
Richard T. Ely on English Socialism

Author(s): M. S. Wilkins

Source: *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Oct., 1958, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Oct., 1958), pp. 61-68

Published by: American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3485024>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*

JSTOR

Richard T. Ely on English Socialism

By M. S. WILKINS

"WHEN I ENTERED THE UNIVERSITY [of Wisconsin], history and classics were the magic words. When I left there, life and growth were the magic words—and you had made the difference," wrote the novelist, Zona Gale, to Professor Richard T. Ely.¹ Ely, a Columbia graduate, a Heidelberg Ph.D. and former associate professor of economics at Johns Hopkins, had been appointed to the University of Wisconsin faculty in 1892 to establish and to direct a School of Economics, Political Science and History. At this time Ely, one of America's leading economists, was considered an authority on socialism in the United States and abroad.

Ely's interest in socialist movements arose during his student days in Germany. In 1879, when at the University of Berlin, Ely attended lectures given by the prominent German academic socialist, Adolf Wagner. At Heidelberg he again studied under a professor—Karl Knies—who was concerned with the economics of socialism.² Unlike Wagner, Knies did not endorse socialist ideas; Ely later described him as "a progressive economist, with a proper respect for existing institutions, which he did not want to abolish but rather to improve by evolutionary processes."³ Young Ely came to accept much the same point of view: "The peaceful progress of society, with the conservation of the results of past historical development, is the author's desire."⁴

It was in this spirit that Ely in 1883 published his first book on socialism, *French and German Socialism in Modern Times*. By the turn of the century, Ely had to his credit two more full-length books devoted to socialism⁵ and a large number of articles dealing with the subject. He

¹ Letter from Zona Gale, Portage, Wisconsin, to Richard T. Ely, July 7, 1937, Zona Gale Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

² Knies had written and was to write about socialism. See for instance the section on socialism in his *Politische Oekonomie* (Braunschweig, 1883). That he discussed socialist ideas with the young Ely is evident from what Ely writes in *French and German Socialism in Modern Times*, New York, 1883, p. 174: "so conservative a man as Professor Knies, of Heidelberg, has often spoken in high terms of his [Karl Marx's] talents and acquisitions. . . ." (my italics). Knies was a member of the German historical school and in all probability introduced Ely to the works of other members of this school, some of which—those by William Roscher and Bruno Hildebrand, for instance—dealt with socialism.

³ Richard T. Ely, *Ground Under Our Feet* (New York, 1938), p. 44.

⁴ Richard T. Ely, *Socialism, an Examination of Its Nature, Its Strength and Its Weaknesses with Suggestions for Social Reform*, New York, 1894, p. viii. In this article, this book will henceforth be referred to by its short title: *Socialism and Social Reform*.

⁵ Richard T. Ely, *Recent American Socialism*, Baltimore, 1884, and Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform: The Strength and Weakness of Socialism* (New York, 1899) contains a reprint of the first three parts of *Socialism and Social Reform* along with a new appendix.

had also given lectures at Johns Hopkins, Cornell, Chautauqua, the University of Wisconsin, and University of Wisconsin Extension.

During the Eighteen-Eighties Ely's writings centered on French, German, and American socialism. At the close of this decade Ely turned some of his attention toward English socialism, and, in preparing his most important work on socialism⁶—*Socialism and Social Reform*, to be published in 1894—Ely resolved to write to prominent English socialists about socialist activity in that country. The replies to his letters are of considerable interest to the student of the English socialist movement, to the biographer of Ely, and to the historiographer.⁷ Not only do these letters provide an informative, contemporary appraisal of some aspects of the English socialist movement, but, taken together with Ely's *Socialism and Social Reform*, they are also significant because of what they reveal about Ely and his historical method. What Ely selected from these letters indicates the extent to which he really understood socialism in England, the extent to which he satisfied his desire "to master the socialism which he [the critic] attempts to criticize."⁸ What Ely selected, also indicates something of his method, scholarship, and biases.

Ely's English Socialist Correspondents

ELY HAD FOUR English socialist correspondents whose letters are preserved: Sidney Webb, Edward R. Pease, William Clarke and H. W. Lee. They were all London socialists, the first three being Fabian Essayists, the last being the secretary of the Social Democratic Federation.

Ely's correspondents were from the two oldest of England's socialist organizations, groups which were at that time, of course, still youthful. The first of these was the Fabian Society, which had been founded in 1884. Its small membership of intellectuals—civil servants, journalists, novelists—tirelessly issued socialist tracts, pamphlets, and essays and sought to convince influential English politicians of the merits of socialism.⁹

The second, the Social Democratic Federation, had been founded in 1881. At first it was called the Democratic Federation and had aimed at uniting London workingmen's clubs; in 1883 it declared itself a socialist organization. Led by H. M. Hyndman, this group consisted of

⁶ This book received general acclaim. For example, the *New York Times* review of this book (July 8, 1894) called it "the most comprehensive and complete volume yet published on this complex subject."

⁷ The replies are in the Richard T. Ely Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

⁸ Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁹ There has been only one entire book devoted to the Fabian Society: Edward R. Pease, *History of the Fabian Society*, 2nd ed., London, 1925. There have, however, been two recent Ph.D. theses dealing with the society, one at Cambridge University, and the other at Columbia.

a heterogeneous collection of wealthy men and skilled and unskilled laborers. Its slogan was "educate, agitate, organize," and what claim to fame it had in the last decades of the nineteenth century revolved around its agitations for work for the unemployed.¹⁰

The contents of the letters from Ely's correspondents indicate significant differences between the socialist orientation of the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation. The letters written by Fabians have an intellectual approach; they show the Fabians' eagerness to involve Constitutional Radicals in their activities, and to interest Radicals in Fabian ideas. On the other hand, the letters from the secretary of the Social Democratic Federation reveal this group's preoccupation with its own organizational structure; the tone of these letters reflects the so-called "exclusiveness" of the S.D.F.—as one former member reported: "They [members of the S.D.F.] appeared to be standing aloof from all existing organizations and regarding Radicals as their bitterest of foes."¹¹ Curiously enough Ely's comments on English socialist organizations in *Socialism and Social Reform* do not include remarks on these essential differences.

Ely did, however, know of distinctions between the S.D.F. and the Fabian Society. Lee had explicitly stated in a letter to him that the Fabian Society had a policy "very dissimilar" to that of the S.D.F.¹² And Ely recognized in *Socialism and Social Reform* two differences between the socialist groups. He noted that the Fabian Society had "become emancipated from the materialistic philosophy of Karl Marx"; while the Social Democratic Federation had as its leader H. M. Hyndman, who presented Marxist thought to the English world.¹³ And he also differentiated between the two organizations when he cautiously described the Social Democratic Federation as "a body pursuing, perhaps, methods more popular than the Fabian Society,"¹⁴ meaning, presumably, that the S.D.F. was more active in agitations.

Ely did not correspond with socialists outside of London, and in his *Socialism and Social Reform* this is in evidence, for he mentions only in passing the socialist movement then developing in the northern part of England. In *Socialism and Social Reform* Ely repeated uncritically Lee's statement that England had only two national socialist organizations, the

¹⁰ The only published history of the Social Democratic Federation is by H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social-Democracy in Britain*, London, 1935. See also the present author's thesis on the Social Democratic Federation (1881-1900) in the Radcliffe College Library.

¹¹ Letter from Henry L. Allen to A. R. Wallace, Nov. 3, 1883, Add. Ms. 46440 (6), British Museum.

¹² Letter from H. W. Lee, London, to Richard T. Ely, Feb. 6, 1894, Ely Papers.

¹³ Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

S.D.F. and the Fabian Society,¹⁵ and when Ely discusses English socialism, he centers his attention on these two organizations.¹⁶ He also acted on Fabian Secretary Pease's advice that the anarchist movement in England was insignificant and, therefore, should not receive much notice¹⁷ by completely omitting any mention of such a movement in England.¹⁸ The result was that Ely tended to ignore the many diverse groups and individuals in England who talked about socialism. The one exception to this lies in Ely's recognition of the various different English *Christian* exponents of socialism, from Bishop Westcott to Stewart Headlam.

Ely and the Relation of Religion and Economics

THAT ELY SHOULD HAVE INCLUDED the Christian exponents of socialism is further evidence of his biases in selecting his material. The relation of religion and economics was a primary concern of Ely's.¹⁹ He had in 1889 published a book entitled *The Social Aspects of Christianity*.²⁰ In this and in many other articles and addresses he "attempted to expound the thesis that Christianity is primarily concerned with this world and it is the mission of Christianity to bring to pass here a kingdom of righteousness."²¹ Consequently Ely most seriously considered socialism at the points where socialism and Christianity seemed most in accord.²² Thus the activities of Christians in England who were professing socialist ideas were of considerable concern to him.²³

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103; and letter from H. W. Lee, London, to Richard T. Ely, Feb. 6, 1894, Ely Papers.

¹⁶ In his brief reference to the program of the newly formed Independent Labour Party, Ely noted that it supported "the collective ownership and control of the means of production, distribution and exchange." (*Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.* p. 61). From this notation and from the context in which it occurs it is obvious that Ely thought of the Independent Labour Party as a socialist organization. Yet pages later in this book (p. 103), Ely repeats without questioning the statement of the secretary of the S.D.F. that England has only two national socialist organizations. The S.D.F. did not recognize the I.L.P. as socialist because the latter did not explicitly call itself "socialist." If Ely had been consistent, he would have argued that there were more than two national socialist groups and referred to the I.L.P. as proof.

¹⁷ Letter from Edward R. Pease, London, to Richard T. Ely, March 8, 1894, Ely Papers.

¹⁸ That is except by indirection, for he does note that the Fabian Society had issued a Tract on *The Impossibilities of Anarchism*. Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.*, p. 93, n. 1.

¹⁹ See John Rutherford Everett, *Religion in Economics*, New York, 1946.

²⁰ Richard T. Ely, *Social Aspects of Christianity*, New York, 1889.

²¹ Ely, *Ground Under Our Feet*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

²² Ely saw moral strength in socialist ideas. For example, he thought that under a socialist society "the maxim of St. Paul, 'He who will not work, neither shall he eat' would become the universal application." Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

²³ Even in his book on French and German Socialism, Ely saw fit to add a section on Christian Socialism in England. See *French and German Socialism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-56.

On the other hand, Ely completely neglects to mention the relationship between secularism and socialism in England. William Clarke wrote Ely before *Socialism and Social Reform* was published:

My nature is religious, my leanings are all that way, but yet I doubt, as nearly all our cultivated men do today. . . . I quite feel that some blending of the economic with the religious element is what society must need. But there are scarcely any of our Socialists here who take that view, for scepticism has gone very deep into English cultivated society and into the more intelligent section of the working classes.²⁴

Yet the Ely who so often had relied on his correspondents for information saw no necessity to follow this lead and include a commentary on the relation of the nonbeliever and the socialist.²⁵

Even in Ely's criticisms of socialism there is no mention of the accusation that the movement is "atheistic." While the reader of the *London Times* might read of socialists' "bawling" in churches to attract attention to distress among the unemployed and might conclude that the socialists had no respect for religion, Ely did not see the necessity of including such reading matter in his volume. In fact, Ely's impression of socialism in England was totally different from the one most probably held by the reader of the *London Times*, for this newspaper, when covering socialist activity, mainly confined itself to reports on the Social Democratic Federation's agitations demanding work for the unemployed.²⁶

On the whole, Ely's conception of socialism in England was one that a Fabian socialist, a Christian Fabian socialist, might have of the movement. So Fabian was Ely's approach that Sidney Webb could write enthusiastically of *Socialism and Social Reform* that the book "cannot fail to be of great use . . . in clearing up misconceptions as to what Socialism means . . ." and that the Fabian Society was urging local libraries to buy it.²⁷ And the American Fabian, W. D. P. Bliss, could write of Ely, "We vastly admire him and doubt if the man lives who has done more for Socialism among thoughtful Americans than Professor Ely."²⁸

²⁴ Letter from William Clarke, London, to Richard T. Ely, May 20, 1891, Ely Papers.

²⁵ Perhaps part of this omission comes from Ely's relying on Thomas Kirkup's *Inquiry into Socialism* (London, 1887) as a source on English socialism—a book which he admired (see *Socialism and Social Reform op. cit.*, p. 104). Kirkup, although mentioning a relationship between socialism and secularism, dismisses it as follows: "It is also by many believed that socialism is hostile to Christianity and is naturally associated with secularism and revolutionary materialism. So it frequently is and has been. But the connection of socialism with views of this nature is purely an accident. Socialism has also been associated with Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. Considered as a principle and theory of social and economic life, socialism is marked by the entire harmony even identity of its moral spirit with that of Christianity" (p. 109).

²⁶ See files of the *London Times* in this period.

²⁷ Letter from Sidney Webb, London, to Richard T. Ely, Sept. 19, 1894, Ely Papers.

²⁸ Letter from W.D.P. Bliss to the *American Fabian*, November, 1895.

Ely as a Critic of Socialism

STILL SOME OPPONENTS of socialism recognized in *Socialism and Social Reform* a contribution to antisocialist arguments. A writer in the *Chicago Evening Post* made these comments:

Professor Ely has done more than any other American writer—one had almost said any other living writer . . . —to refute the current sophistries of socialism.²⁹

In the book, Ely is indeed critical of socialism;³⁰ and in his Preface he claimed that he was writing in a "conservative spirit."³¹ When the Superintendent of Schools of Wisconsin accused Ely of being a socialist,³² Ely replied: "But am I not a socialist? On the contrary, I have thought . . . that even could socialism be organized and put in operation, it would stop progress and overthrow our civilization."³³

Yet despite this vigorous denunciation of socialism the reasons why Ely and the Fabian Socialists had such cordial relations are multifold. When he was not personally under attack Ely was far less vehement in his attitude on socialism. While his contemporaries, such as William Graham Sumner and E. L. Godkin, had nothing kind to say of the movement, Ely could find *some* good in socialist views. In a friendly letter to the English socialist, A. R. Wallace, about land nationalization he would write

My attitude is simply this: I do not accept the full program of Nationalization but I am glad to see Nationalization encouraged because I think it is the direction in which we in this country at least ought to move."³⁴

In *Socialism and Social Reform*, Ely praised the "Fabian Essays in Socialism," which, he wrote, "give us a genuine English socialism, practical, straight-forward, divorced from excrescences which have no connection with socialism as an industrial system."³⁵ He also recommended to the careful student of socialism the Fabian Sidney Webb's *Socialism in England*.³⁶ A few years previously Ely had suggested to

²⁹ "Professor Ely's Social Philosophy," *Chicago Evening Post*, Aug. 27, 1894.

³⁰ For Ely's general criticisms of socialism see *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-252.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

³² Letter from Oliver E. Wells, Madison, to the Editor, July 5, 1894, *Nation*, 59 (July 12, 1894), p. 27.

³³ Richard T. Ely, "Statement Made in Amphitheater at Chautauqua," Aug. 14, 1894, in Ely Papers. This reply of Ely's was read by Bishop John H. Vincent before a large audience at Chautauqua (see Ely, *Ground Under Our Feet*, *op. cit.*, p. 224).

³⁴ Letter from Richard T. Ely, Baltimore, Md., to A. R. Wallace, Oct. 9, 1890, Add. Ms. 46440 (5) British Museum.

³⁵ Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Webb that he write this monograph and had arranged for its publication by the American Economic Association.³⁷

In common with the Fabian socialists, Ely opposed laissez-faire economic theory. He had, in 1887, been one of the founders of the American Economic Association, an organization which "represented a protest against the system of laissez faire, as expounded by writers of the older school of 'orthodox' American economics,"³⁸ and which regarded the "State as an educational and ethical agency whose positive aid is an indispensable condition of human progress."³⁹ Fabian socialists had no differences with these general propositions.

Likewise, in endorsing social reform measures, the conservative Ely often supported the same measures as the socialist Webb, although Ely would urge,

Social reform does not find any one panacea for social evils, but holds that remedies are numerous, because society is many-sided and complex. Social reform views with favor what socialists and adherents of panaceas generally look upon with impatience as mere patchwork. . . . Social reform is conservative, and not revolutionary.⁴⁰

This statement did not, however, find disfavor among Fabians for Webb could write to Ely after reading it:

If I had to criticize your book, I should say that I do not recognize your division between Socialism and Social Reform. . . . All *your* Social Reforms are based, it seems to me, on Collectivism and so I agree with them. . . . Of course it suits us admirably to have people drawing the distinction that you do, for then they apply our principles and know it not.⁴¹

And again, the Fabians felt an identity with Ely when he commended socialists on their endorsement of a real brotherhood of man, of a higher living standard for men, of a better future for women and children, all of which he saw as the moral strength of socialism and all of which are points where socialism seemed to Ely to overlap with Christianity.⁴² As we noted earlier Ely was most sympathetic with socialism where he saw a close identity between religion and socialism.

One other point that Ely shared with Fabians was the goal of objectivity. The Fabians, with their socialist views, and Ely, with his

³⁷ Letter from Sidney Webb, London, to Richard T. Ely, Feb. 1, 1889, Ely Papers.

³⁸ Ely, *Ground Under Our Feet*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

³⁹ Item 1 in the Platform of the American Economic Association, *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁴⁰ Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁴¹ Letter from Sidney Webb, London, to Richard T. Ely, Sept. 19, 1894, Ely Papers.

⁴² Ely, *Socialism and Social Reform*, *op. cit.* pp. 145-56.

conservative views, both maintained that social forces should be treated with objectivity and impartiality.⁴³

Conclusion

TO CONCLUDE, in this essay we have dealt with Ely's consideration of English socialism—his understanding of the movement, his treatment of his sources, and his point of view.

Though Ely's comments on English socialism represent but a small portion of his total writings, his appraisal was widely read in America and provided a source of information for Americans on English socialism. Thus the biases and accuracy of Ely in his presentation of his data become important.

We have found that Ely's writing on English socialism had strength in his treatment of those aspects where he found himself most in sympathy.

On the other hand, his work was weakest in dealing with the diversity in English socialism, with the religious scepticism of many of the English socialists of that time, and with the new socialist movement that was developing in the north of England. The first of these points he appears not to have adequately considered; the second, he was out of sympathy with; and the third, his correspondents, who were Londoners, gave him the wrong impression about.

In spirit, if not in detail, Ely's approach harmonised with that of the English Fabian. In comparing Ely to the English Fabian, we have found one more example of a similarity in English and American thought in the decades at the end of the nineteenth century.

Columbia University

⁴³ See for instance, Ely, Preface to *France and German Socialism*, and letter from Sidney Webb, London, to Richard T. Ely, Feb. 1, 1889, Ely Papers.