

## *The British Radicals: Fathers of British Socialism*

A familiar tactic of the political historian who wants to keep safely clear of real events is the retreat into philosophy. When Dr. Ewing of Cambridge spoke to the University at Peradeniya in 1959 on the subject of 'Democracy', he said that the variety of parties in the United Kingdom made a full and free choice possible for the voter. When it was objected that the Conservative Party, for instance, had its origin in a period when there was gross inequality, without which it could not have grown up, and that therefore the choice was only nominally free, Dr. Ewing replied that he wasn't there to discuss the merits and demerits of particular political parties—his subject was "pure democracy." But where is this pure democracy to be found? what country can claim it? where is it available for inspection? Such a way of thinking is only an escape from actual history. We get nowhere, we remain distracted with merely theoretical notions, unless we think all the time of specific ideas as they arose in specific situations.

Thus it seems to me misleading to stress, in defining radicalism, the role of the 'philosophic radicals' (e.g. the utilitarians), or indeed to start from any such phase in the 'history of ideas.' 'Radical' was in actual use, increasingly with a capital letter, to name a well-known and very definite political movement in Britain early in the 19th century. There was even a group of that name in the House of Commons, for example Joseph Hume, the mouthpiece of Francis Place, and they stood for very definite things. Of course these things changed. It is the essence of any political movement that while it may stay the same nominally, its content changes with the growing society it exists in. But from the first until at least the rise of Chartism the Radicals had this in common, that they were the most forward body in their society, and the most conscious and articulate spokesmen for the changes in class, in economy, that were going forward. After the Napoleonic War, the Radicals were for Parliamentary Reform: working-class Radicals like Cobbett and Orator Hunt worked hard to win a reform which directly benefited only the bourgeoisie, because such a move was, objectively, progressive, an advance without which the

next stage might never have been reached. By mid-century, after the break-up of Chartism and the repeal of the Corn Laws, the official Radicals were progressive mainly in that they stood for the new big-business interests against the hereditary land-owners. Yet they were still progressive in the other sense that, out of the whole of England, only John Bright's Radicals and the trade unions hailed Lincoln's proclamation emancipating the negro slaves.<sup>1</sup> So the movement changed, split up, moved forward and developed, or got left behind. But always it is radicals of one sort or another who make up the political vanguard.

This has implied that the forward movement in the country was not clear, not smoothly continuous. The husks of outworn ideas and social forms survive into a changed age, like rocks and other débris on the back of a glacier. Old-fashioned illusions, utopias, wistful regressions to a former, forever replaced condition of society remain, masking the actual new problems. A most influential one in that Britain was religion, or religiosity. In 1813 there were mass executions of the Luddites—the old stocking-makers who had smashed and burned the new stocking frames which were flooding the market with shoddy goods and driving them out of work. These men sang on the scaffold, not the 'International' as they might have done a century later, but—Methodist hymns.<sup>2</sup> As Eric Hobsbawm said in his recent *Primitive Rebels*, "the ideology of political labour movements descends from that of a bourgeois revolution fought and won before secular ideology had reached the middle classes." Thus Robert Owen might be called the first of British socialists. Yet one of his early propaganda bodies was named the 'Society of Rational Religionists' and its agitators were known as social missionaries. A general strike proposed by the Chartists in 1838 was even called a 'sacred month.'<sup>3</sup> This whole trend can be put in a formula. Once there were just chapels, e.g. Methodist chapels. In the later 19th century there arose what were called 'socialist chapels'—really meeting places for lectures on politics and society. And nowadays there are plain socialist meeting-places.<sup>4</sup> In this way the true political

1. E. H. Carr, *Karl Marx* (1938 ed.), pp. 116, 182.

2. E. P. Thompson, 'Homage to Tom Maguire': see *Essays in Labour History*, ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (1960), p. 290, n.1. The pamphlet-poems which the Nottingham framework-knitters wrote in an appeal for charity were also hymn-like—in their metre, their turn of phrase, and their spirit of dutiful meekness (see *The Common Muse*, 1957, ed. V. de Sola Pinto and A. E. Rodway, pp. 118—9).

3. E. Frow, 'Robert Owen': *Marxism Today*, October 1958, pp. 298—9; A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (1956 ed.), p. 434.

4. In 1848 there was a 'Communist Church'; and a 'Chartist Church' arose after the Chartist collapse: see G. D. H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People* (1956 ed.), p. 321; Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place* (1925 ed.), p. 378.

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impulse, arising out of actual events, must struggle to shake off the husk of the outworn ideology it has been disguised in. As dialectics puts it, "forms change eternally in consequence of the 'higher development of their content.'"<sup>5</sup> The Church form of institution is transformed out of recognition as the true social nature of its content emerges ever more openly.

This overlapping of historical stages is strikingly embodied, early in the Radical movement, by William Cobbett, a Radical whose unclearness as to the possible lines of progress took the form of an urge to get back to, or stay in, the healthy rural England which was now being despoiled. Cobbett did hanker after a rural England now irretrievably changed, he was too much of a ditch-dweller wholly to go with the new industrial and proletarian movement. Yet he was an out-and-out *radical*—bitterly against the selfishness of the wealthy, wholeheartedly sympathising with the country workers who were starving on a diet of potatoes or forced by the poor-law regulations to work virtually as slaves for the better-off farmers, or with the town workers toiling in the unaccustomed factories in a temperature of 85%. To assess Cobbett fairly, we must ask: What was he for? and what was he against? He was for a minimum living wage for everyone. He was for Parliamentary Reform. He was for machine industry *if* it would help to feed and clothe and house the people, and not be merely a means to extract profits for the benefit of non-workers.<sup>6</sup> And he was against all means whereby unproductive drones could live in luxury on the toil of others—against Stock-Exchange swindlers, against sinecures, against a standing army; and also against emigration, as the easy, inhuman, Malthusian method of coping with starvation, unemployment, and destitution. Cobbett did hark back too much. But the whole burden of his most influential, most telling writings, which made him *the* Radical agitator of the crucial period leading up to the Reform of 1832, is *contemporary* matters, the contemporary struggle against reaction and privilege. And the stand he took on these things was progressive, forward-looking, far, far in advance, not only of the Cannings and Sidmouths but of Bentham or James Mill or Francis Place.

A passage of characteristic Cobbett will show his instinctive radicalism. It is from his article in his *Political Register* for August 30, 1823, analysing the Combination Laws in the year before they were repealed:

5. G. V. Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History* (trans. A. Rothstein, ed. Moscow, 1956), p. 108.

6. Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (Everyman ed., 1940), II, p. 53 (entry for August 30, 1826).

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Well, Wilberforce; the combiners are to go to gaol or to the House of Correction, to the former for not more than three months, to the latter for not more than two months, for the first going off. . . .

Now, you will observe, Wilberforce, that this punishment is inflicted in order to prevent workmen from uniting together, and by such union, to obtain an addition to their wages, or, as in the case of Ryding and Horrocks, to prevent their wages from being reduced. Every man's labour is his *property*. It is something which he has to sell or otherwise dispose of. The cotton spinners had their labour to sell or otherwise dispose of; or at least they thought so. They were pretty free to sell it before this Combination Law of 1800. They had their labour to sell. The purchasers were powerful and rich, and wanted them to sell it at what the spinners deemed too low a price. In order to be a match for the rich purchasers, the sellers of the labour agree to assist one another, and thus to live as well as they can; till they can obtain what they deem a proper price. Now, what was there wrong in this? What was there either unjust or illegal? If men be attacked either in the market or in their shops; if butchers, farmers, millers be attacked with a view of forcing them to sell their commodities at a price lower than they demand, the assailants are deemed rioters, and are hanged! In 1812, a poor woman who seized, or rather, assisted to seize a man's potatoes in the market at Manchester, and, in compelling him to sell them at a lower price than that which he asked for them: this poor woman, who had, very likely, a starving family at home, *was hanged by the neck till she was dead!* Now, then, if it was a crime worthy of death to attempt to force potatoes from a *farmer*, is it a crime in a cotton spinner to attempt to prevent others from getting his labour from him at a price lower than he asks for it? . . . .

This Combination Act does, however, say that the "*masters shall not combine against the workmen.*" Oh! well then, how fair this Act is! . . . Does not the law say this; and does it not empower the two Justices to *send the masters to the common gaol and the House of Correction?* No, the devil a bit does it do such a thing! No such a thing does it do. However flagrant the combination; however oppressive; however cruel; though it may bring starvation upon thousands of persons; though it may tend (as in numerous cases it has tended) to produce breaches of the peace, insurrections and all their consequences; though such may be the nature and tendency of these

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combinations of the masters, the utmost punishment that the two Justices can inflict, is a *fine of twenty pounds* ! But, and now mark the difference. Mark it, Wilberforce ; note it down as a proof of the happiness of your “*free British labourers*” : mark, that the masters cannot be called upon by the Justices to *give evidence against themselves and their associates*.<sup>7</sup>

Cobbett writes as he must have spoken ; and his arguments have the absolute literalness of one accustomed to driving home a point before simple people. At the same time the economics in that passage are not unsophisticated ; and Cobbett is concerning himself in the most detailed way with the conditions of the town workers. In that passage we can see unmistakably why the early Radicals are to be viewed as the fathers of socialism in Britain. The impulse in Cobbett's argument is his humane fellow-feeling for poor workers caught in the vice of capitalism. He sees as well as Marx that the proletarian worker lives solely by selling his labour-power. And he fearlessly applies to the owner exactly the same standard as to the worker. Cobbett's spirit is still needed to-day, when the British Press is full of hints about the dangerous power of the trade unions but says next to nothing of the truly sinister power of the monopolies.

So Cobbett was in the political vanguard of his time. And after Reform he took his rightful place as a Radical Member of Parliament, for Oldham, then a new industrial centre. Of course his radicalism was shot through with streaks of the out-of-date, the unrealistic, the cranky (e.g. the implication that runs through the *History of the Protestant Reformation* and the *Rural Rides* that the needy should be cared for by charity, as they had been in the days of the monasteries). It could not have been otherwise at so early a stage of the progressive movement. Cobbett was wont to deplore and grieve over the loss of the harmonious ‘chain of connection’ between owner and worker, and sigh for the return of this idyllic harmony.<sup>8</sup> That is, he could not see that an age of class struggle had come to pass. And he often speaks, in the old pre-socialist way, as though poverty and inequality were inevitable, as though they provided the only conceivable incentive to hard work, and so on.<sup>9</sup> But he was too effective a radical for his past-looking to be properly classed with the hearties, the Merrie-Englanders,

7. Quoted from J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Town Labourer, 1760—1832* (1920 ed.), pp. 127—9.

8. See Asa Briggs, ‘The Language of “Class” in Early Nineteenth Century England’ : *Essays in Labour History*, pp. 45—6.

9. E.g. *Rural Rides*, II, pp. 233, 294.

the *laudatores temporis acti* pure and simple. It should rather be formulated in a way that suggests his relationship to the new developments that were then going forward. Thus a recent American sociologist, Neil J. Smelser, writes in his *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* :

In terms of the social division of labour, Cobbettism represents a de-differentiation of roles. The re-establishment of the domestic economy—which fused economic with other family functions—would erase that great complexity of ‘artificial’ commercial and industrial roles. In this sense Cobbettism was regressive ; it was an idealisation of a *less differentiated* form of society. Such idealisation appears frequently when social roles are under pressure in different directions. The appeal had an unrealistic ring, furthermore, because of the sheer impossibility of such a mighty retrogression in the face of recent changes in population and social structure and in the face of the dominant English values of the day.

And he explains how in this Cobbett was at one with a whole class :

The appeal of Cobbettism had an appropriate symbolic appeal for the weavers and other dying artisan groups after the war. The release of weavers from the military aggravated the effects of overcrowding, the wage-cuts, and the Irish immigrants. The weavers, with some reason, attached their woes to the new industrial society. Furthermore, the radical reform of Parliament—for which there were some powerful arguments in any case—represented a simple yet grandiose appeal to restore a society in which the outmoded artisan could flourish.<sup>10</sup>

There, then, is how an idea which, historically, is futile can keep its appeal. Yet it would be misleading to say, as it often is said, that *the* division amongst thinkers in the early days of Radicalism was between those who accepted industrial change and those who resisted it. Cobbett was a countryman ; yet he finished up M.P. for Oldham, and his life’s work had gone objectively—whatever he was trying for himself—to forwarding the shift of the balance of power to the towns : the industrialists, the proletariat, the rise of urban-centred ideas. In this age in which the class struggle first became naked and conscious, the basic division was between those who accepted industrialism as a source of private wealth and those who wanted

10. (1959), p. 251.

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to secure its whole product for the workers. Of course one can divide up people in all kinds of ways. But there should be good reasons for one's classifications ; they should be, indeed, in line with the main course of historical developments. In effect the Radical movement was the first purposive workers' movement ; hence it was the source of the later, conscious socialism ; and as the lead was taken over by Chartism, the most advanced thinkers were coming out explicitly with a programme that anticipates a great deal of what was shortly to be given coherence by Marx and Engels.

This radicalism was very much the natural ideology of its age. And that is surely the best way to approach it—not as the brain-child of a few individuals so much as the coming into ideological consciousness of the most powerful new forces in society. So I had better say briefly what was the new state of society which was creating the necessity for socialism. The early 19th century was a time of violent disorganisation, civil upset; but the opposite pole to that was greater organisation : the two occur side by side. Thus in 1797 came the Nore mutinies ; in 1798 the Irish rebellion ; in 1810 a strike of the Durham miners ; in 1811 the Luddites ; in 1817 the so-called Derbyshire 'Insurrection' ; in 1818 strikes in Lancashire ; in 1819 the slaughter of the worker demonstrators at Manchester ; in 1826 riots in Lancashire against the powered looms ; in 1831 riots in Bristol and Nottingham—a non-stop series of most violent troubles, the growing pains of industrial capitalism. To contemporaries (to Wordsworth and to the Tory government) it seemed as though the day of wrath had come ; the flood-gates would give ; civilisation was doomed. But in the midst of turmoil, necessitated by it, indeed another face of the same whole process, there arose organisation. After the Napoleonic War, as famine and destitution became acute, people realised with bewilderment that they didn't even know whether the population was getting bigger or smaller. Statistics, and the far-flung administrative machinery they involve, were in their infancy. But in 1801 the first comprehensive census was taken. At the same time Robert Owen was pioneering the planned society, in which industry, schooling, housing, employment, buying and selling would all be planned and run together, for the common good. Co-operatives spread rapidly : the first was set up in Brighton in 1828, then Owen took over the movement, and in a year or two there were five hundred.<sup>11</sup> At the same time his Labour Exchanges, where men could buy outside the profit-making retail trade by means of 'labour notes,' were growing up. In 1826 was founded the University of London, the first alternative to Oxford and Cambridge, which

11. Elic Halévy, *The Liberal Awakening* (1949 ed.), pp. 281—2.

then did little more than polish or 'finish' the sons of landed gentry who intended to succeed their fathers, or supply intending Church of England clergymen with the necessary minimum of Classics. Government was also making itself more and more responsible for keeping a check on the fate of the people. In 1833 an Act was passed providing for factory inspection. In 1837 the registration of births, marriages, and deaths was made compulsory.<sup>12</sup> Communications became rapid and far-flung: in 1839 penny postage came in, so that communicating with a fellow-countryman in another county was no longer the privilege of lords and their hangers-on.

The sides of organisation most important for my theme I have left till last. First, the growth of towns is itself a kind of organisation—chaotic though it seemed at the time. In the century up to 1821, the density of population doubled. In 1790 there were twice as many country as town workers; by 1840 the reverse was the case. And during the life of the early Radical movement the industrial towns increased their population on average three or four times.<sup>13</sup> Everyone knows the appalling social mess that resulted from this—one which the now-developing countries should be able to avoid. But when people are so crammed together, a certain minimum control and forethought becomes indispensable—sewage, piped water, municipal housing, the lighting of the streets. All kinds of standards must be laid down officially and—usually after a gap of a good many years—even enforced. For example, Marx found the Factory Inspectors' reports invaluable in writing *Capital*; and, after a further lag, some of the factory legislation was actually implemented

The kind of organisation which belongs at the heart of our subject is the organisation of labour—the rise of the trade unions and of proletarian class-consciousness. The men who were developing industry brought about the herding of people into towns and factories so as to maximise the profits made by operating expensive machines. But under such conditions, in the congested town or on the factory floor, the workmen could not but learn to *co-operate*. By welding men together in mutually dependent masses—by *socialising* production—the capitalist was building, inside his ver own system, the means whereby, sometime in the following century,

12. Dr Wakley, 'the Radical coroner' of West Middlesex, held inquests "even on paupers." One such died scalded in a workhouse copper and was quietly buried. The workhouse master, censured by the coroner's jury, sneered that "The jury have found a verdict, but they have not identified the body." Said Wakley, "If this is not the body of the man who was killed in your vat, pray, sir, how many paupers have you boiled?" (Cole and Postgate, *The Common People*, p. 315).

13. Cole and Postgate, *The Common People*, pp. 136, 305—6.

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that system would be overthrown.<sup>14</sup> So, at the start of this period, strikes were held when the tiny 'combinations' or early unions had saved enough money to live without wages for a week or two.<sup>15</sup> And sometimes the strike was barely distinct from the riot—the "outburst of desperation" at intolerable living conditions.<sup>16</sup> But from every incident the workers learn. Unions accumulate funds, and experience. They think of amalgamating, to set up a solid front against the employers. For example, even as Chartism was petering out in the late 1840s, unions of trade unions were growing up to carry on the work of solidarity. Throughout the 1840s the miners were organised nationally. They could pay a lawyer £ 1,000 a year to fight every case that involved their interests. The engineering unions, soon to be organised as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, fought together for shorter hours and higher wages. Two National Associations, for the Protection and for the Employment of Labour, were formed, led by the Sheffield craftsmen and the Yorkshire miners, and the joint President of both was—a Radical M.P. The Protection Association even considered founding a trade-union political party—the first time a working-class party based on the trade unions had been mooted.<sup>17</sup>

The declared object of the Association for the Employment of Labour shows how a quite formed and conscious socialism was now the core of British radicalism. It aimed to revive co-operative production, dormant since 1834, and "to aid the members' wage-struggles by means of collective self-employment, with a view to the ultimate supersession of the capitalist system of competition."<sup>18</sup> This is very bold and drastic; it shows that the workers are now fully aware of what their interests are. But it is also vague as to *means*. It has the shortcomings, but also the revolutionary seed, defined by Marx with regard to the constitution proclaimed in Paris during the revolution of 1848:

The first draft of the constitution, made before the June days, still contained the *droit du travail*, the right to work, the first clumsy formula

14. This basic trend in modern development is defined in Marx and Engels's *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Moscow, 1957 ed.), pp. 62—4; Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 172; Marx, *Capital* (ed. Engels, trans. Moore and Aveling, New York, 1906 ed.), I, pp. 257—8, 552, 836—7; Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Pelican, 1938 ed.), p. 395; Lenin, *cit.* N.K. Krupskaya, *Lenin* (Moscow, 1959 ed.), p. 462.

15. E.g. Wallas, *Life of Place*, pp. 8—9.

16. See Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (Moscow, 1952 ed.), p. 51.

17. Cole and Postgate, *The Common People*, pp. 316—7, 318.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 317. Compare the remark made in July 1960 by Frank Cousins, secretary of the powerful British Transport and General Workers Union: "Our object is not to enable the worker to live under capitalism, but to do away with capitalism." (*London Observer*, 28.8.60).

wherein the revolutionary demands of the proletariat are summarised. It was transformed into the *droit d'assistance*, the right to public relief, and what modern state does not feed its paupers in some form or other? The right to work is, in the bourgeois sense, an absurdity, a miserable, pious wish. But behind the right to work stands the power over capital; behind the power over capital, the appropriation of the means of production, their subjection to the associated working class and, therefore, the abolition of wage labour, of capital and of their mutual relations.<sup>19</sup>

So now, in considering the content of radicalism during this period, we have to note that it is both drastic and incoherent, both dynamic and short-winded, doomed to false starts, glorious sweeping hopes that founder in a few years every time. For one thing, the new form of society had engendered the need for a militant party of the working masses—yet, politically, the masses were still playing along with the industrial employers who also were fighting, against the hereditary landlords, for more scope and power. And wherever the bourgeoisie were allowed to participate in the radical movement, they soft-pedalled it, led it aside from the main track, sold it to the governing class. Halévy says about the changing nature of industrial unrest:

The riots of 1812 had been merely the revolt of misery and want, the incoherent rising of a disorganised and leaderless rabble, which immediately united against it all the wealthy and ruling classes. The riots of 1815, on the other hand, were tolerated, encouraged, perhaps even directed, by leaders of industry, bankers, and stock-brokers, who were bitterly hostile to the policy of the landowners and agriculturalists.<sup>20</sup>

But of course the Reform manifesto which emerged from these troubles contained not one item clearly in favour of those rebellious masses. Again, in 1842 near Manchester some firms reduced wages, in spite of a trade improvement, with the aim of forcing the workers out on strike and thus conveniently pressuring the government to repeal the Corn Laws—without incriminating the bourgeoisie. But the mass meetings held by these workers discussed—not the Corn Laws—but “a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work.”<sup>21</sup> In general at this period the demands in the People’s Charter

19. *The Class Struggles in France, 1848—1850* (Moscow, 1952 ed.), p. 103.

20. Elic Halévy, *England in 1815* (1949 ed.), pp. 149—50.

21. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*: see Marx and Engels, *On Britain* (Moscow, 1953), pp. 266—7.

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were treated as the end, the terminus, by the bourgeois Radicals. They were only the beginning for the militant proletariat.<sup>22</sup> Finally in the 1860s the mass campaign for universal suffrage was at a point of near revolt which seemed on the verge of leading to revolution. But the bourgeois Radicals along with the leaders of the General Council of Trade Unions (who, as skilled workmen, were already developing a craft snobbery which cut them off from the unskilled and also unorganised labourers) made their peace with the government, and the rising was betrayed from the inside.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the truly radical movement was jeopardised both by sapping from outside and by its own primitive incoherences. "But utopian Socialism was *right* from the point of view of world history, as it was a symptom, an expression, a herald of the class which, born of capitalism, has by now, the beginning of the twentieth century, become a mass force capable of putting an end to capitalism and irresistibly proceeding in that direction."<sup>24</sup> At every point what the original Radicalism foreshadows, often in a fantastic guise, is the later clear socialism. The editor of the *Birmingham Journal*, R. K. Douglas, one of the live wires of the provincial movement, thought of drafting a petition for working men's rights in biblical language, and at the height of the Chartist agitation he was dreaming of "a petition signed by two million men, drawn, like a Cheshire cheese of twenty feet diameter, in a cart of white horses to the House of Commons."<sup>25</sup> That almost comic vision of abundance is amazingly akin to the utopianism of medieval times—what Shakespeare shows us in the speeches of Jack Cade in *Henry VI*.<sup>26</sup> But there are also at this time clear anticipations of modern, scientific socialism. Thus Bronterre O'Brien, the outstanding mind in the Radical movement, the editor of the Chartist *Poor Man's Guardian*, thought of the amalgamated trade unions as the basis "of a new kind of social organisation where Parliament would be replaced by a House of Trades."<sup>27</sup> That is very close to the 'guild socialism' which developed as a wing of the Fabians during the Great War. And there was also a trend of opinion (still favouring the trade union movement to this day) that the workers should keep clear of politics and trust to purely industrial action as a means of fighting for their

22. *Ibid.*, p. 270; Morton, *People's History of England*, p. 433.

23. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 221 and n.

24. Lenin, 'Two Utopias' (October 1912): see *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1952), I, Part 2, p. 309.

25. Asa Briggs, 'The Local Background of Chartism' in Briggs (Ed.), *Chartist Studies* (1959), pp. 22, 24.

26. Part II, Act IV, Scene ii, e.g. "There shall be in England, seven halfe peny Loaves sold for a peny; the three hoop'd pot, shall have ten hoopes, and I will make it Fellony to drink small Beere..."

27. *Poor Man's Guardian* for 19.10.1833: cit. Briggs, *Chartist Studies*, p. 13.

rights. After the collapse of the trade unions in 1834, Radical leaders such as Henry Hetherington and William Lovett realised that without the political arm (universal suffrage) their movement was helpless. But some of the Leeds trade-unionists were still talking dramatically about a general strike as the hammer-blow which would smash all resistance.<sup>28</sup> That is the spirit of the syndicalism which was so strong in the days of Tom Mann and Ben Tillett in the later 19th century, and it was still influential as late as the General Strike of 1926, to which many workers pinned such hopes.

These workers in the Chartist era were, however, thorough socialists. This shows both in the reactions to them of the 'philosophic Radicals' and in their own demands. Let us consider those demands. The usual reaction to the dog-in-the-manger Reform of 1832 is given in a petition presented by the Glasgow workers on Glasgow Green to Lord Durham, an advanced Whig. They recognised that in two years the Reformed Parliament had freed slaves, reformed the Court of Chancery and the Irish Church, introduced municipal self-government in Scotland, and 'reformed' the English Poor Law.<sup>29</sup> But none of this "bore, except with additional burdens, upon the condition of the British labourer." There was a "base embargo upon the bread of life" (the Corn Laws), unequal taxation, an "unhallowed restriction on the acquirement of useful knowledge" (the Stamp Act on periodicals), and a host of pensioners "still left to fatten upon the fruits of our toil." What they wanted above all was "a greater infusion of popular feeling into the legislature."<sup>30</sup>

There is the immediate programme. The movement also had a body of theory which contains a host of the key points which were common property of socialism later in the century: labour as the source of wealth, the idea of surplus value as the means of exploitation, the propertylessness of the working class, the need for a complete change of economic and class system. In 1832 John Doherty, most militant of the Lancashire trade union leaders, brushed aside Francis Place's argument that the workers had never got anywhere politically without the help of the bourgeoisie, with the remark "that they were now resolved to have their *rights*... They were

28. G. D. H. Cole, *Attempts at General Union* (1953), p. 143.

29. I put 'reformed' in commas because that brain-child of the utilitarian 'philosophic Radicals,' the 1834 Poor Law, was in practice so harsh a measure. "The workhouses [which it set up] were universally known as 'Bastilles,' orders were given by local leaders to destroy them, rioting was widespread... The attempt to apply the New Poor Law 'did more to sour the hearts of the labouring population than did the privations consequent on all the actual poverty of the land.'" (*Chartist Studies*, p. 11).

30. W. L. Mathieson, *Church and Reform in Scotland, 1797—1843* (Glasgow, 1916), p. 234.

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now organised, were determined to bring the matter to issue, and if it were possible they could fail, it were better to be slain in the attempt than to go on as their enemies, the wealth accumulators, now made them go, in misery unmitigated, and as they intended, perpetually.”<sup>31</sup> That is reckless—both desperate and insanely optimistic (“if it were possible. . .”). But the movement also had its matured theory. The Radical thinkers knew the political issue: Bronterre O’Brien wrote in the *Poor Man’s Guardian* in 1835: “Where the few make the Government, the Government will govern only for the few. . . In England the Government is made *by and for* the middle and upper classes alias for those who live by fraud and force on the plundered industry of the poor. So long as the Government continues in such hands, neither Mr. Owen nor anybody else will effect the slightest practical change.”<sup>32</sup> They knew the economic issue: part of the catechism of the Owenite Grand National Consolidated Trade Union ran as follows: “Do you fully acknowledge that labour is the source of all wealth? And that those who labour have an unimpeachable right to secure to themselves, and for their own disposal, all its benefits and advantages?”<sup>33</sup> Those are just the terms of the famous Welsh miners’ syndicalist manifesto of 1913, ‘The Miners’ Next Step’;<sup>34</sup> and they are just the terms of the thoroughgoing socialist constitution which the Webbs drafted for the Labour Party in 1918.

The Radical movement as early as the 1820’s also had its economic thinkers who already, even in the heyday of classical political economy, had begun to work out an equalitarian economics which was, we might say, a century or more in advance of anything thought out by Ricardo or Malthus or the Mills. William Thompson, the Owenite economist, subtitled his book *Labour Rewarded* (1827), ‘How to secure to Labour the whole product of its exertions.’ Thomas Hodgskin, author of *Labour Defended Against the Claims of Capital* (1825), defined the propertylessness of the proletariat: “There is no longer anything which we can call the natural reward of individual labour. Each labourer produces only some part of a whole, and each part, having no value or utility in itself, there is nothing on which the labourer can seize, and say: It is my product, this

31. Wallas, *Life of Place*, p. 266.

32. Quoted by Betty Grant, ‘Robert Owen and Co-operative Production’: *Marxism Today*, November 1958, p. 338.

33. Quoted by E. Frow, ‘Robert Owen’: *Marxism Today* (October 1958), p. 297. Later thinkers have seen that there is a drawback to the popular demand for the ‘whole product.’ A socialist society must keep back a proportion of the product to pay for the facilities that are made available to the people as a whole (see, e.g., Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow, 1959 ed., pp. 277—8). I.e. the ‘whole product’ demand is coloured by utopianism: it represents the level of scientific socialism then possible.

34. See A. L. Morton and George Tate, *The British Labour Movement, 1770—1920* (1956), p. 239.

I will keep to myself.”<sup>35</sup> That is, Hodgskin sees that the socialisation of production has superseded private property for the mass of the people ; although he cannot yet draw the conclusion that it has thereby necessitated going over to property in common.<sup>36</sup> And he also defines what is virtually surplus value : “ Before a labourer can have a loaf of bread he must give a quantity of labour more than the loaf costs, by all that quantity which pays the profit of the farmer, the corn dealer, the miller and the baker, with profit on all the buildings they use ; and he must moreover pay with the produce of his labour the rent of the landlord.”<sup>37</sup>

This most searching and drastic socialist theory arose in the minds of these Radicals because they went the whole way with the working-class movement. Their fullness of economic and political understanding is inseparable from their full militancy. No sneaking adherence to the party of property and privilege clouds their vision. They were active Radicals—Radicals in effect, in practice. And this was just what the ‘philosophic Radicals’ could not stomach. Consider the record of Francis Place, the one-time breeches maker and master tailor, who was behind so many Radical manoeuvres from the War to the 1830s. At the time of Reform, the London National Union of the Working Classes was getting a great following, its ideas were taking root. Says Place, “ The consequence of this excitement was a general persuasion that the whole produce of the labourers’ and workmen’s hands should remain with them.”<sup>38</sup> Place states this as though it were self-evidently absurd, far-fetched, even scandalous. And his correspondence with James Mill shows how Mill even more shrank back as he saw the working-men moving further and further away from the safe ground of ‘philosophic’ Radicalism, with its programme of petty reforms—objectively, if not consciously, in the interests of the ‘liberal’ bourgeoisie.<sup>39</sup> On the eve of Reform, Place said that the middle classes wanted the Reform Bill to prevent revolution, the workers wanted to block it to bring about revolution<sup>40</sup> (an excellent militant tactic, although doomed to abort in those early days). But of course Place worked night and day to get the Bill moved. He and Bentham and the Mills were ‘philosophic Radicals,’ no doubt. But in that case we cannot dodge the conclusion that

35. Quoted by Marx, *Capital*, I (*op. cit.*), XIV, 4, p. 390, n.l.

36. As was noticed at the time by William Thompson in his *Labour Rewarded* : quoted in Max Morris (Ed.), *From Cobbett to the Chartists* (1948), p. 81.

37. Quoted *Ibid.*, p. 76.

38. Wallas, *Life of Place*, p. 266, n. 2.

39. E.g. Wallas, *Life of Place*, 274 n., 352, 354. See also Halévy’s *Thomas Hodgskin*, p. 128 : quoted by Brian Simon, *Studies in the History of Education, 1780—1870* (1960), p. 156.

40. Wallas, *Life of Place*, p. 290.

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a philosophic Radical is a *bourgeois* radical—an inveterate soft-peddler and side-stepper of those thorough-going demands, political and economic, which alone can “secure for the workers by hand or brain the whole fruits of their industry” (to quote from that clause 4 of the British Labour Party constitution which its right-wing leadership is at present trying to get rid of, in the teeth of trade-union opposition). The philosophic Radicals were the forerunners of the Fabians—similarly equivocal, similarly compromising, a similar drag on the full onward force of the workers’ radical movement.

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