

THE ORIGINS OF BRITISH SOCIALISM, by Morgan Phillips
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'Our rejection of Marxism as a philosophy has not made us any less revolutionary than those who claim to be his official spiritual descendants today and who would impose a new tyranny on the people of the world'

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At the beginning of June, I delivered at the International Socialist Conference in Copenhagen a speech in which I attempted to define, principally for the benefit of our Continental comrades, the philosophy of British Socialism. That speech attracted more than a little attention in the British press, and provoked a certain amount of controversy.

The DAILY WORKER did me the honour of a 2,500 word commentary by T.A. Jackson and a cartoon by Gabriel in which I was depicted as embracing Wesley and turning my back on Karl Marx. THE FREETHINKER charged me with posing as an agent of the Vatican! And Ian Mackay, reporting the speech for the NEWS CHRONICLE, coined the phrase 'Methodism not Marxism'.

That phrase 'Methodism not Marxism' is of course an over-simplification of what I said at Copenhagen. And that over-simplification has unfortunately led to a misinterpretation of my remarks in certain quarters.

What I had to say was not altogether new. It has been said before, for example, by the Prime Minister in his book 'The Labour Party in Perspective' published by the Left Book Club as long ago as 1937. And you may remember that the Prime Minister returned to this theme in a speech which was broadcast from the Royal Academy dinner some little time ago, in which he said that in the Labour Party, 'the influence of William Morris far exceeded that of Karl Marx'.

It is a fact that British Socialism owes but little to Karl Marx, either in theory or practice, or in its methods of organising the working-class. The term 'Socialism' was first used in connection with the work of Robert Owen - the Welsh-born reformer and factory owner - who, in a very real sense was the father not only of Socialism, but also of the Co-operative and Trade Union Movement in this country. Owen was active in the 1830s. The Communist Manifesto did not appear until 1848 and 'Das Kapital' was not published in English until 1886.

Trotsky was not far wrong when he said that the English Revolution brought about by the Puritans was nourished on biblical texts; the French Revolution on the abstractions of democracy and the Russian

Workshops of Democracy.

Methodism, it has been truly said, took the place of the franchise in the lives of the new industrial working class between 1750 and 1850. The system of Church Government evolved by the Methodists was essentially democratic. It provided an atmosphere in which working men learned to govern themselves instead of being governed from above. It gave ordinary folk the opportunity to exercise their mental faculties - it gave them something to do and made them feel that they mattered. And it is a historic truth that the impulses set free by Methodism were translated during the nineteenth Century into radical action in British political life.

It does not of course follow that all Methodists were progressive in their attitudes. For the first fifty years, official Methodism maintained an attitude of strict neutrality in political matters, John Wesley counselled his followers to 'be friends of all and enemies of none', although after his death in 1791, neutrality became more difficult to maintain.

While official Methodism went over to the side of Toryism, the rank and file began to dabble in radical politics. So much so, that in many of the industrial areas, especially in the North, radicalism in politics became synonymous with religious dissent.

The Methodists, moreover, provided the organisational pattern for the radical movement, political associations and friendly societies which thrived apace during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Methodists had evolved a system of 'classes' - small groups usually of twelve to twenty people, who met regularly under a leader in the various localities.

These classes were not only religious meetings but also social gatherings in which men learnt the art of self-government, and were taught to practice social duties not only among themselves but in the wider communities of which they were a part. They provided a new form of democratic fellowship which was adopted on the political side by the Chartists.

When Chartism revived after its defeat in 1839 its reorganisation as a national movement owed a good deal to radicals and democrats who belonged to the Methodist Church. The National Charter Association formed at that time was in fact founded upon a system of 'classes' borrowed from the Methodist form of organisation. In the later Chartist Movement under the direction of a General Council and a central Executive Committee, adherents and supporters of the movement were formed into 'classes'. Each class was composed of ten members under the supervision of a 'leader' appointed by the Executive Committee.

The British Labour Movement, as this time, on both its politi-

Revolution on Marxism. But the history of revolt against oppression in this country goes back even beyond the Revolution of 1688. It goes back to the early peasants' revolts - to John Ball, the priest, who preached that: 'Things cannot go well in England, nor ever will, until all goods are held in common, and until there will be neither serfs nor gentlemen and we shall all be equal'.

The history of revolt moves down through the centuries, through such writings as the 'Utopia' of Sir Thomas More, who wrote:

'... To speak plainly my real sentiments I must freely own that as long as there is any property, and while money is the standard of all other things I cannot think that any nation can be governed either justly or happily: not justly, because the best things will fall to the share of the worst men: nor happily, because all things will be divided among the few (and even these are not in all respects happy); the rest being left to be absolutely miserable. From whence, I am persuaded, that until property is taken away there can be no equitable or just distribution of things, nor can the world be happily governed; for as long as that is maintained, the greatest and the far best part of mankind will be oppressed with a load of cares and anxieties'.

The same spirit becomes vocal again in the republicanism of Milton, in the demands of the Levellers, in the war between King and Parliament, in the Digger Movement and in such tracts as the Ideal Commonwealth of Gerald Winstanley.

The note struck by John Ball and Sir Thomas More, by Milton and Winstanley is repeated again and again in the writings of the pre-Marxian Socialists. And nowhere more than in these writings are the evils arising out of the institution of private property, the existence of an unproductive class, the maldistribution and misuse of wealth, the domination of money, the exploitation of the poor by the rich, and even the indictment of the state as the managing committee of the rich, emphatically exposed.

British Socialists do not consider it at all a reproach or a source of weakness in their intellectual and political position that their movement has been profoundly influenced by religious thought. The very organisation of our British working class movement embodies methods we have taken over from religious institutions.

And here we come to the role of Methodism, although let me make it clear that it was not Methodism alone. I have never said, and do not say now, that our British Socialism is exclusively a product of the Methodist evangelical revival inspired by the Wesleys. As I shall try to show, there were other influences at work. Methodism was only one of a number. At the same time, it would be both wrong and churlish for us to ignore the influence of the Methodist revival, which no less than Socialism was a product of the industrial revolution.

cal and trade union sides, drew heavily for its leadership on the religious communities. In many districts, the Methodists and the dissenting sects supported Chartist principles and opened their Chapels to Chartist meetings.

On the industrial side, Methodists often took the lead and filled positions of influence in the trade unions, particularly among the miners in Northumberland and Durham and in Staffordshire. And it is worth recalling that of the six Men of Dorset whom we remember and revere as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, three - George and James Loveless and Thomas Stanfield - were Methodist local preachers.

At a later stage in the history of the Labour Movement, one sees the emergence of such leaders as Thomas Burt who was one of the first working men elected to Parliament in 1874 and who was a devout Methodist, and later still Keir Hardie himself, who was a Presbyterian, and men like Arthur Henderson and Phillip Snowden who first learnt the art of public speaking as lay preachers.

While it was natural that religious dissent should lead men to radical action in politics, account must also be taken of other influences which were at work in the middle years of the nineteenth century.

British Socialism owes something to the Christian Socialist Movement led in the Established Church by Charles Kingsley and F.D. Maurice who preached that Socialism was the truest form of Christianity at a time when 'respectable' people shuddered at its mention and regarded it as being synonymous with atheism and immorality.

Then on the ethical and aesthetic side there was William Morris, the poet, artist and craftsman who became a socialist because he hated the ugliness and squalor which the industrial revolution had brought in its train.

Morris joined with Hyndman, Harry Quelch, Will Frome, and John Burns to form the Social Democratic Federation in 1884. But this association with Hyndman was shortlived. Morris broke away from the S.D.F. to form the Socialist League: he had neither the patience nor the inclination to study the Marxian economics of the S.D.F. He found Marx's writings dreary in the extreme, and used to say that he did not need the Labour Theory of Value to tell him that the rich robbed the poor, as he could see it with his own eyes.

Although the S.D.F. was for a time the spearhead of working class action, its influence has been far outlived by that of the Fabian Society, formed in the same year as the S.D.F. - in 1884.

The Fabian Society gave to British Socialism much of its intellectual content through such leaders as Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, Graham Wallas and Annie Besant. In philosophy and approach to so-

cialist theory, the S.D.F. and the Fabian Society were poles apart. The Fabian approach was essentially empirical and practical. The S.D.F. was rigidly Marxist and doctrinaire.

Fabian Socialism parted company with Marxism at the point where the controversy arose as to what constituted 'Value'. Instead of the 'Labour theory' of value, the Fabians built upon the 'marginal theory' of value formulated by the English economist, Jevons. The value of a thing, according to this theory, is measured not by the amount of socially necessary labour it contains, but by the utility of a thing at the margin of supply where the 'law of indifference' comes in to determine its exchange value. It is the final utility of a thing, not the identical quantity of socially necessary labour embodied in it, which determines its exchange against another thing with money as the medium.

All this, of course, is elementary. But rejection by the British Socialists of the Marxist theory of value had important practical consequences in the development of the politically organised Labour movement, because of the interaction between Marx's economic thinking, and his theory of politics based upon his historical materialism and his doctrine of the class struggle.

Marx's conception of the political organisation required for the waging of the class war was not accepted by the British Labour Movement. The organisational pattern which we know today was conceived by Keir Hardie, who in 1893 had been instrumental in forming the Independent Labour Party.

Under Hardie's leadership, the I.L.P. drew on moral and idealistic sources to which the S.D.F. had little access, and brought a new crusading spirit into our political life. The basis of its appeal was essentially ethical and humanitarian.

From 1893 to 1900, Hardie and the I.L.P. struggled continuously to convert the Trade Unions to the cause of independent working class representation in Parliament. Hardie saw clearly that a stable and powerful party could only grow out of the organisations which had already been evolved to fight the workers' battles.

While he welcomed the interest and support of middle-class idealists who personally enjoyed a high standard of life, he knew that the mass strength of the new movement could only be drawn from the oppressed sections of the population whose wrongs cried out for remedy. Those oppressed sections had already forged in the trade unions a weapon to fight the exploitation of their Labour. Keir Hardie made it his mission to convince them that this was only half the battle. He succeeded in 1900 with the formation of the Labour Representation Committee at the historic conference at the Memorial Hall in London.

The eclipse of the S.D.F. - the only specifically Marxist body among the Labour Party's forebears - really dates from the Memorial Hall Conference. At that Conference, the S.D.F. proposed that the new party should be based on a recognition of the class-war.

The proposal was rejected by the Conference and because of its insistence on a concept to which the great majority of the working classes were unsympathetic, the S.D.F. dwindled into insignificance.

To state that fact is not to deprecate or belittle the contribution made by the S.D.F. or indeed by the Marxists whom we had always had, and still have, in the Party. But they have always been a minority.

What I have tried to show is that British Socialism is essentially ethical and humanitarian. The British Labour Movement has never lost its ethical inspiration, which goes back far beyond Marx. Marxian Socialism disdains any ethical or Utopian interpretation. There is hardly a trace of human emotion in Marx's writings. He was we all know - and not merely because Lenin told us - profoundly influenced in the development of his teaching by German philosophy, English political economy and the social implications of the French Revolution.

But our rejection of much of his teachings has not been a source of weakness. We do not consider it at all a matter for reproach that our Movement has been profoundly influenced by religious thought and ethical concepts. Our rejection of Marxism as a philosophy has not made us any less revolutionary than those who claim to be his official spiritual descendants today and who would impose a new tyranny on the people of the world.

It is our insistence that our Socialist objectives can be realised within the framework of a free society which distinguishes our philosophy from that of the Communists. We believe that democratic Socialist planning can be fully compatible with the maintenance of essential freedoms - freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association in free trade unions, freedom of worship and freedom before the law. We believe that freedom matters because we believe that people matter as people, because we believe that only in an atmosphere of freedom can men and women develop their talents and personalities to the full.

Ours is the strongest and most successful social democratic Party in the world. Is it without significance that we have in this country one of the weakest Communist Parties in the world; or that the Communists should be on top in just those countries where the Social Democratic Parties are Marxist in philosophy?

The British Labour Party - humanitarian and ethical in its

approach, representative of all classes of the community -stands out as a beacon of hope, lighting the way to a new and better future, free from the tyranny of totalitarianism on the one hand, free from the injustices of unbridled capitalism on the other.