
CONTRADICTIONARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIAL SCENE IN ENGLAND AND THE RISE OF SOCIALIST POLITICAL CONCEPTS IN LATE 19TH CENTURY

ABDUL HAMID SALLOUM

Any observer of the late Victorian social scene could have realized that highly antagonistic forces were shaping the social, political, economic and cultural "profile" of England in the second half of the nineteenth century.

On the one hand, English bourgeois society was self-confident, proud of its achievements, of the prestige and power of the British Empire. Victorian England was perhaps the wealthiest West-European country, enjoying the well-earned results of Britain's industrial and commercial leadership. Queen Victoria herself (1837-1901) became the symbol of Britain's sovereignty, imperial power, and a universal, optimistic belief in progress seemed to be the firm basis of economic and political stability and social harmony.

On the other hand, in the last third of the nineteenth century it became more and more obvious that the whole English economic and social structure had undergone significant changes and the stable, firm Victorian order was breaking up.

Periods of depression, stagnation and sudden booms followed each other in quick succession. The British industrial expansion resulted in wholesale breakthrough in the field of new technologies and extensive factory systems, but it caused an ideologically more and more conscious working class to appear which as a politically organized body in the Chartist movement. Though the movement could not develop to be a decisive political force, it smoothed, prepared the field for the better organized, more effective trade union and socialist groups.

The traditional two-party system seemed to function harmoniously throughout the whole Victorian era, but after the "hungry forties", in parallel with the above mentioned developments, the old "Whig" and "Tory" system seemed to give place to "Conservative" and "Liberal" systems, though the full meaning of this modern conservatism and liberalism were far from being clear and homogeneous.

Problems of contemporary British foreign policy strengthened the effect of these destructive forces. There was the Crimean War (1854—56) where England joined the army of the Ottoman Empire against Russia; then there was also the American Civil War (1861-65), where England could not really decide if she wanted to help the fight against slavery - all these becoming sore focal points of highly debated, discussed moral (legal, political, etc.)

issues which also worked against the unanimously cherished idea of Victorian stability.

The competition from other European countries, mainly from Germany but also from the United States challenged Britain's industrial supremacy, and British agriculture - again for very intricate international economic changes - practically collapsed. The idyllic world of merry old England - so very well known from the early Dickens novels - had completely vanished and the overthrow of the British landed aristocracy changed the whole class structure of the British Islands. All these changes created general uncertainty and discontent, the economic depression sharpened the social contradictions, and these were soon followed by moral-religious-intellectual doubts and dissatisfaction. This is why G. M. Trevelyan calls - very succinctly - this epoch a "period of change and strife"¹.

The general discontent, among the other phenomena, resulted in the sudden proliferation of a great variety of clubs, societies, coteries - socialist, theosophist, spiritualist, religious - declaring humanist, socialist manifestoes and programmes, debating each other's rightfulness, some of them existing only for months, some of them surviving through the most important decades of the formation of modern Britain. The Fabian Society was one of those.

Predecessors of Fabian Socialism

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, we can follow the development of a more and more responsible sociological and economic awareness in the works of thinkers, philosophers, writers - interested in these problems. Though it is not our task to deal here with Malthus, Bentham, and Owen or with those early sociologists who gave inspiration to the basic convictions, principles of the 19th century thinkers, yet we have to say some words about these personalities who we owe the birth of British socialist thinking. Several scholarly monographs tell the readers that we do not know who first used the words "socialism" and "socialist". G. D .H. Cole tells us in his book that they first appeared in print in 1803, in Italian - almost entirely unconnected with any of their later meanings². In 1827, the word "socialist" appeared in the Owenite Co-operative Magazine, indicating the followers of Owen's co-operative doctrines. In 1832, in the French Saint Simonian *Le Globe* the word "socialism" was used to emphasize the characteristic tenets of Saint Simon - and slowly both of the words spread all over Europe and Great Britain (here socialism became one of the most popular topics only at about the beginning of the eighties, after Darwin's death). At this early stage, "socialists" were those, who, in opposition to the prevailing stress on the

¹ G.M. Trevelyan: *English Social History*, London, Penguin, 1982, p.579.

² G.D.H.Cole: *Socialist Thought - The Forerunners, 1789-1850*, London, Macmillan, 1953- p.1. See also: M. Beer: *A History of British Socialism*. (London, 1948) vol. I. pp. 185-188.

claims of the individual, emphasized that instead of the individualistically conceived rights and position of the single citizen, the social element is the basic and most important element in the complicated tissue of human relations³.

According to G.D.H. Cole. the genuine socialist groups “were principally three ... These three were, in France, the Saint Simonians and the Fourierists, and in Great Britain the Owenites who in 1841, officially adopted the name of Socialists”⁴.

In the works of these early socialist thinkers, we cannot find the idea of class-struggle, or the description of the proletariat, they concentrated mainly on the problems of the abuses of the contemporaneous property system, they distrusted politics and politicians, and they insisted that the task of all the responsible, “good” citizens was to promote the general well-being and happiness of the community. While the Fourierists and the Owenites believed in the small local communities as a possible basis for this general well-being, the Saint Simonians believed in large-scale organizations and systematic planning and were willing and wanted to transform and use State and Government offices in order to reach their co-operative, distinctly not competitive, ideal, “utopian” welfare state.

It is very easy to realize, how close Fabian socialism stood to these early socialist thinkers, movements, how close their strategy of “permeation” was to the basic Saint Simonian principles, and it is also natural that besides the French Utopians, it was the socialism of the great British Utopian, Robert Owen (1771 -1858) that had made the most profound impression on the working people of England. Many of his contemporaries called him the founder of British Socialism and of British Co-operatives. He himself, being a factory owner, was very soon revolted by the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution and made himself the driving force in very many early socialist, co-operative movements of which the best known are the English New Lanark (1799-1829) and the American New Harmony (1825-1828) co-operatives. His “Socialism” was the main outcome of two things: of a view of the process of character formation, which he developed very early in his life, through his experience as a manufacturer, first in Manchester, and then at New Lanark. Convinced that all men had rights, and that all were capable of goodness and excellence if they were given a fair chance, he rebelled against the acquiescence of most of the men he encountered in the growing horrors of the factory system, the slums, and the gin-drinking that dulled the sense of misery. He was driven to the view that nothing worthwhile could be done to amend the lot of the people without two great changes - the eradication of false beliefs about the formation of character, and the abandonment of the unregulated competition which impelled each employer towards inhuman conduct on the plea that his competitors were engaging in it, and that he too must face bankruptcy or do the same.”⁵.

³ Ibid. p.2.

⁴ Q.D.H. Cole: op. cit. pp.2-3.

⁵ Ibid. p.88.

In the second half of the 19th century, the tradition of Owenite socialism was confined mainly to those who had heard of Owen himself. Owen, who was considered by many one of the greatest men of his age, had no sense of art; his innumerable writings are now almost unreadable; and both his later excursions into spiritualism, and the failure of his communities and co-operative enterprises, had clouded his reputation amongst those outside the range of his personality.

The social philosophy of the 19th century was obviously affected by the contemporaneous political and industrial developments and results. Almost in all the works of 18th century, we find the discovery of the significant, basic idea, that "society" is something more than an aggregate of so many individual units, that it is something more than a number - or any number - of good citizens. They realized that the community must necessarily aim, consciously or not, at its continuance as a community. Though the social organism had itself evolved from the union of individual men, they saw the individual as something created by the social organism of which he forms a part, without the continuance and sound health of which no man can live or thrive. Accordingly, the conditions of social health are a matter for scientific investigation.

The new creed of philosophic radicalism did not have - matters all its own way. Its doctrine was suitable only for upper middle class wealthy people, factory owners and merchants. Robert Owen and his followers, the enthusiastic communistic co-operators formulated those ideals, which also the great mass of the wage earners could accept.

And then there was Carlyle, who rather managed to keep alive the faith in nobler ideals than making a fortune in this world. He was followed by Kingsley Ruskin and others who dared to impeach the current middle class cult; until finally, through the philosophy of Comte, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Darwin and Herbert Spencer, the conception of the Social Organism had at last penetrated to the minds.

Clearly, the most important realization, based on the discovery of this "Social Organism" was that the individual ought to have taken even more care to improve the social organism of which he formed a part, than to perfect his own individual development. The perfect and fitting development of each individual was not necessarily the utmost and highest cultivation of his own personality, but the filling, in the best possible way, of his humble function in the great social machine. Man was seen to assume more and more, not only the mastery of "things", but also a conscious control over social destiny itself.

This new scientific conception of the Social Organism had put completely out of countenance the cherished principles of the early political economist's and the philosophic radicals. The publication of John Stuart Mill's "Political Economy" in 1843 marked conveniently the boundary of the old individualist economics. After this date, every enlarged, new edition of Mill's book became more and more socialistic addressing his critical remarks

at the inequalities of the capitalist society and the in-equalities of the distribution of wealth.

Mill had spoken very respectfully of Socialism – even Communism - in his “Political Economy”. He wrote:

“If the choice were to be made between Communism with all its chances and the present state of society with all its sufferings and injustices, if the institution of private property necessarily carried with it as a consequence that the produce of labour should be apportioned as we now see it almost in inverse proportion to labour, the largest portions to those who have never worked at all, the next largest to those whose work is almost nominal, and so in descending scale, the remuneration dwindling as the work grows harder and more disagreeable' /A.H.S./ until the most fatiguing and exhausting bodily labour cannot count with certainty on being able to earn even the necessities of life; if this or Communism were the alternative, all the difficulties, great or small, of Communism would be but as dust in the balance”⁶.

And again in the next paragraph: "We are too ignorant, either of what individual agency in its best form can accomplish, to be qualified to decide which of the two will be the ultimate form of human society"⁷.

Besides the clear analysis, objective criticism of the contemporaneous situation, a significant characteristic of Mill's work was that it suggested some of his readers that there was an alternative to the capitalistic system, and that Socialism or Communism was worth studying.

Having a look at the above-mentioned names, we have to record as one of the most powerful intellectual influences Auguste Comte's (1798-1857) positivist, altruistic “religion of humanity”. He was the thinker who challenged the existing order of the contemporaneous social body, pronounced it to be wrong and suggested, again through the means of moral metamorphoses - both of the rich and the poor - the possibility of a new and happy world, free from all the inequalities of wealth.

Through different reasoning, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) expounded a characteristically English variant of Comte's future “brave new world”. The basic ethical doctrine of his utilitarian philosophical radicalism was that morality of human actions is always determined by utility that the object of all conduct and legislation should be “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”.

Another significant intellectual force was, especially in the English speaking territories - both in America and Great Britain - the book of Henry George (1839-97). One cannot wonder that the early Fabians all considered themselves in a way the pupils of Henry George, as he both in his speeches and main work *Progress and Poverty* (1879) proposed to abolish poverty by political action.

⁶ John Stuart Mill: *Political Economy* Book II. Chap. I. Sec. 3., London, 1848.

⁷ *Ibid.*

“To George belongs the extraordinary merit of recognizing the right way of social salvation. The Socialists of earlier days had proposed segregated communities; the Co-operators had tried voluntary associations; the Positivists advocated moral suasion; the Chartists favored force, physical or political; the Marxists talked about Revolution and remembered the Paris Commune. George recognized that in the Western States political institutions could be molded to suit the will of the electorate; he believed that majority desired to seek their own well-being and this could not fail to be also the well-being of the community as a whole. From Henry George I think it may be taken that the early Fabians learned to associate the new gospel with the old political method”⁸.

One year earlier, that the Fabian Society was founded, Karl Marx died in London, and Pease, later the secretary of the Fabian Society finds it important to state in his book on the history of the Fabian Society, that in 1883 nobody in England was aware of the fact “that the greatest figure in international politics had passed”⁹.

At a later stage - naturally - both the historical and theoretical works of Marx gained greater importance, in spite of the fact, that many of the Fabians “rejected Marxist socialism because they thought his theory of value is as dead as the classical economics out of which it was born. They doubted the validity of predictions which demanded a philosophy of history of the logic of which they were not sure. They disliked his narrow dogmatism; they suspected his hostility to free enquiry, they were more doubtful of a metaphysic, which lacked the simplicity of straightforward analysis than the Marxists. No one who has read the writing of Webb or Shaw can fail to see that they admitted their debt to Marx, and acknowledged it fully, but they disliked the rigid and intolerant orthodoxy of the epigonic, and their fantastic combination of mechanical application with a reckless disregard between ends and means”¹⁰.

Marx, may be, had failed to make the English workmen, whom he knew, understand his ideas. (He lived in England for thirty-four years but many of his writings were not translated into English in that period)¹¹. Still, one will be able to appreciate the work of the Fabians if one compares it with that of their illustrious predecessors, Owen and Marx.

At the time when Owen entered his socialist propaganda, the working classes were not organized and were absolutely unconscious of the strength which unity could give them. They were also educated and helpless. The

⁸ Edward R. Pease: *The History of the Fabian Society*, New York, 1926. pp. 20-21.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 23.

¹⁰ H. J. Laski: *Fabian Socialism*, In: *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians* by BBC Press, 1949, pp. 83-84.

¹¹ The Communist Manifesto was first published in London in 1848, in German. The first English translation, by Helen Macfarlane, appeared in 1850. A new authorized English text, by Samuel Moore, appeared in 1888, with the introduction and notes by Engels.

state was almost entirely oligarchic and an instrument of oppression. Anything in the nature of welfare, improvement and social justice was not considered to be the business of the State.

Under these circumstances Owen could not help coming to the conclusion that the salvation of the people must come from some self-sacrificing redeemer, some heroic educator and organizer. Parliamentary action was futile, since the State had nothing to do with the welfare of the masses. Trade union action was of no avail, since the possessing and ruling classes were united against the people.

Marx's theories were the adequate expression of this period; they epitomized the conditions created by a fiercely competitive economic life, non-democratic constitution, and a society split up in antagonistic warring classes.

Beer points out emphatically that between the years 1865 and 1885, Great Britain entered a period of change. English thought was moving away from traditional convictions, the rise of the working classes could no longer be denied; their influence on legislation and the wage-contract was visibly on the increase. The British Constitution was turned into a democratic constitution, old liberalism, with its doctrine of individual interest as the best guide to happiness, gave way to the collectivist theory of State and municipal action for social reform¹².

We may not suppose of course that these changes were clearly defined and manifested. They were tendencies rather than accomplished facts. A democratic State which was prepared to take upon itself social reform duties, a working class with economic influence and power, a national with growing social conscience, could not be treated from the standpoint of revolution and class struggle.

“The fundamental socialist concepts needed a new basis and new methods more in harmony with new conditions. Socialism had to be adapted to democracy. This adaptation has been performed by Sidney Webb”¹³.

Analyzing the different socialist approaches to the basic sociological, political, economic questions of the period, it was again M. Beer who compared how Owenite, Marxist, and Fabian endeavors were connected to each other. In his opinion the Owenites advised the working men to abandon completely political and trade unionist action, and to devote their energies to collective production. The Marxists advised the working men to vote straight and send social reformers to Parliament in sufficient numbers to form a majority and to assume the reign of the British government¹⁴.

In that period, the advantages which capitalists enjoyed were the effects of social effort. All who were rendering services to society contributed to the growth of civilized life, to the achievements of science, to the increase of wealth, and more efficient forms of organization. This did not, however,

¹² M. Beer: op. cit., vol. II. pp. 277-280.

¹³ Ibid, p. 279.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 280.

imply that the distribution of the productions was to be effected on the principle of equality. Nevertheless, every worker had to be guaranteed an honest degree of civilized existence. As long as the social conscience of the nation was not developed enough to cause men to perform their duty to society without regard to the degree of remuneration, equality of distribution was impossible.

From these considerations followed a social policy which was highly different from that of both Owen and Marx. The straggle was not to be fought out between rationalist and theological views, not between the capitalist class and the working class, but between the overwhelming majority of the nation and the appropriators of differential rent between those who make inventions who are busy with scientific and social research, who work and those who grew rich on these services. If the government was seriously bent on social reform, it ought to have therefore turned its attention both to the industrial and agricultural rent and use it in the interest of the whole community¹⁵.

Webb seems to have committed an error though he has not appreciated to the full the historic mission of the working class in bringing about socialism. His mental descent from mill and the new school of political economy on the one hand, and his implicit belief in British democratic institutions on the other, have not allowed him to see the kernel of truth which the Marxist theory of class warfare contained. To return to Beer's comparison, the real question of the period was, how these new concepts, methods should be used in order to get systematic social reform?

The Owenites left the State boundaries for the purpose of building up a co-operative commonwealth, and they elaborated its general outlines, and details. The Marxists scorned all questionings for the details of the future State, but urged the working classes to fight against the existing order. The Fabians investigated the particular and concrete evils of society, pointed out the remedy for each of them in accordance with the general principles of socialism, and tried to persuade the nation that these remedies were applicable and suitable for legislation. The mission of the socialists - according to the Fabians - was therefore to acquire knowledge by means of specialized research into the various manifestations of economic and social life, to acquaint themselves with the machinery of legislation and administration, and to put their knowledge and experience at the disposal of all political agencies. They were convinced that there was no reason for socialists to wait for the social revolution. The realization of socialism had begun since the State accessed social reform ideas.

When this moment arrived it was also the right moment for the birth of the Fabian Society.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 282-283.

ԱՐԴՈՒԼ ՀԱՄԻԴ ՍԱԼԼՈՒՄ – Հասարակական-քաղաքական հակասությունների սրումը և սոցիալիստական գաղափարների ամրապնդումը Անգլիայում XIX դարավերջին – Հոդվածը նվիրված է ուշ վիկտորիանական դարաշրջանում անգլիական հասարակական կյանքում տեղի ունեցած գաղափարական և քաղաքական փոխակերպումների և Մեծ Բրիտանիայի պետական-քաղաքական համակարգում սոցիալիստական կողմնորոշում դավանող քաղաքական ուժերի կայացման գործընթացի մեկնաբանությանը: Մասնավորապես, աշխատանքում լուսաբանվում են վաղ ֆաբիանական սոցիալիզմի քաղաքական պլատֆորմի ձևավորումը, Ֆաբիանական միության ստեղծմանը նախորդած ժամանակափուլում հասարակական հակասությունների պատճառներն ու շարժառիթները: Ներկայացված է անգլիացի ականավոր մտածողների գաղափարական ազդեցությունը Մեծ Բրիտանիայում XIX դարավերջում նոր քաղաքական ուժերի ձևավորման և զարգացման վրա:

АБДУЛ АМИД САЛЛОУМ – Обострение социально-политических противоречий и усиление социалистических идей в Англии в конце XIX века. – В статье освещаются идейные и политические трансформации общественной жизни на исходе викторианской эпохи, анализируются становление и усиление политических сил, имевших социалистическую направленность. В частности, речь идёт о раннем фабианском социализме и о причинах обострения социальных противоречий в период, предшествовавший созданию Фабианского общества. Особое внимание уделено идейному влиянию видных представителей английской политической мысли на формирование новых политических сил в стране.