

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# A REVIVAL OF POLITICAL RADICALISM

**I**N the last century in America, native radicalism was perhaps the most coherent social movement of the time, and its influence continued growing well into the closing decades. It numbered in its ranks the most memorable presidents, philosophers, political leaders, literary men and publicists. Then a strange hiatus occurred, and around or shortly after the turn of the century the voice of the native radical was heard no more in the legislative halls. There may be a very good reason for this; I think the cause of the trouble may have been the false notions introduced by the so-called "modernists;" who are unlearned in the elements of jurisprudence, fundamental economics, and the history of political science. Be that as it may; what inspires these recollections is the recent discovery by some thoughtful observers of the times of the loss occasioned by the absence of the counsels of the native radicals.

As the political situation becomes more confused, the hope arises for a revival of political radicalism, for there lingers in the memory of men an understanding of its worth in clearing away the debris of social chaos. Are there grounds to believe that the hope is warranted? One can only reply by setting out the history and the doctrines of the native radicals, who were akin to the English radicals of the time in more than identity of name.

The importation of the thought of the English Fabians checked, at least, the development of radical ideas. Indeed, the confusion caused by the promulgation of Shavian, Wellsian and Webbian notions as to how society should be ordered is worse now than it was twenty years ago. So strange is the turmoil of ideas of our historians, economists, and sociologists that it is almost impossible to find anyone today who can define such terms as "radical," "liberal," "socialist" or "communist." The confusion reaches so far that even editors, not only of daily papers but also of reviews, apply "radical" as an epithet to all persons holding opinions that do not conform to the thought of the advertisers. The peculiarity of the turmoil may be appreciated when it is pointed out that it has reached the stage now where a clean sweep is

made of the precise distinctions once held, and all and sundry are cluttered into two groups—Leftist and Rightist—though a few particular persons are inclined to add another group for the uncertainties and call it the middle lot. There seems to be no way out of this mess of notions, for men are far too busily occupied with the concerns of their own existence to find the time to define the terms they use. We have really reached the period referred to by Dr. Huse in his book, *The Illiteracy of the Literate*,<sup>1</sup> in which, with an excellent sense of humor, he remarks that we do not know the meaning of the words we use.

When one looks for a renaissance of the movement of the nineteenth-century radicals, I humbly suggest he should be quite clear in his own mind, before the quest begins, what genus he is really seeking. Recent discussion of the practical political benefits of such a renaissance makes me think that those who long for it may be searching for a type of person they will not find, or that the type they think of as radicals may be one whom no straight-thinking radical would for a moment accept. As I am often called "the last of the English radicals," I would not like to see these seekers undertake this extraordinary

task in vain. I am as keen to meet the real chap as they seem to be.

One of those who wish to see the native radical appear once more upon the political scene is Dr. James Bryant Conant,<sup>2</sup> president of Harvard University.<sup>3</sup> It is plain from the first two sections of his article that the radical Dr. Conant is in search of would satisfy neither an English radical nor an American one, for the new species is to be used as a kind of meat in the sandwich whose top layer is of white bread and whose bottom is of brown. Dr. Conant says: "Into the debate between reactionary and radical I should like to see introduced a third voice—the voice of the American radical."<sup>4</sup>

This is no place for a radical, and I do not think there has ever been one who would consider occupying it for a minute. If the radical proper is to modify his ideas according to the whims and caprices of the reactionary, on the one hand, and the undefined *radical*, on the other, he will withdraw from the political arena and join a discussion group, as the radicals did in England and in this country long before the Fabians were born.

What is the utility of a third voice—the voice of the American radical in a debate between a reactionary and a radical? Would it not be better

to leave the two who now occupy the arena to fight it out to a finish and save the voice of the third, the American radical, to give counsel when the others are exhausted? For, make no mistake about it, this time there will be a fight to a finish, with or without the aid of the radical whom Dr. Conant and those who think like him would find.

Strangely enough, there was a time in our history when an English radical came to the assistance of two groups of men of utterly diverse views, when it was a question of maintaining a British colony or affirming the English right of having grievances redressed before granting supply. The man who appeared upon the scene was Thomas Paine, and he supplies the only case of an effective radical who ever saw his ideas triumph. Suppose Paine had found himself in the position that Dr. Conant's third voice would occupy and that he would have been obliged to modify his ideas according to the ebb and flow of the Tories and the revolutionaries; I presume it is a fair guess to say that this country would never have become a Republic. It is our good fortune that Paine hewed his own line and never for a moment changed his character as an English constitutional radical.

But suppose such a man were to appear upon the scene now and suggest changes akin to those put forth by Paine. If he entered the political arena, would he not be denounced as a traitor and perhaps be lodged in jail? I wonder if Dr. Conant would accept another Thomas Jefferson, for he assuredly was an American radical. Suppose a miracle were to take place and a Thomas Jefferson of our time came forward and said:

. . . The public money and public liberty, intended to have been deposited with three branches of magistracy, but found inadvertently to be in the hands of one only, will soon be discovered to be sources of wealth and dominion to those who hold them. . . . They [the assembly] should look forward to a time, and that not a distant one, when a corruption in this, as in the country from which we derive our origin, will have seized the heads of government, and be spread by them through the body of the people; when they will purchase the voices of the people, and make them pay the price. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Jefferson wrote that in 1782. In the statement he described the situation as it is in America today. A Thomas Jefferson in this year of grace, if he were to state in public the views he repeatedly gave to the people of his time, would be denounced as a disturber of the peace, and, in

all probability, condemned on the charge of *lèse majesté*. Neither Paine nor Jefferson will do as models of the radical Dr. Conant is seeking. Indeed, I doubt very much whether he is sure of the type of man who would do for the job, for the university president says:

. . . The names of the predecessors of the European radicals are to be found on the lists of the Fabian Society of England of a generation back. The nearest approach to their ideals is to be seen in the miraculous Russian state. Their cultural heritage has been derived from Germany, France, and England.<sup>6</sup>

This is news to me, although I have been, under the impression that I have made a deeper study of Fabian literature than any Fabian I have ever met. Indeed, some of them admitted that I knew their "stuff" better than they did. But what would European radicals be doing in a list drawn up by the Fabian Society? And who were the radicals whose ideals could be discovered in the smallest particle in the "miraculous Russian state"? This leads me to the belief that Dr. Conant would not know an English radical if he met one.

Further on he attempts to give us an idea of the type of his political hero. He says:

The American radical traces his lineage through the democratic revolution of Jackson when Emerson was sounding his famous call for the American Scholar. His political ideal will, of course, be Jefferson; his prophets will be Emerson and Thoreau; his poet, Whitman. He will be respectful but not enthusiastic about Marx, Engels, and Lenin. I believe he can make a good case that his kind were the only radicals in the United States on economic matters until the close of the nineteenth century. . . .<sup>7</sup>

It seems the confusion for which some modern sociologists are largely responsible is getting out of hand. For it is impossible to imagine that such individualists as the Americans named in the above quotation would be respectful to men who scorned the idea of natural rights, who scoffed at justice, and who were advocates of the slave state. Marx would deride Jefferson and thrust him aside as a representative of the bourgeoisie; Engels would probably faint on reading Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*; and I feel sure that Lenin would writhe at the individualism of Walt Whitman. In this case, extremes do not meet.

The farther we probe into this type of thinking, the deeper is the confusion we find. In describing "a peculiar North American brand of doctrine" for his radical, Dr. Conant says:



. . . For example, he will be quite willing in times of peace to let net salaries and earnings sail way above the \$25,000 mark. He believes in equality of opportunity, not equality of rewards; but, on the other hand, he will be lusty in wielding the axe against the root of inherited privilege. To prevent the growth of a caste system, which he abhors, he will be resolute in his demand to confiscate (by constitutional methods) all property once a generation. He will demand really effective inheritance and gift taxes and the breaking up of trust funds and estates. And this point cannot be lightly pushed aside, for it is the kernel of his radical philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to make even an attempt to unravel this tangled scheme. The man that is required will "believe in equality of opportunity," but "he will be resolute in his demand to confiscate (by constitutional methods) all property once a generation." At the same time "he will demand really effective inheritance and gift taxes and the breaking up of trust funds and estates." How, after the confiscation of "all property once a generation," there will be trust funds and estates to bear "inheritance and gift taxes," the political essayist does not pretend to say. Probably he is leaving this part of it to be worked out by the trial and error system we have had in the United States for the past ten years and by the American radical to whom he

is bequeathing a job no sane person would think of accepting at one hundred times the \$25,000 limit. For if the man have such absurd notions as putting something by for a rainy day, he will surely say to himself: "What's the good of saving when I have 'to confiscate (by constitutional methods)' the property my heirs should be entitled to?" And all this is to be done by one who "believes in equality of opportunity."

This phrase "equality of opportunity" has been submitted to the most shocking abuses during the past decade. Of all the phrases and terms used by the real radicals of England and of this country, it is the one that has been singled out for particularly severe mistreatment. The reason is that few know its origin and what it means:

It has a long history, one that goes back far beyond the period in which William Lovett,<sup>9</sup> Thomas Spence,<sup>10</sup> and Francis Place<sup>11</sup> put forth their ideas. Many of these men were called socialists by the opposition, and strangely enough this label has clung to them even to our day. And yet, any earnest student of the doctrines set forth by them (and many others before their time) will discover that the basic principles they advocated were purely individualistic. They believed in equality of opportunity as firmly as

did Patrick Edward Dove.<sup>12</sup> Each of these men asked for the restoration of the land to the people. Some of them imagined this could be done through nationalization; others knew the only just way of granting equality of opportunity was in taking the value of land (rent) for the purposes of government. I have not encountered a single instance, during the past ten years, of an American politician using this phrase, who pretended to tell his readers or his hearers what he meant by it.

No better example of muddled notions can be found in the literature of Fabians, or those associated with them, than the work of Graham Wallas. In his book, *The Life of Francis Place*,<sup>13</sup> he refers to Thomas Spence as "the Land Nationaliser."<sup>14</sup> This is inexcusable in a man of Wallas' attainment and achievement. Spence was not a "land nationaliser" and, if Graham Wallas had taken the trouble to understand Spence's lecture read at the Philosophical Society in Newcastle on November 8th, 1775, he would have found that Spence has good right to be claimed as a precursor of Henry George. In this lecture Spence says nothing whatever about nationalizing land, but he does clearly indicate that all that is necessary for the community's

welfare is to take rent. He says, referring to the parish:

There are no tolls or taxes of any kind paid among them by native or foreigner, but the aforesaid rent which every person pays to the parish, according to the quantity, quality, and conveniences of the land, housing, etc., which he occupies in it. The government, poor, roads, etc. etc., as said before, are all maintained by the parishes with the rent; on which account all wares, manufactures, allowable trade employments or actions are entirely duty free. . . .<sup>15</sup>

The influence of Thomas Spence, William Ogilvie,<sup>16</sup> Thomas Paine<sup>17</sup> and Patrick Edward Dove—to name only four of the great individualistic radicals who made reform possible—spurred the English people to those great political efforts, extending over 150 years, which won back for them freedom from the tyranny of the House of Hanover.

Let me state again that I am just as keen as Dr. Conant himself, or as any who thinks like him, to discover a radical, to find the type of man who will undertake the job of setting things straight with the same fervor and wisdom that Paine gave to Washington and Jefferson. The radicals that I know in this country think the business is hopeless from merely a political

standpoint. They say something must happen first before radicals can enter upon the scene with any chance whatever of showing their usefulness. Heavens, there are radicals enough in the country to move mountains, but they all believe the volcano must do a lot of erupting before the internal fires are dead! However, when these people come to grips with the views of those who yearn for a revival of radicalism, their discouragement will be deeper than it has been, for most of those I know are men of culture and very poor. I can imagine some of them rubbing their eyes at the following extraordinary statement:

To turn from such eminently practical matters as earning a living to the problems of nourishing the human soul, we see also a difference here between the members of my hypothetical trio. For the American radical could not indulge his taste for "Old World culture" without a twinge of conscience. Therefore he would be impelled to sponsor a most difficult undertaking: the work of redefining culture in both democratic and American terms. He would have little patience—too little patience—with antiquarians, scholars, and collectors. The idea that culture is aristocratic would find no sympathy from his kind. This is one of the few points on which the American radical joins hands with his other radical friends and the Russians of the new day; his concept of art and culture would

be in terms of the present and the future, in terms of every man and woman and not a special privileged few.<sup>18</sup>

Where the president of an American university gets his ideas that culture is aristocratic, I do not know. Disraeli said: "The British aristocracy do not read." Other critics of the privileged few have said much worse. And yet for a century and a half the great baronial mansions of England have been packed with some of the finest pictures, the rarest volumes, the most famous sculptures, and the richest decorations the art world can supply. Surely it does not mean that a man is cultured when he is surrounded with *objets d'art*! Dr. Conant has only to look about him in this country to realize we have collectors of the most expensive pictures, costly books, rare antiquities, and other articles of great aesthetic value; and yet, many of these gentlemen can scarcely pronounce the names of the painters of their pictures. Those in America who understand the works that enter into their collections are men who started early in life and, as their fortunes grew, pursued their studies and learned to appreciate the art works they had acquired. There is not an aristocrat among them. When I think of the great collections made by individuals, which have been presented to our galleries, I cannot

recall a donor who had not to make his way in life from almost nothing.

Why, then, should "Old World culture" be condemned? And why should "the American radical join hands with his other radical friends and the Russians of the *new day*"? Surely the Hermitage Collection is still in existence and enjoyed by the Russian people! I have not heard that any of the sculptures of renown have been broken by Stalin's orders. Five years ago I was informed by a London art collector that most of the fine things in the old collections of Czarist times were still on exhibition.

Why should anyone from Harvard, of all places in this country, imagine that art and culture were at any time a special privilege of the few? I have lived a fairly long life—half of which has been spent in Europe and half in America—and I am prepared to say that art and culture were never the special privilege of the favored few as against the love of them by the working classes. Who throngs the galleries of Europe and America? The privileged aristocrats or the proletariat?

I should humbly suggest that Dr. Conant begin his inquiries as to the type of persons the English radicals were by forgetting all he has read about the Fabians, who date from 1883.

He must put out of his mind all ideas that the English radical stems from any other source than England. The English radical is of long lineage. We first hear of him in the Peasant Wars at the time of Richard II. He fought the land thieves of the reigns of the Tudors, the Stuarts and the Hanoverians who, by their enclosures by force and also by statute, reduced the mass of the people of England to wage slavery.<sup>19</sup>

The case of this radical has been set forth by many historical students, and it should be as clearly understood now as it was in the closing years of the Georges. It is the Fabians themselves who are responsible for the distorted notions that have crept into the literature of economics and politics during the past half century. A study of the pamphlets published by the Fabian Society, when read with a knowledge of the ideas and opinions of those extraordinary groups of radicals who came after John Wilkes, will convince any earnest student that John Morley was right when he said: "The Fabians botched the business. The right road faced them, but they obstinately took the wrong turn." How a bureaucratically minded fellow was to know the real road when he saw it is something I have never understood.



Perhaps this feeling of the need for a political revival of radicalism may be useful in rediscovering the real radical. Let us see if we can find the reason for their thought and action since the days of Chatham. C. B. Roylance Kent in his excellent work, *The English Radicals*, says:

. . . It was the perpetration of the crimes that awakened discontent and caused men to meet together to question and consider; it was the desire to discuss grievances that caused the Radicals to spring into existence.<sup>20</sup>

Lecky points out that "the year 1769 is very remarkable in political history, for it witnessed the birth of English Radicalism."<sup>21</sup> He tells us it was then the first serious attempts were made to reform and control Parliament by pressure from without. This was not a movement against the House of Lords, nor even against the Crown. It was directed almost exclusively against the House of Commons. Most of the radicals of that day advocated annual parliaments. They were at one with Swift who said he admired "that Gothic institution which made Parliaments annual."<sup>22</sup>

Strangely enough, these men were supported by the mass of the people who had little or no knowledge from elementary schooling and, therefore, educated themselves. The political news of the day was read in the public houses, and

Wilkes' paper, *The North Briton*, was eagerly studied and inspired the discussions which followed. It is impossible to go over the pamphlets and other literature of that time and not be impressed with the fact that, when the masses were uneducated, they frequently exhibited a common sense rarely noticed today. They had the clearest ideas of their rights and their powers. They knew the old English law of redress of grievance before supply and, when Townshend refused to pay his land tax on the ground that Middlesex was not legally represented in Parliament, the very government shook with fear. It was Horace Walpole who said: "The storm that saved us was raised in taverns and night cellars."<sup>23</sup>

Walpole's statement may not be true, but there is in it an idea that the radicals of the day were supported by the common folk. ~~The men who led the movements from the date of the birth of radicalism were constitutionalists and thorough individualists.~~ The few who followed Robert Owen are scarcely worth mentioning. That movement, it was said, began in vapor and ended in smoke. The real note struck at that time, to which the people responded, was the one attributed to James Mill: "Liberty, in its original sense, means freedom from restraint." Fran-

cis Place, whom some of the Fabians have called a socialist, said:

All legislative interference must be pernicious. Men must be left to themselves to make their own bargains; the law must compel the observance of compacts, the fulfilment of contracts. There it should end. So long as the supply of labour exceeds the demand for labour, the labourer will undersell his fellows, and produce poverty, misery, vice, and crime.

. . . No restrictive laws should exist. Every one should be at liberty to make his own bargain in the best way he can.<sup>24</sup>

And so it was down to the days of Cobden and Bright. It has been shown repeatedly that those who stood behind Cobden in his crusade to relieve the British people of the terrible Corn Laws kept alive the old beliefs of Joseph Priestley, Thomas Paine, Francis Place, and the Philosophical Radicals—James Mill, Sir William Molesworth, and George Grote.

I should advise Dr. Conant to take the counsel Wordsworth gave to a student at the Temple when he urged him to throw aside his books on chemistry and read Godwin on Necessity. All who think like him might well undertake the same task. What one might distinguish as philosophical radicalism was never more flourishing

than it is in our country today. But not until the reactionaries and the revolutionaries bring to maturity the crisis of our time, which they precipitated and which will force their abdication from pretensions to political leadership, will the radicals come forth and assume political responsibility. In this sense, one might say that the revival of political radicalism is assured. The hour will find the men equal to it.

## FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

*Amer. Jour. Econ. Sociol.*, III, No. 1 (Oct., 1943) 15-27.

<sup>1</sup> New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Conant, "Wanted: American Radicals," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May, 1943.

<sup>3</sup> It is rather a singular thing that the most outspoken among those who seek the counsel of the radical should be a president of Harvard University. Years ago Harvard itself turned out not a few radicals. Recently I have looked over two books, *The Early Years of the Saturday Club, 1855-1870*, by Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918) and *Sketches and Reminiscences of the Radical Club of Chestnut Street, Boston*, edited by Mrs. John T. Sargent (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1880), which are records of the speeches and discussions of the members of these clubs. Such eminent Americans of Boston intellectual circles as Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Dana, Benjamin Peirce, John Fiske, Motley, and others met to discuss the momentous questions of the day, and frequently they laid down ideas and opinions that coincided with those held by the wisest of the English radicals. Many of these men were of Harvard, reared by it, or were in close touch with the faculty of the university.

<sup>4</sup> *Atlantic Monthly*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the state of Virginia written in the year 1781, somewhat corrected and enlarged in the winter of 1782, for the use of a Foreigner of distinction, in answer to certain queries by him . . . 1782.* (The first edition, although dated 1782, was not actually published until 1784. It was Jefferson's only book and was written at the request of M. de Marbois, secretary to the French embassy. Sec. 211, para. 4.)

<sup>6</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Lovett was a Cornishman, born in 1800 at Newlyn, who migrated to London in 1821. From 1836 to 1839 he was the spokesman of the political labor movement which started with the formation of the London Working Men's Association, and which developed into Chartism. He was intimately acquainted with Francis Place. (*Life and Struggles of William Lovett, in His Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom* [first published in 1876; reprinted, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920, with an introduction by R. H. Tawney]).

<sup>10</sup> Spence was of Scottish origin. On November 8, 1775 he delivered a paper before the Newcastle Philosophical Society on the "Rights of Man," for which "the Society did the Authour the honour to expel him." In 1793 he republished his Newcastle Lecture under the title *The Real Rights of Man*, and in 1796 under the title *The Meridian Sun of Liberty, or The Whole Rights of Man displayed*. It was republished in 1882 by Mr. H. M. Hyndman, who entitled it *Nationalisation of the Land*, and in 1896 by Frederick Verinder and Morrison Davidson for the Land Restoration League. (*The Pioneers of Land Reform, Spence, Ogilvie, and Paine*, edited with an introduction by M. Beer [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920]).

<sup>11</sup> Born in 1771, died 1854; famous as a reform agitator in 1831-32, in the Chartist Movement, and in the Anti-Corn-Law League. He wrote a *History of Reform Agitation* (1836-39), organized, with Lovett, the Working Men's Association, and drafted "The People's Charter."

<sup>12</sup> In 1850 Patrick Edward Dove published in London and Edinburgh a limited and anonymous edition of *The Theory of Human Progression and Natural Probability of a Reign of Justice*, which was dedicated to Victor Cousin. Dove's basic thought is that human poverty is not the result of divine neglect but rather of man's ignorance and his failure to follow natural law.

<sup>13</sup> New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919 (revised ed.).

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> *Pioneers of Land Reform*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ogilvie was Professor at Aberdeen University. He published his *Essay on the Right of Property in Land* (1781) anonymously. This *Essay* was republished in 1838 and in 1891 and may be found in *Pioneers of Land Reform*, pp. 35-181.

<sup>17</sup> The complete title of Paine's pamphlet, which was addressed as a proposal to the Legislature and Executive Directory of the French Republic, in 1797, was *Agrarian Justice opposed to Agrarian Law and Agrarian Monopoly, Being a plan for Meliorating the condition of Men by creating in Every Nation a National Fund, To pay every person when arriving at the age of twenty-one years the Sum of fifteen pounds stg. to enable Him or Her to begin the world, and also Ten pounds per annum during Life to Every person now Living of the age of fifty years, and to all others when they shall arrive at that Age, to enable them to live in old age without wretchedness, and to go decently out of the World.*

<sup>18</sup> *Atlantic Monthly*, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> See *supra*, chaps. IV and V, "The Conspiracy Against the English Peasantry."

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>21</sup> *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (8 vols.; London, 1890), III, 174. For more details on the origin of the name and the merging of the two names "Radical" and "Liberal" see *supra*, p. 132 and p. 172, n. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Essay on Public Absurdities in England in The Works* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1824), IX, 262-66.

<sup>23</sup> *Memoirs of the Reign of King George III* (4 vols., 1845; re-edited by Mr. G. F. Russell Barker, 1894), I, 182.

<sup>24</sup> G. Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, pp. 174-75.