The Rediscovery of English Democratic Socialism

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Source: *Government and Opposition*, AUTUMN 1988, Vol. 23, No. 4 (AUTUMN 1988), pp. 424-439

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44511086

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The Rediscovery of English Democratic Socialism

'SEEK, AND YE SHALL FIND'. YET IT IS NOT IMMEDIATELY obvious that the last decade has seen a remarkable revival of a specifically English tradition of democratic socialist thought. Most political writing in England, of course, has a bad press. I use 'political writing' in an obvious but also a special sense. By 'political writing' I mean serious writing about politics which is neither academic nor purely polemical. Sometimes it may be by academics, but then not academics writing for academics in a manner only comprehensible to academics; rather those books or articles which are written for a general public who take a serious interest in politics, whether directly or indirectly involved — say 'literate citizens'.

The reasons why most political writing is neglected by the press are several. Only a few political columnists or correspondents still appear to do much reading: they adopt the persona of a shrewd and knowing man of the world who spends his time talking confidentially to important people in-the-know, and they then share these confidences and their judgments on them with their readers. So most political columnists would risk advertising a lack of friends in-the-know if they wrote about books or articles at all regularly. Neil Aschersons and Hugo Youngs do not grow on trees. And literary editors are usually literary editors, giving precious space grudgingly to political books, and then usually to the worst sort: instant polemics, statesmen's self-justifying memoirs or dishonest biographies of the living. The revival of political philosophy goes unnoticed even in the quality press, even though, a happy side-product of English empiricism and concern with language, most political philosophers write well. English literary editors are often as politically illiterate as English politicians are philistine: they do not know the good from the bad, politics to them is simply E. M. Forster's 'world of telegrams and anger' or that of irrational and

passionate sincerities (usually 'a phase'). Politics for English writers was 'going to Spain' and now there are no Spains to go to. Even the reflective voice of political thinking as found in the novels of, say, William Golding, Dan Jacobsen, Graham Swift and Doris Lessing is seldom recognised as political because it is not strident and committed. There are few political intellectuals in England now.[1]

REASONS FOR NEGLECT

The case is different, I believe, elsewhere. French, Italian, German and both North and South American intellectuals are usually fairly literate politically and are treated, sometimes to a fault, as public figures whose views are demanded on public issues. Thus good political writing is more widely reviewed and discussed than in England. I say 'England' rather than Britain. For in Ireland, Scotland and Wales the case is somewhat different: more intellectuals are politically minded, mainly because the preservation of their culture is itself a political question.[2] Their writers have often been the main disseminators of political ideas. A sign of this is the many small presses in these countries who print both literary and political books, often of high quality, mostly ignored in the London metropolis. The Irish Political Studies Association is four years old; but serious Irish political writing has a long tradition: not philosophical but, rather as Perry Miller once described a 'citizen literature' of eighteenth-century North America, intended to be persuasive and to reach the politically literate public; and if polemical then not strident (unlike bad political writing produced only to cheer or chasten the already converted), but genuinely designed to persuade the unconvinced or those with reservations.

Abusive internalized polemic has given reasoned or persuasive public polemic a bad name. Right-wing journalists will habitually quote with relish an absurdity from some Trotskyite or Militant tract and call it 'extremist', implying by 'extreme' not just that it is totally over-the-top-and-way-beyond but that it is an extreme yet logical extrapolation of any possible socialist discourse (what Mr Hattersley would really say if ever he had no need for caution).

[1] Bernard Crick, 'Intellectuals and the British Labour Party', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, IV, 1, 1987, pp. 8–23.

[2] Bernard Crick, 'An Englishman Considers His Passport', *Irish Review*, No. 5, 1988.

'Student extremists' was once widely used to imply, most improbably, that all students would be like Tariq Ali were they not a wee bit lazy: they were, in fact, a rather special sub-group.[3]

So it is often not the case that there is no political writing but simply that it gets neglected by the media. A reader of the 'quality' dailies, even, might doubt my main assertion if there was not —since this is an academic journal, that is, one concerned with truth—an extra-textual way of demonstrating the revival of democratic socialist thought which is not available in popular writing: bibliography and footnotes. By 'democratic socialist writing' I mean writing which is unequivocably democratic and committed to liberty. It can, as we will see, begin with Marxism, without necessarily ending with it either; but most of it does not depend on Marxism, and can be non-, ex-, or anti-Marxist. Both the quantity and the quality of this writing demand some special explanations for its neglect.

Right-wing political intellectuals, once somewhat of a novelty in Britain, have not been neglected by the media. So there is an element here both of fashion and of changed political reality. Every dog should have his day. With a radical and reforming Conservative government in its third period of office, almost any book by a right-wing intellectual who can make the faintest claim to have been received at court (I mean Mrs Thatcher's court, not the Queen's court) becomes a news event and a must for the review pages. Mrs Thatcher gives cautious patronage to such writers (the phrase 'populist intellectual' was born) in a way that Harold Wilson and James Callaghan never did. To a certain extent this is a phenomenon of perception rather than a wholly real displacement effect, just as when Jacqueline Kennedy came to Camelot in the 1960s small women with round, merry faces seemed to vanish and tall, thin and neurotic ones came in. Some democratic socialist literature has been there all the time unnoticed. This does not mean that many unnoticed books do not sell and perhaps have indirect influence, having their own special audiences reached by advertising and small journals. And, conversely, any publisher knows of books on current affairs that are widely noticed but sell badly: readers are grateful for the conclusions without having to labour through the argument (as those who draft such excellent summaries of parliamentary and government reports well know).

[3] I first construed 'extremist' in the BBC anthology *Words*, BBC, 1976, p. 34.

Also, in bad times for left-wing parties, left-wing writers may be deliberately ignored. Few editors are weighing merits dispassionately. They simply do not want to review them. But the revival of democratic socialist thought began as part of the internal Labour Party debate after the fall of Callaghan's government.

FIRST REVIVALS AND EARLY THEMES

The belief that there is a party system must at least mean that the behaviour of major contestants for power are much affected by the behaviour of their opponents. The relation between politics and political thought is neither simple nor always of the same form, but it is not wholly reactive. The Labour Party's defeat in 1979 certainly triggered off attempts at a fundamental, not just a tactical, reassessment. This in itself needs some reminding explanation. After all, the defeat had been a narrow one. Callaghan might have won had he fought earlier or handled Scottish devolution differently. If there has been a 'Thatcher revolution' it has come through the opportunity of power not as a direct reflection of fundamental social changes (I am no more impressed by Thatcherite determinism than by Marxist determinism). Labour might well have been preoccupied with tactical considerations. But two things happened which had little to do with the attempt to 'answer Thatcherism'. That came later when Kinnock made a series of speeches in which he seemed to admit that Labour had been 'beaten at its own best game' of providing a popular ideology and needed to make a reply on the level of morality and values, not just of policies:

> The main ... messages of the New Right were of freedom, patriotism, of the reassertion of the work ethic, of the supreme importance of small business, the family, the need for order and for prudence. These themes seemed at the same time reassuringly homespun and refreshingly harsh, moralistic and materialistic.[4]

But that was September 1986. In 1979 'Thatcherism' was not yet taken seriously as an ideology, even by many Conservative thinkers. Around 1978 there was a sudden spate of Conservative intellectual

[4] Press release of speech by Neil Kinnock on 'Righting the Wrongs of the New Right' at the Ardwick Fabian Society, 12 Sept. 1986, quoted by myself in 'Return to Old Values', *Scotsman*, 22 Sept. 1986.

writing. But neither Maurice Cowling[5] nor Roger Scruton[6] had yet come down from the old High Tory elitist hobby-horses and caught the authentic voice of the Finchley future, still less named it. Patrick Cormack's anthology of big renegades, sub-titled 'eight men who changed their mind', was closer to the mark in its populism — and was dedicated to Margaret Thatcher, but nobody else mentioned her, so the meaning of the dedication might not have been entirely intellectual. Sir Keith Joseph's and Jonathan Sumption's *Equality* did contain the essence of New Right thinking[8] but was thought eccentric and drew no serious or worthy response at the time.

So the first re-emergence of democratic socialist thinking was not an answer to 'Thatcherism' but was an answer to the pragmatism of Labour's right-wing, an attempt to 'fill the vacuum' which Paul Johnson and others were for ever saying had been filled by Marxism. Certainly after the publication of *The Future of Socialism* in 1956 little or nothing was published in the tradition of Tawney, Cole, Laski and Durbin. As a democratic socialist one lived on the fruits of the past. If one looked for new socialist writing in Britain, it was, indeed, almost entirely Marxist, albeit one that now often talked about 'problematic' and no longer said 'ideologically correct'. Certainly there was Marxism and marxism, and it was all, post-1956, so-called 'free Marxism': that of the *New Left Review*, sternly intellectual and eager for debate (with French and Italian communists), but almost wholly esoteric and internalized (Althusserian indeed). It probably had no popular influence whatever, even among Labour Party activists, except in the form of what even by 1962 I had technically called 'student politics', meaning immature and flamboyant.[9] The re-emergence of the democratic socialist tradition was a reaction primarily to the utter *thoughtlessness* (using that word as Hannah Arendt would) of the Wilson governments. It was a reaction to the attempt to govern purely pragmatically without any public philosophy of either principles or theory. The

[5] Maurice Cowling, (ed.), *Conservative Essays*, Cassell, 1978.

[6] Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, Macmillan, 1980.

[7] Patrick Cormack, (ed.), *Right Turn*, Leo Cooper, 1978.

[8] K. Joseph and J. Sumption, *Equality*, John Murray, 1979.

[9] Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, Weidenfeld, 1962, pp. 127–31, later editions in Penguin.

revealing and astounding quality of Harold Wilson's mammoth book, *The Labour Government: 1964–70* was that it was simply a dull hymn to his own cleverness in the day-by-day actions of office — no preface, no conclusion, no socialist rhetoric even, nor any attempted justification for the use of power. In a review in *The Guardian* I argued that he must be a Lutheran Pietist, believing that everything that happens in high office is a mark of God's wonder-working Providence, that the trivial is infused with divine purpose as it was in Israel in the time of the kings.

For it was Wilsonian pragmatism, not Militant penetration, that nearly broke the heart of the Labour Party and provoked the Bennite civil wars of the time of Foot which led to the Great Secession. (That was tragedy, the second campaign of the Old Pretender has been farce.) The reactions from the Left of the party are better known: more true socialism to cauterize (or reinfect) the wound.[10] But in 1979 a little-noticed book appeared from the Right of the party which first tried to reopen an old and important theoretical debate, Evan Luard's *Socialism Without the State*.[11] Luard was not an anarchist, he was an old pluralist. He pointed to the arguments about the dangers of centralism and the advantages of dispersing power. There was an implicit criticism of the national shibboleth of 'the sovereignty of parliament' and no-other-way-can-work (except for foreigners). There was a hint of federalism, in its philosophical, not just its constitutional, sense: what the over-maligned Laski had called in his *Grammar of Politics*, 'power as federal'. This critique of the Webbite belief in benign central public administration had direct parallels with a gradual change of theme among the Marxist New Left. As views got more relaxed about the dominance of the base by the superstructure, as class dominance and class consciousness began to be seen as 'not a simple matter', and as it was admitted that 'ideology could have a relative autonomy', so too the centrality of 'the state' in the theory of transition grew less, there were the glimmers of a rediscovery of 'civil society' (something that most of the rest of us had never lost). This took the specific form of moving through the 'Stalin bad, Lenin good'

[10] See, for instance, Tony Benn, *Arguments for Socialism*, Cape, 1979 and *Arguments for Democracy*, Cape, 1981; Ken Coates (ed.), *What Went Wrong?*, Spokesman Books, 1979; and James Curran (ed.), *The Future of the Left*, Polity Press, 1984, although the latter had some outbreaks of realism as well as reiterative romanticism.

[11] Evan Luard, *Socialism Without the State*, Macmillan, 1979.

period into questioning Lenin's basic assumption that control of a centralized state was the key to social transformation.[12]

Both the Fabian tradition and the Leninist had shared this sense of the state, a bureaucratic state in fact. But the other socialist tradition, the small-group, decentralized, cooperative one, which had its roots in Fourier and Prudhon, and its English exemplars in Owen, Morris and Cole, had always been there if one cared to look for it, when not suppressed by Stalinists or mocked by Fabian office-seekers. This older tradition was fiercely egalitarian and libertarian, but the pluralism had common ground with the decentralist strand of modern British liberal thought — as seen in the writings of the Social Democrats at the time of the Limehouse Secession.[13] Indeed there is little theoretical difference between Owen in 1981 (though his thought was to evolve rapidly), Shirley Williams at any time and (as we shall see) Roy Hattersley or Bryan Gould.[14] The first four sections of Owen's book in 1981 were headed: '1) The Values of Socialism,[15] 2) The Decentralist Tradition, 3) The Growth of Corporatism [against it, of course], 4) The Social Democratic Tradition', and by the latter he meant what I mean by 'democratic socialism', or as he put it, the absolute antithesis between reformist and revolutionary thought.[16]

So two intellectual themes converged even amid the confused clamour of the Footite days: the Marxist Left re-entering normal politics via a maze of scholastic (sometimes just face-saving) debate about recovering a real Marx from Engels, Lenin and Stalin; and the pragmatic Right trying to recover both a theoretical and a moral

[12] A. J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics*, Methuen, 1984, was a devastating critique of Lenin's rejection of politics and its fatal legacy.

[13] See David Owen, *Face the Future*, Cape, 1981; and Shirley Williams, *Politics for People*, Allen Lane, 1981.

[14] Roy Hattersley, *Choose Freedom: the Future for Democratic Socialism*, Michael Joseph, 1987; and Bryan Gould, *Socialism and Freedom*, Macmillan, 1985.

[15] Which he said were 'liberty, equality and fraternity'! Owen, op. cit., p. 5: 'the old radical cry still emphasizes an eternal truth: that none of the three can properly be fulfilled without being combined in some measure with the other two'.

[16] But if one sees revolution as a transformation of values, then one can be a democrat and a revolutionary; one can believe that such a transformation is only possible by political reform, consent and time (lots of time, generational time-scales not Mr Benn's fantasies of the First Hundred Days of a new government — see my *Socialist Values and Time*, Fabian Society, 1984).

discourse as a popular ideology — to find a synthesis of the egalitarian moralism of R. H. Tawney with Crosland's and Gaitskell's concern to reconcile central planning with consumer choice. It was not immediately apparent that the latter project was simply rewarming some once well-known old dishes.[17] As a student in the postwar decade I knew these dishes but my students of the 1960s either did not, or did not care for them. The old moralistic socialism was, as a matter of fact, what Michael Foot himself always believed in,[18] even when to the eyes of political observers it seemed as if his party was being torn apart by a battle between revolutionaries and pragmatists; but that was always an exaggeration, however much each extreme lived off the exaggerated abuse of its opponents.

RETHINKING AND REDISCOVERY

The conscious attempt to revivify the tradition of English parliamentary socialism, or the pursuit of egalitarian and humanitarian ends by libertarian or consensual means, can be seen in Anthony Wright's documentary anthology of 1983, a most carefully chosen demonstration of the power and coherence of the non-Marxist tradition. And his own elegant *Socialisms*[19] of 1986 strove to distance non-parliamentary socialism by exhibiting the historical diversity of socialist doctrines (good, bad and indifferent), rather than by getting drawn into the internalized obsessive fervour of the 'what is true socialism?' debate. Perhaps Michael Foot tried to convey this with his title '*My* Kind of Socialism', but it either seemed too solopsist or too kind, casual and tolerant, as if anything goes. Both Benn's *Arguments for Democracy* and his *Arguments for Socialism* make it unjust to doubt his devotion to democracy and liberty, but all too easy to wonder why he is so tolerant or naive about undemocratic socialisms? (Somewhere Ernest Gellner has said that we should be socially tolerant but intellectually intolerant.) The Labour Left has always suffered more from intellectual tolerance of muddled sincerity than from monolithic dogma.

[17] Such as Evan Durbin's *The Politics of Democratic Socialism*, Allen & Unwin, 1940.

[18] See his *My Kind of Socialism*, *Observer* reprint, January 1982 and the essay on Silone in *Debts of Honour*, David Poynter, 1980.

[19] Antony Wright, *Socialisms*, Oxford University Press, 1986 and as editor, *British Socialism: Socialist Thought from the 1880s to the 1960s*, Longman, 1983.

Two recent books moved into the English socialist tradition via Marxism in very different but equally important ways: Gavin Kitching's *Rethinking Socialism* and Michael Rustin's *For a Pluralist Socialism*.[20] Kitching made a more self-conscious attempt to stay close to a classical Marxism by arguing, from deep and direct experience of Third World economics, that socialism can only succeed as a consequence of both the achievement and defects of a mature capitalist economy; attempts at short-cuts are doomed to violent and oppressive failure. Like Ralph Miliband in his *Marxism and Politics* he insists that civil liberties and democratic institutions are a genuine achievement of bourgeois society, only that they need broadening. Liberty can be extended to all, it is not a part of the false-consciousness or manipulative ideology of a capitalist civilization. He attacked the rigidity of most other theorists of the British Left, too encased in rigid concepts of class struggle and in empirically outdated ideas of class (much as Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm were arguing, not that 'class' is no longer an important concept, but that actual social structure and class relationships are now far more complex — perhaps they always were) and thus less open to central control and influence by identical means: different sections have different needs and need different treatment. Kitching scorned the apocalyptic views of social change that were often a consequence of the vulgar Marxist views of class — and their ignorance about actual working people — all that old 'the coming crisis of capitalism' and 'after the revolution' stuff: revolution can only be seen as a long process, not a coming event, which needs a dispassionate, almost a pessimistic perspective:

> Otherwise the gap between what seems required and desirable and what is appears so large as to be totally dispiriting. It can be even more dispiriting if one holds, as I do, that the kind of fundamental social change, the deepening and extending of democracy, at which socialists aim comes on as a result of a slow, contradictory and painful historical process.[21]

Rustin both illustrated and offered intellectual leadership to a move from the old New Left of high theory to a democratic concern with policy and direct participation. What one perceives and all one can hope to influence now is a highly pluralistic society,

[20] Gavin Kitching, *Rethinking Socialism*, Methuen, 1983; and Mike Rustin, *For a Pluralist Socialism*, Verso, 1985.

[21] Kitching, *ibid.*, p. 133.

as opposed to the simplicities of a dual or triadic class structure and talk of mobilizing the masses. He applied a pluralistic perspective to regional policy, education and even electoral reform. He argued that a majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral system cannot mirror actual pluralities of opinion and values, nor of regional and occupational as well as class interests. Like others, he is much influenced by Alec Nove's critiques of Soviet planning and by Michael Walzer's theory of complex equality, a theory of justice based on actual types of human sociability rather than Rawls's postulate (albeit a hypothetical one) of freely contracting individuals.[22] And, almost apart from socialist theory, he sought to demonstrate what a profoundly undemocratic society Britain is with so few opportunities for popular participation in the decisions that really affect people's lives; and what need and scope there is for democratic reform. Some of these arguments touch a core in the Bennites, and are almost indistinguishable from Liberal, I mean SLP, doctrine and policy.

Both Kitching and Rustin fit well into what came to be called the 'new realism'. The phrase seems to have been popularized by Eric Hobsbawm whose essay 'The Forward March of Labour Halted'[23] stirred so much debate. Hobsbawm, from a refined Euro-Communist perspective, was both attacking old Communist rigidities and advocating deeper thought about time-scales and the growing complexity of advanced industrial societies; he was not abandoning socialist perspectives, only pricking the romantic bubbles of one-shot quick-solution socialists. Figures of the 'hard-Left' made clear that they saw any talk of realism as right-wing betrayal, etc; but Hobsbawm's influence was considerable in bringing many of the old New Left intellectuals down to earth, that is to discuss politically realistic policy alternatives within the Labour Party and with some understanding of why its electoral fortunes were low in relation both to real social changes and to the real hopes and fears

[22] Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*, Allen & Unwin, 1983; Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality*, Basic Books, 1983; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, 1972; and John Baker's *Arguing for Equality*, Verso, 1987 (though not available to Rustin) is perhaps the best philosophic case for egalitarianism.

[23] In Martin Jacques and Fred Mulhern, (eds), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, Verso, 1981.

of real people.[24] He was also one of the first to take Thatcherism seriously intellectually, to speculate about its popular appeal, and to insist that it had to be argued with, not ignored for the favourite private pastime of the Left, defining true socialism.

Despite Walzer, Rawls's essentially liberal theory of justice and equality has had considerable influence in the revival and reformulation of democratic socialism in Britain. Some version of it seemed common ground to many associated with the Fabian Socialist Philosophy Group.[25] That group itself was interesting. Contingently it was one reaction among many to Labour's defeat in 1983, a desire of a group of academic political philosophers to address systematically presuppositions, key concepts and formulations of public policy as they imagined, not always rightly, that intellectuals of the Radical Right were doing. None were believers in literal equality (was anyone ever, except in satire or in Shaw's provocative speeches?). But all were affected by Rawls's argument that every inequality needs justifying, and that the best justification for an inequality is that it results in some demonstrable general benefit. 'Down with all unjustifiable inequalities!' is not a slogan to warm the blood like wine, but neither was 'Towards equality!' especially when addressed to the British working class (as some years before W. G. Runciman had been able to demonstrate empirically in his famous analysis of ideas on 'relative deprivation').[26] 'Equality' is probably a misnomer, what is really at issue is egalitarian behaviour as against deferential.[27] And some models of democratic egalitarian behaviour are more apparent in capitalist America than in social democratic Europe, as Crosland saw more clearly than the new ex- or neo-Marxists.

[24] 'Eric Hobsbawm Interviews Tony Benn', *Marxism Today*, October 1980, an account of what was in fact a debate (at Birkbeck College), and an important and destructive one too — Bennites were visibly depressed as the vague shallowness of their hero was politely exposed.

[25] Their most influential publication so far has been Brian Forbes, (ed.), *Market Socialism: Whose Choice?* Fabian Society, 1986. Raymond Plant's *Equality, Markets and the State*, Fabian Society, 1984, was written before the group of which he was a leading instigator got under way, but it helped to set its agenda.

[26] W. G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in Twentieth Century England*, Allen & Unwin, 1962.

[27] As John Baker argues in *Arguing for Equality*, op. cit.

Rethinking does not always result in new thinking. Many of the ex-Marxists have furrowed their brows, thought hard and deep, and laboured painfully, even courageously, to reinvent the wheel (though some quite serviceable wheels have emerged).[28] Similarly the modernizers and revisionists keep on reinventing Evan Durbin. The 'market socialism' of the Fabian philosophers is simply a useful modern reformulation of the broad belief in a mixed economy[29] which the Labour Party has held since its first founding and has only been denied by the most embarrassing of its friends or free-loading fellow travellers or by the most blinkered or dishonest of its opponents. But rediscovery can be as important morally and politically as new invention.

Perhaps the finest and most theoretically complete piece of 'rethinking' comes from someone from the New Left who has brooded on the acute problems for liberty when the state has professed equality — in those crucial lands of Eastern Europe hitherto sadly neglected by the British Left. John Keane's *Democracy and Civil Society*[30] exposes the narrow parochialism of much of the British Left, or to be more fair helps them out into the light at the very moment they seem open to suggestion — 'accepting' Europe as well as the EC and the universe, at last. He puts the other question: where there is socialism, and a despotic socialism, how does the demand for a democracy begin to make itself felt? Theoretically he follows those 'dissidents' in Czechoslovakia (in fact, like Václav Havel, the preservers of their national tradition) who think straight and well in such difficult but sometimes grimly stimulating conditions; and he would reinstate the eighteenth-century concept of civil society at the heart of any possible discussion of democratic socialism. Socialist theory, he argues, must only give a relative weight to concepts of 'the state' and of 'class': the autonomy of civil society is the question — and it is quite comforting, in a sad way, to discover how much of the values and structures of civil society can survive even under oppression in the grimmest circumstances,

[28] See Barry Hindess, *Freedom, Equality, and the Market*, Tavistock, 1987 and Paul Q. Hirst, *Law, Socialism and Democracy*, Allen & Unwin, 1986.

[29] Elizabeth Durbin, *New Jerusalems: the Labour Party and the Economics of Democratic Socialism*, Routledge, 1986, a scholarly and timely study of her father's circle in the 1930s.

[30] John Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society*, and, as editor, *Civil Society and the State: European Perspectives*, Verso, 1988.

so long as they were previously implanted in the culture. And it now seems with *glasnost* and *perestroika* that there is some economic necessity for tolerating, even stimulating, some kind of quasi-autonomous civil society even in the Soviet Union. And that necessity rests on grounds quite familiar to eighteenth-century liberal philosophers, with their basic critique of autocracy for being economically inefficient and regressive, not simply unjust, a critique unfamiliar until very recently to modern Marxists.

IMAGE-MAKING

Our mothers warned us that our eyes can be bigger than our stomachs. So, as well as a revival of democratic socialist thought by intellectuals, there has been a notable publication of books by senior Labour politicians. The contrast to the Wilson-Callaghan era is remarkable. This was in part an attempt to pull the party back from the odd assumption of Tony Benn and his friends (and former friends) that they were the only true intellectuals in the party, and were the priests of the Grail of True Socialism. It was also partly genuine thinking — triggered by the astounding circumstances of having to fight a hard-Left at the same time as confronting a Social Democratic secession, originally claiming (remember) to be the true Labour Church of Attlee and Gaitskell betrayed — and partly sheer image building. Gould's *Socialism and Freedom*[31] went straight for the issues that worried many former Labour intellectuals, and if derivative, his argument was concise: that if one values freedom above all else, and freedom for all, the consequence must be a far more egalitarian society than we have now. He argued that the heart of the socialist project was precisely the reconciliation of freedom and egalitarianism, not questions of class dominance or types of ownership. Plainly he believed, like Crosland and Gaitskell, that the fiscal and taxation systems were the key to social justice, not ownership.

Hattersley set himself the larger task of trying to be Crosland reborn, and to produce a comprehensive theory of democratic socialism.[32] The kindest thing to say is that his Big Book is a tolerable restatement of the well-worn middle ground. But the

[31] Bryan Gould, *Socialism and Freedom*, op. cit.

[32] Roy Hattersley, *Choose Freedom*, op. cit.

really interesting thing is the title — like Gould he consciously wants to meet the New Right on their own terms and to win back, or at least get a fair share of, a reputation for freedom. 'The true object of socialism', the book begins, 'is the creation of a genuinely free society in which the protection and extension of individual liberty is the prime duty of the state'. To put it mildly, he plays down egalitarianism: a society only has to be as equal as it needs for each of its citizens to be free. The first sentence of the Labour Party's 1988 statement *Democratic Social Aims and Values* reads: 'The true purpose of democratic socialism and, therefore, the true aim of the Labour Party, is the creation of a genuinely free society, in which the fundamental objective of government is the protection and extension of liberty...'.

This formulation is flagrantly, almost comically, more tactical than thoughtful, and few people will really believe it. Though it would be silly to doubt his concern for freedom, and indeed that of most of his colleagues, yet everyone knows that democratic socialists stand for something in addition to freedom, or else they would all (if party membership followed doctrine) be Liberals or Social Democrats. The words 'liberty and equality' need to be linked together or added to in the classic grouping, 'liberty, equality and fraternity'.[33] For as none of these concepts alone can possibly define a distinct political ideology, it is their combination that counts; and it is the mix of moralism and mixed-economy economics that is distinctive about 'English socialism'. Kinnock seemed to realise this in a series of speeches he made in 1985,[34] but after the general election defeat of 1987 and by the time of the hasty drafting of *Democratic Socialist Aims and Values* in January 1988,[34] his for-

[33] I elaborated and related these sacred sisters in my *Socialist Values and Time*, op. cit.; in the appendix, 'A Footnote to Rally Fellow Socialists' to the 1982 Pelican edition of *In Defence of Politics*, and with David Blunkett in *The Labour Party's Aims and Values: An Unofficial Statement*, Spokesman Press, 1988.

[34] Notably his Fabian Autumn Lecture of 12 November 1985, *The Future of Socialism*, Fabian Society 1986. He followed Raymond Plant, Julian Le Grand, Antony Wright and others in treating R. H. Tawney's *Equality* and *The Acquisitive Society* as classic statements of English democratic socialism. Geoffrey Foote in his *The Labour Party's Political Thought. A History*, Croom Helm, 2nd. ed. 1986 (itself part of the rediscovery) is kind to say (p. 341) that 'this concentration on socialist values' can be traced to my *Socialist Values and Time*, 1984. But it was in the air and some of us had always breathed it. Kinnock's Mackintosh Memorial Lecture of 24 June 1983 was all about values and full of quotes from both Tawney and Bevan (see an extract in *The Scotsman*, 25 June 1983 and a longer one in the *New Statesman*, 7 October 1983).

mulations had become ever more tactical, and intellectually vague or implausible.[35] The philosophical and the political are in a crucial conjunction for once: if the Labour Party cannot convince itself and the public that a more egalitarian society is desirable, and can be compatible with, indeed extend, liberty, it will never trust its leaders and never appear honest and plausible to the electorate. It is hard not to sympathize with Megnad Desai who finds the canny, compromised *Aims and Values* document 'a limp rag. It has no cutting edge, no memorable phrase, no fresh thought' or with Hobsbawm's disappointed dismissal of it for 'excessive defensiveness' and 'lack of vision'.[36]

Despite their desire to picture themselves as heading Labour's 'new thinking' or rethinking, both Hattersley's book and the Hattersley/Kinnock statement *Aims and Values* (which actually states that they wrote it) make the attainment of freedom the 'duty of the state' and 'the fundamental objective of government'. Well may Desai complain that his shelves have a lot of Labour 'rethinking' on them, much of which is good, yet none of it seems reflected in Hattersley or Kinnock despite their desire for and air of intellectuality. For one red thread running through the rethinking is scepticism about what can be done through the central state alone to change attitudes and conditions. The new writing is full of thoughtful argument for decentralization and does not evade the difficulties of decentralization, devolution and of creating institutions for a plural and democratic society — neither Mrs Thatcher's version of one (homogeneous) nation nor the old Fabian one.

The leadership of the Labour Party is still only rhetorically interested in decentralization and democratization (which must

[35] Kinnock published a rather slight book, *Making Our Way: Investing in Britain's Future*, Blackwell, 1986, which used none of his more thoughtful speeches on values but tried to show in the pre-election period how hard-headed he was economically; democratic socialism had always been about production! The Foreword to *Social Justice and Economic Efficiency*, Labour Party, 1988, the collective title for the seven policy reviews for the 1990s, claims that 'the review is firmly rooted in Labour's aims and values', but in fact they were all written before *Democratic Socialist Aims and Values*, which was a hastily drafted last-minute change of mind, a top-dressing not an irradiating core: the old machine pragmatists had won again.

[36] M. Desai reviewing *Aims and Values* in *Tribune*, 18 March 1988, pp. 6–7; and Hobsbawm in *Marxism Today*, April 1988, pp. 14–17.,

involve each other), and even then not much — to judge by the official statement. They are not interested at all in constitutional and electoral reform, a subject they try to make taboo. But nearly all the new democratic socialist thinkers argue for such reforms, quite unashamed of finding common ground with liberals.[37] They are clear that the use of government inherently needs balancing with the control of government, and that the old conventions of the informal British constitution are now virtually destroyed ('elective dictatorship' indeed, as Lord Hailsham once famously argued). Kinnock and Hattersley do not want constitutional reform, they still hope heroically for total victory, one more big push with the old machine and its slogans cleaned up and modernized a bit, to capture the commanding heights of power and use them, of course, with care, concern, restraint and benevolence. Their intellectual failing again has a bad political consequence: they are throwing away the one new issue in which most of the country is interested. Their massive silence draws ridicule from their thoughtful would-be friends and arouses suspicion from those they need to make their friends. There is, I have argued, a remarkable revival of democratic socialist thought, interesting and reflective. But as yet it has less influence on the Labour leadership than the popularizers of Hayek and Friedman have had on the Conservative leadership.

[37] Hobsbawm, op. cit., praised David Marquand's *The Unprincipled Society*, Cape, 1988 and said that his analysis showed 'considerable potential' for agreement on policy 'within a broad anti-Thatcher coalition'. He'll get no thanks, but true intellectuals never do.