of the schoolmen were inherited by the extremists of the Civil War, who were the first in England to form groups for the purpose of carrying out communism. Throughout almost the whole period dealt with in this volume, communistic groups were too weak numerically to aim at altering the State. The Diggers of 1649, who set to work to dig up and cultivate St. George's Hill near Esher in a spirit of Christian communism, may be regarded as initiating the long series of attempts to found small societies on ideal lines in the midst of an unregenerate environment. They preached and practised non-resistance, and Cromwell had no difficulty in suppressing them. It is surprising how long Socialists continued to believe in the usefulness of separate little colonies of the elect cut off from the general life of the world. And even now there are those who imagine that there can be victorious national Socialism while other nations adhere to the capitalist regime. The doctrine of the inevitable unity of the world is hard for impatient reformers, but those who forget it are doomed to futility. The very progress of industrialism which has caused the spread of Socialism has also made the world an economic whole, and swept away the former independence of the separate nations.

The second Part of Mr. Beer's book begins with the economic revolution, and closes with the era of disappointment after the passing of the Reform Bill. His summary of the period preceding the Reform Bill agitation is so admirable that we shall quote it as a sample of many others:

'From a sociological point of view, the period from 1760 to 1825 exhibits four phases. The first phase was purely parliamentary and constitutional; its protagonists, Wilkes and 'Junius', fought against the oligarchy and the remnants of personal monarchy; this phase is outside the plan of our work. The second phase was mainly agrarian; the effects of the rapid rate of enclosing farms and commons as well as of the improvements in agriculture turned the attention of revolutionary minds toward agrarian reform; its writers were Spence,

Ogilvie and Paine. The third phase was caused by enthusiasm for the French Revolution on the part of English intellectuals and London artisans, whose minds had been prepared by the theories which were current in the antecedent two phases; its writers were William Godwin, the youthful Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth and John Thelwall. The fourth phase was that of the industrial revolution proper, the first critical writer of which was Charles Hall, followed by Robert Owen and his school, and the anti-capitalist critics, Ravenstone, Hodgskin, and several anonymous writers; the poet of this phase was Shelley. The common basis of all those writers consisted mainly of natural law as they found it in Locke's 'On Civil Government'. This small treatise became their Bible, particularly after its theories had been consecrated by the success of the American Revolution, and had come back to England from France endowed with the fiery soul of Rousseau.

The first use of the word 'Socialist', we are told, is in 1827, in the *Cooperative Magazine*, an Owenite publication. The word meant at that time an Owenite cooperator, not what it has since come to mean. Owen's influence is powerfully felt throughout the movements dealt with in the later chapters of the book, and its strength is shown in the opposition which Owen was able to maintain against the doctrine of the class-war, which became prevalent in Labour circles after the passing of the Reform Bill. Socialism in a more modern sense arose, as an economic theory, largely out of Ricardo's doctrine that labour is the measure of value. Mr. Beer maintains that most of the controversies promoted in Germany by Marx's *Capital* were fought out in essence in England between 1820 and 1830, and he gives an excellent account of the more or less Socialist writers who based themselves upon Ricardo – Thompson, Hodgskin, Ravenstone and the rest. We think, however, that he somewhat over-estimates these writers as compared with their continental successors. He himself points out that their criticism of capitalist society was made largely from the point of view of those who simply regretted the growth of industrialism and failed to see what was progressive in capitalism. In this respect Marx, with his conceptions of necessary epochs in economic development, and his realization of the revolutionary achievements of capitalism as against the old order, is immeasurably superior in intellectual power to any of his English precursors. One cannot say of him, what Mr. Beer truly says *à propos* of the British Socialists of the '20s, that

'Most writers on subjects of moral philosophy, social and economic science, and the history of nations, form their conception not from phenomena which are in the process of shaping themselves, but from phenomena which already belong to the past.'

This observation, we fear, has been true of the immense majority of philosophers, ever since Aristotle failed to notice the doings of Philip and Alexander. It will always be true of men whose ideas are derived from books and 'culture' rather than from contact with men and affairs.

In some ways the most interesting chapters in the book are the last three, which deal with the rise of Chartism, the alliance of Labour with the middle class in the fight for the Reform Bill, and their separation after it was found that the Bill had done nothing for the working class. Chartism had all the characteristics, except

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experience, that mark a modern Labour movement, including the doctrine of the class-war, and the conflict as to political and industrial methods. Its chief organ, the *Poor Man's Guardian*, defied the stamp-tax to which all newspapers were liable, and appeared at a penny, with the announcement on each number: 'Established contrary to Law to try the power of Might against Right'. Nowadays such a contest would be quickly decided, but in those times the State was less powerful or less determined. The *Poor Man's Guardian* was closely connected with 'The London National Union of the Working Classes', founded in 1831, a body of great importance in the history of Socialist ideas. Starting from Owenism, it gave rise to the Chartist movement and to discussions in which such modern policies as Syndicalism were (except in name) invented and first advocated. A good deal of what Mr. Beer has to tell concerning these discussions is, so far as we know, new, and some of it is surprising. It appears, for example, that in 1833, twenty-six years before the *Origin of Species*, meetings of working men were discussing the 'Simian hypothesis' that men were descended from the lower animals.

Coming to matters more nearly allied to Socialism, we find an account of William Benbow, the inventor of the general strike as a method of changing the economic constitution of society. His pamphlet on the subject bore the attractive title: *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*. Every working-class family was to lay in a store of food, and stop work for a month: the month was to be devoted to concerting unity of action in the future and to devising the best constitution of society. The actual phrase 'general strike' was not used by Benbow, but was adopted by the trade unions, and is found as early as 1834. In these years, 1832-34, the trade unions were Syndicalist in outlook. They had been induced to support the Reform Bill, but the outcome had disgusted them with political methods. The degree to which modern ideas were anticipated is shown, for example, in an article in the *Crisis* (April 12, 1834) containing such passages as:

'We have never yet had a House of Commons. The only House of Commons is a House of Trades, and that is only just beginning to be formed. We shall have a new set of boroughs when the unions are organised: every trade shall be a borough, and every trade shall have a council of representatives to conduct its affairs.'

But the movement was short-lived. There was a general collapse in working-class movements in 1834, with which Mr. Beer's first volume ends. Every student of the history of ideas must earnestly hope that nothing will happen to prevent the publication of the second volume. It would be difficult to imagine a book more fair-minded than Mr. Beer's, or showing more mastery of the voluminous material of his subject. In spite of his great erudition, he never loses himself in detail, but shows himself at his best in his general summaries. In conclusion, we wish to associate ourselves with some wise words of Mr. Tawney's:

'At a time when to speak of the unity of Europe seems a cruel jest, a work like that of Mr. Beer, the history by an Austrian scholar of the English contribution to an international movement, is not only a valuable addition to historical knowledge, but a reminder that there are intellectual bonds which preceded the war and will survive it.'