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MARXISM AND BRITISH SOCIALISM

What is the nature of British socialism? and why did it take the form it did? A common perspective on these questions stresses British exceptionalism, pointing out Britain was the only major European state where no important Marxist movement emerged. From this perspective, our questions become: how does British socialism diverge from Marxism? and why was there no Marxism in Britain? I want to move away from this perspective because it incorporates two problematic assumptions. The first is an essentialist account of Marxism: there is a true socialism from which the British variety departed. It makes sense to draw a clear distinction between Marxism and British socialism only if we believe certain doctrines are necessary to a Marxist outlook, or at least incompatible with a Marxist outlook. The second is a teleological view of history: there is a natural path of historical development from which Britain departed. It makes sense to look for an explanation of Britain's departure from the norm only if we accept a theory leading us to expect Britain to follow it. I will argue British Marxists espoused a Marxism infused with themes from their national culture, and British socialists criticised Marxism from a perspective incorporating the same themes. This blurs the distinctions between Marxism, British Marxism, and British socialism, thereby suggesting British socialism is a product of an encounter between Marxism and an indigenous culture.

When Marxism attracted a following in Britain after 1881, its adherents approached Marx's teachings through two native traditions; radicalism and romanticism. Of course, Marx had British associates within the International, notably labour leaders who did not think of themselves as socialists, and old Chartists who did think of themselves as socialists. But few of them could be called Marxists, and there certainly was no organised Marxist group. This

changed in 1881 when Hyndman and Bax wrote articles introducing Marx to the British public, and Hyndman founded the Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.).

The S.D.F. was a product of the radical tradition.¹ Hyndman was a conservative radical, and the members included popular radicals, many of who were followers of the old Chartist Bronterre O'Brien, liberal radicals, and others drawn from the secularist and positivist movements.

It was as radicals that the British Marxists approached Marx's economic theory. Although radicalism was composed of a diffuse set of not always compatible doctrines, all radicals accepted a post-Ricardian economic theory with landlords being condemned for the unearned increment they acquired from monopolising of a factor of production. The British Marxists remained deeply influenced by this cultural legacy. They ignored Marx's distinction between use and exchange value, so they rarely analyzed exploitation in terms of an inherent property of labour in a market economy: surplus value was not a result of labour having a use value greater than its exchange value. Instead, they saw exploitation as a result of monopolies: the capitalists' had a monopoly of the means of production enabling them to pay workers less than the true value of their labour. Thus, to end exploitation one had to do away with monopolies, not with the system of labour as a commodity. It was because the British Marxists emphasised the evil effects of monopolies that their programmes in the 1880s still gave pride of place to nationalisation of the land; landlords remained the leading representatives of monopoly, and they did so irrespective of whether or not they bought labour as a commodity.

The radical legacy also appears in the British Marxists' attitude to political issues. Radicals emphasised political ills, or at least political reform as a means to cure social ills. Most Chartists followed liberal radicals in calling almost exclusively for political reforms such as an extension of the franchise, and even social Chartists believed a truly

democratic state was the vital requirement for creating a just social order. The Marxists of the S.D.F. agreed. They did not see the political realm as a reflection of the socio-economic one, so they did not insist on a social revolution. Instead, they were committed to contesting elections to secure control of parliament from where they could oversee a peaceful transition to socialism. They wanted a truly Democratic Party combining socialists - who were the vanguard of the radical movement - with other radicals to conquer Parliament, extend the suffrage, and promote social reform where necessary.

The core of radicalism was a righteous, moral indignation at privilege and injustice. Although radicals followed Ricardo in regarding economics as a science, they saw the results of this science as something to be fed into a moral grid, not something problematising all moral standpoints. Many British Marxists understood Marxism to be a denunciation of injustice requiring them to right wrongs, at least as much as a science proving the downfall of capitalism. Their economic theory encouraged this view by portraying exploitation as a matter of monopolists cheating people, not a system based on buying and selling labour. Marx can be seen as something of an Old Testament prophet denouncing wrong-doing, but this view was not common in the 1880s. Indeed, several British Marxists, notably Bax, complained Marx neglected the ethical dimension of socialism. They saw their allegiance to Marxism as a response to a moral demand based on Victorian values of duty and service. They argued Marxism ought to be about the radical reconstruction of the social organism in accord with an ethic of social responsibility.

The other cultural legacy British Marxists brought with them was romanticism.² Although radicalism and romanticism often went along together, and although we can not say radicals uniformly remained within the S.D.F., we would not be mistaken if we said Marxists most influenced by romanticism formed the Socialist League together with William Morris and J. B. Glasier.

British romanticism incorporated a reaction against the deductive science of economics practised by Marx as well as Ricardo. A dislike of economics, or at least a concern to moralise economics, was part of the legacy of romanticism to British Marxism. Glasier recalled Morris saying, "I do not know what Marx's theory of value is, and I'm damned if I want to know."³ It is possible the story is apocryphal, but it tells us much about Glasier's views, and it captures a general tone found in Morris' writings. Many British Marxists did not care about abstract economic theory. Their concern was with a romantic conception of a beautiful and harmonious existence, and they thought capitalism, and the industrialism associated with it, were antithetical to this existence. Thus, their interest in economics was more sociological than theoretical: they argued capitalism should be replaced because it was ugly or immoral in its effect; they did not study the operation of capitalism as a scientific guide to future development.

A neglect of economics opened up a space for the romantic moralising of British Marxists. Their condemnations of capitalism lingered not on its facilitating exploitation, but on its mitigating against a beautiful, harmonious mode of existence. They attacked degrading patterns of work which replaced traditional craftsmen with deskilled appendages to machines: workers no longer could take pride in producing quality goods stamped with their individuality; instead they were cogs in a mechanised process turning out shoddy, standardised, unsightly commodities. It was because British Marxists were concerned with this romantic moralising that they were more ready than Marx had been to discuss in detail the form a socialist society should take. After all, their main reason for working for socialism was to realise a particular sort of society; they attacked capitalism because they wanted a society constructed according to their romantic ideal.

The legacy of romanticism appeared in the attitude taken by British

Marxists to political issues. Their concern with a social order based on a new attitude to life encouraged them to concentrate on the spread of this attitude at the expense of concrete forms of political action. They hoped to promote ideals of beauty and harmony, fellowship and solidarity, and they thought these ideals more important than institutional frameworks. They advanced these ideals through leisure activities that dovetailed nicely with propaganda, and by adopting a programme of education for socialism. They tried to make socialists, where to be a socialist was to have internalised a particular set of moral values. It was because the Marxists of the Socialist League adopted this attitude to politics that they distrusted parliamentarianism and revolutionary talk. They wanted to educate people in the spirit of socialism, and they were happy to trust the problem of political action would look after itself once people received this spirit, or at least the problem of political action could wait until people received this spirit.

When Marxism attracted a following in Britain, a number of people were turning to forms of socialism they defined against Marxism. These socialists drew on the native traditions of radicalism and romanticism, but instead of interpreting Marxism against a background of these traditions, they criticised Marxism from a perspective indebted to these traditions. One organisation embodying this movement was the Fellowship of the New Life, formed in 1884 out of a split in the people who collected around Thomas Davidson when he visited London in 1882. The members of the Fellowship were searching for a new faith, and this led them to ethical socialism. The other half of the group around Davidson formed the Fabian Society. The Fabians were more interested in economic and social issues than the religious and moral concerns of the New Lifers. Actually, the gap between the Fabians and the New Lifers was not as great as has been suggested: a quasi-religious moralism and a more hard-headed approach to social issues were by no means incompatible, and a number of

socialists were members of both organisations. However, we would not be mistaken if we said the heritage of the Fabians was radical, whereas that of the ethical socialists was romantic.

The Fabians complained Marx had got his economics all wrong, and they championed instead various liberal theories which they gave a radical interpretation.⁴ For instance, Shaw entered the value controversy intending to defend Marx, but became convinced Jevons was right and Marx wrong: value came from marginal utility, not labour. Shaw developed a theory of rent based on Jevonian economics which extended the radical critique of the landlord's monopoly to the capitalist. Likewise, Webb criticised Marx for adopting a faulty theory of distribution that lumped rent, interest, and profits together as surplus value.⁵ He developed a theory of rent based on Marshallian economics which extended the radical critique of the landlords' monopoly to capitalists and skilled workers. Thus, the Fabians opposed Marxism in the name of a socialism which, like radicalism, drew on liberal economics to show quasi-monopolies produced an unjust distribution with the few obtaining an unearned increment at the expense of the many.

Many Fabians criticised Marxism from the moral perspective of their radical heritage, particularly if they came from secularist or positivist wings of radicalism. Olivier complained the narrow economic socialism of Marx appealed only to the selfish instincts of the workers, encouraging them to think of their individual right to things improving their well-being.⁶ He wanted a larger socialism based on a communal ethic bringing out the cooperative instincts of the workers; this would encourage them to think of the general good thereby promoting that revolution in economic motive which alone could sustain socialism. Even Fabians who did not place such an emphasis on a spirit of cooperation often took a more robust attitude to moral issues than did Marx. Their economic theory emphasised the evils of monopoly,

not the difference between the use and exchange value of labour, so they condemned monopolists for cheating workers of the full value of labour.

The radical legacy also appears in the Fabians' attitude to political issues. They did not necessarily reject class struggle - the monopolists and those they exploited had diametrically opposed interests - but they did see the struggle as one between rentiers living off unearned increment and all other members of society. Thus, they thought socialism had a natural ally in at least radicalism, and perhaps liberalism, they were more than happy to combine with the Radicals, and perhaps to work through the Liberal Party. Moreover, because they took an accommodating attitude to some non-socialist organisations, and because they saw no need to overturn society as a whole but only to counteract the ill effects of monopolies, they were quite content to work through the democratic process. It was from this perspective that the Fabians condemned Marxists for their intransigence, complaining about the S.D.F.'s unwillingness to work constructively with other political organisations, and its leaders' unhelpful and inflammatory rhetoric.

As the Fabians criticised Marxism from a radical perspective, so the ethical socialists did so from a romantic one.⁷ They took little interest in economic analysis, and, when they did so, it usually was to reject deductive economic theory for the historical and moralistic approach of Ruskin. Thus, Carpenter compared the debate on the value question to the meaningless disputes of medieval scholastics.⁸ He depicted two economists debating whether two commodities that exchanged with each other did so because they contained an equal amount of labour or because they were equally desirable. But, he asked, how do the disputants know the commodities contain an equal amount of labour, or the commodities are equally desirable? They know these things because the two commodities have an equal exchange value. The truth was the importance of labour, utility, and social custom as determinants of

exchange value varied with time and place, and the proper role of economic theory was to offer a moral assessment of existing practices.

The ethical socialists, like Marxists such as Morris, emphasised the place of a form of romantic moralising within socialism. They focused on the way capitalism prevented people living harmonious lives in a proper relationship with nature. Their socialism rested on a utopian vision of a society conceived in romantic terms. Carpenter described socialism as the development of an inner feeling of oneness with the wider world around one, and he equated this feeling of oneness with love of one's fellows and the simple life he developed as a self-sufficient market gardener. Socialism required not just, or even mainly, the end of the capitalist system, but rather the realisation of a spirit of harmony through a life lived close to nature. It was from this perspective that the ethical socialists criticised Marxism for ignoring the real life-springs of the socialist ideal: Marxists emphasised economic issues at the expense of the harmonious existence which was socialism.

The way ethical socialists approached political issues reflected their romantic heritage. Because they stressed a new attitude to life as the cornerstone of a socialist society, their aim was to make socialists, and they sought to do this by the example of their lives and educative propaganda. They argued the more concrete forms of political action favoured by the Marxists were at best an irrelevant distraction, and at worst a positive break on socialism as they encouraged a spirit other than the true socialist one.

So, British socialists criticised Marxism from the perspective of indigenous traditions of radicalism and romanticism, and these traditions influenced the way British Marxists understood Marx. This challenges the essentialist distinctions dividing British socialism from Marxism. British socialism had much in common with British Marxism; it was just whereas the

Marxists introduced indigenous themes into Marxism, the socialists criticised Marxism for ignoring these themes. Moreover, when we recognise British socialism and British Marxism as similar indigenous forms of socialism, we also see they resemble Bolshevism understood as Russian socialism and the Marxism of the S.P.D. understood as German socialism. British socialism arose, and took the form it did, because its exponents arrived at their socialism through a national culture.

NOTES

1. M. Bevir, "H.M. Hyndman: A Rereading and a Reassessment", History of Political Thought 12 (1991), pp. 125-145; "The British Social Democratic Federation 1880-1885: From O'Brienism to Marxism", International Review of Social History 37 (1992), pp. 207-229; and "Ernest Belfort Bax: Marxist, Idealist, and Positivist", Journal of the History of Ideas 54 (1993), pp. 119-135.
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3. J. Glasier, William Morris and the Early Days of British Socialism (London: Longmans, 1921), p. 31.
4. M. Bevir, "Fabianism and the Theory of Rent", History of Political Thought 10 (1989), pp. 313-327; "The Marxism of George Bernard Shaw 1883-1889", History of Political Thought 13 (1992), pp. 299-318; and "Fabianism, Permeation, and Independent Labour", Historical Journal (forthcoming).
5. S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages: Being a Criticism of Karl Marx and a Statement of Economic Theory", The Passfield Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, PP. VII:4.
6. S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism", To-day 6 (1886), pp. 47-55 & 109-114.
7. M. Bevir, "Welfarism, Socialism and Religion: On T.H. Green and Others", Review of Politics 55 (1993), pp. 639-661; "British Socialism and American Romanticism", English Historical Review (forthcoming).
8. E. Carpenter, "The Value of the Value Theory", Today 11 (1889), pp. 22-30.