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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/51h4m12z>

Journal

Journal of Social History, 34

Author

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Publication Date

2000

Peer reviewed

Republicanism, Socialism, and Democracy:

The Origins of the Radical Left

By

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The more powerful the state, and thus the more political a country is, the less it is inclined to look in the state itself, that is in the present organisation of society whose active, self-conscious, and official expression is the state, for the cause of social evils, and thus understand their general nature. Political intelligence is political just because it thinks inside the limits of politics. The sharper and livelier it is the less capable it is of comprehending social evils.¹

When Engels wrote about Chartism, he described the movement as the first to embody the true class consciousness of the workers, a consciousness focused, as Marx had implied, on social evils that had social causes and afflicted the workers as a class.² Many subsequent historians, whether Marxists or not, took a similar view. The chartists, they argued, broke with old traditions of popular radicalism to inaugurate the history of a working class movement progressing towards a mature socialist ideology. Recently, however, numerous social historians have challenged this orthodoxy by tracing continuities from the traditions of popular radicalism through Chartism and even on into various movements of the 1860s and 1870s.³ Although the reasons for this challenge to orthodoxy are many and complex, two stand out. The first is the linguistic turn. An increasing reluctance among historians to define the nature of a movement in terms of the objective social position of its participants has encouraged a new interest in the beliefs and languages by which people constructed their world, and when historians have looked at the beliefs and languages of nineteenth-century radicals, they have found ample evidence of the continuing strength of popular radicalism. The second is the work of historians of political thought on the republican tradition. They have recovered a republican tradition centred on concepts such as virtue, corruption, and liberty as an important and persistent alternative to Enlightenment liberalism.⁴

The linguistic turn in social history has combined with a growing awareness of the place of a civic republican tradition in the history of political thought to make us aware of the continuing strength among radical workers in the nineteenth-century of things such as a concern with the political rather than the social and a belief in the people rather than the working-class. But an awareness of these things raises a clear problem of transition: how did the socialism of the twentieth-century emerge out of, or perhaps even supplant, the republican tradition of the Victorian era?

The Republican Inheritance

Before we can resolve the problem of transition, we have to be clear about the nature of the republican radicalism that constitutes our starting point. What we now have is a story in which a republican tradition passes through Thomas Paine into the chartists and even later radical movements. Nineteenth-century Britain continued to provide a home to a republican tradition inspired by Machiavelli and Harrington. We should be cautious, however, neither to over-estimate the importance of the republican tradition nor to under-estimate changes in it. Indeed, if we equate the republican tradition with a narrowly defined civic republicanism, then we should say that it was disappearing rapidly from Victorian Britain. Civic republicanism incorporates a view of the self as firmly embedded in a particular tradition or community. Hence it stresses both the individual's location in a particular commonwealth, and the importance of the glory of that commonwealth. By the nineteenth-century, civic republicanism generally had been displaced by the more individualist and universalist doctrines associated with the Enlightenment and the romantic movement.⁵ To some extent, therefore, we can resolve the problem of transition by saying that the recent historiography over-emphasises the republican presence in Victorian thought. The dominant strands of nineteenth-century political thought derived from rationalist and romantic traditions set apart from civic republicanism. Moreover, many radicals were increasingly influenced by a liberalism deriving primarily from Utilitarianism and Philosophical Radicalism.

But suppose, then, that we equate the republican tradition with a much broader civic humanism, characterised solely by a concern to promote virtuous and independent citizens. In this case, we should say that it was remarkably common in Victorian Britain. J. S. Mill, for example, expressed a concern for civic virtue, although, of course, he did so in the context of a utilitarian philosophy somewhat at odds with civic republicanism.⁶ But civic humanism here becomes so broad that one even might say that it is no more than a set of abstract, perennial concerns, and so incapable of doing substantial historical work. Certainly the concern for virtue and independence are here set free both of all philosophical underpinnings so that they can co-exist with a universalist liberalism, and of all specific content, so that independence can mean having secure employment or even exhibiting certain habits rather than owning land or paying taxes. To some extent, therefore, we can resolve the transition problem by saying that the recent historiography defines republicanism so loosely that we end up finding it everywhere, including, no doubt, within the socialism of the twentieth-century.

The real transition problem arises not with civic republicanism or civic humanism, but rather with a republican movement situated on the extreme edge of radicalism. The key message of the recent historiography is, after all, that many chartists and associated figures shared a set of beliefs distinct from modern socialism, beliefs rooted in a civic republicanism already profoundly transformed by discourses such as those associated with the enlightenment and romanticism. Although there were clear differences of opinion among these popular radicals, a number of common themes are apparent. Their main complaint concerned the corrupt nature of the state, and only thereafter the way in which this corruption led to social and economic ills. Almost all republican radicals argued that a few landed, aristocratic families dominated the state, which they used to advance their sectional interests, not the common good. Social evils arose principally because the ruling classes used their political power to pass oppressive laws under which they could rob the people. Bronterre O'Brien, the "schoolmaster of the Chartists", told the workingman, "it is because you are unrepresented that you have no property": he explained that "wages-

slavery is wholly and solely the work of tyrannical laws which one set of men impose upon another by fraud and force."⁷

Republican radicals complained of the ruling classes using their power to sustain an inequitable distribution of land. Although there were debates about how exactly the distribution of land impoverished the people, there was almost universal agreement among republican radicals that it did do so. The most common view was that the ruling classes used their political power to maintain their monopoly of the land and thereby deny the people the chance to work for themselves. The private ownership of land by, in J.S. Mill's famous words, 'the few', created a group of idlers who exploited the 'many' who had no way of providing for themselves save to work for these idlers on unjust terms. The basis of social ills, such as the private ownership of land, remained, however, the corrupt political system. Thus, even when the main concern was to improve living standards, the means of doing so remained political reform. Once the political system was made more democratic, the people would use their new political power to prevent the few exploiting the many and thereby to eliminate social ills.

This republican radicalism had a complex relationship to anti-monarchism. For a start, similar beliefs, often tied back to the civic republicanism of the country party, exercised a lingering influence on Tory radicalism and even popular loyalism.⁸ In addition, not all republican radicals denounced the monarchy. What they wanted was not to abolish the monarchy so much as to protect liberty and promote social justice by strengthening the popular element of the state and so eliminating corruption. Most agreed that a republic was in theory the best guarantee of liberty, but whereas some hoped to abolish the monarchy altogether, others saw no immediate prospects for anything other than constitutional monarchy, so they promoted a strong legislature capable of resisting interference by monarchy and government alike. Finally, a desire to abolish the monarchy was, of course, also found among both other radicals more firmly entrenched in a rationalist, liberal tradition, such as Charles Bradlaugh, and a number of positivists inspired by the political teachings of Comte.⁹

From Republicanism to Socialism

By 1880 the republican movement of the 1870s had by and large collapsed. Its legacy consisted of the O'Brienites and other old chartists who had links with a few Tory radicals, positivists, and liberal radicals. In 1881, H. M. Hyndman, a Tory radical who had read Marx, gave a series of lectures at radical workingmen's clubs in an attempt to drum-up support for a new political party. After a few preliminary meetings, the inaugural conference of his Democratic Federation (D.F.) was held in June 1881.¹⁰

The people involved in the formation of the D.F. had backgrounds in the groups left behind by the republican radicalism of the 1870s. They included public intellectuals who sympathised with this republicanism: Tory Radicals such as Hyndman and Morrison Davidson, positivists such as E. S. Beesly and Henry Compton, and a few liberal radicals such as Herbert Burrows and Joseph Cowen. The most numerous group, however, were the popular radicals. Typically they were artisans who worked outside factories in small workshop trades where the impact of mechanisation came comparatively late: Charles and James Murray were both shoemakers as was William Morgan, while George Harris was a tailor, and Richard Butler a compositor. The radical clubs to which they belonged were concentrated in the West End of London away from the sites of the new industries that relied on mass production.¹¹ Their culture remained that of many chartists, infused as it was by the teachings of O'Brien.

So, the D.F. was formed as an ultra-democratic organisation with roots in the remains of the republican movement of the 1870s. Edwin Dunn, who sent out the invitations to its inaugural meeting, wrote a letter to the Radical that illustrates its debt to republican radicalism. He argued that political imbalances led to corrupt laws which impoverished the people:

We live in an age when every class is united, and is duly represented in Parliament, save that of the majority of the nation. The landholders are united and bound by one common interest; they govern of course the House of Lords, and

have many representatives in the Commons . . . So with the other classes, all are organised, and use their organisation to subdue and keep in subjugation the labouring masses of the people. Such being the case it cannot be wondered at that our laws are framed and our taxes arranged so that the people bear the burden.¹²

The programme published by the D.F. a month after its inaugural meeting echoes Dunn's letter. The D.F. sought to unite "Democrats and workers" so as to advance a list of reforms. The list began with slightly modified versions of the demands of the Charter yet to be met - adult suffrage, triennial parliaments, equal electoral districts, payment of M.P.s - moved on through related political measures - corrupt practices to be made illegal, abolition of the House of Lords, legislative independence for Ireland - and Hyndman's particular concern - national and federal parliaments - to the one key social reform - nationalisation of the land.¹³ In 1903, Justice, the official newspaper of the D.F., still characterised its members as the "legitimate heirs and successors" of the chartists.¹⁴

In the early 1880s, the D.F. moved to a clear socialist position, first by demanding further social reforms such as the eight hour day, then by declaring itself to be socialist, and finally by changing its name to Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.) and adopting a new programme that included collective ownership of the means of production. The D.F. provides, therefore, the context in which we should look for the answer to the transition problem, for many of its members made the transition from republican radicalism to socialism. Moreover, we have no reason to look far beyond those involved in the D.F., since we have little evidence of republican radicalism thriving elsewhere. Apart from the popular radicals in the D.F., for example, workers rarely showed much enthusiasm for republicanism, although, like so many others, they echoed themes expressed by earlier civic humanists. Even in the 1860s and 1870s, positivists such as Beesly and popular radicals such as James Murray who sought to align themselves with the broader working-class movement found that they could do so far more easily on issues that attracted the backing of the liberal radicals who dominated the trade unions than on strictly republican ones.¹⁵ Outside the D.F. there were few republican radicals around to make the transition

to socialism. We need to trace this transition, therefore, in Tory radicals such as Hyndman, popular radicals such as the Murray brothers, and positivists such as Bax.

In 1884 Hyndman wrote a leader for Justice entitled "Our Republic". His familiarity with a Tory radicalism rooted in the ideas of the country party enabled him, as well as the popular radicals, to draw on the republican tradition. He evoked a radical ancestry, denounced a corrupt, courtly politics, and called for a socialist republic:

Tyler and Ball, and Cade and Kelt, Vane and Blake and Harrison, Priestly and Cartwright, Spence and Owen, Vincent, Ernest Jones, and Bronterre O'Brien - a noble band indeed! . . . How do courtly fuglemen and ennobled sycophants look by the side of these? A great democratic English Republic has ever been the dream of the noblest of our race . . . To bring about such a Republic is the cause for which we Socialists agitate to-day.¹⁶

In reality, however, Hyndman's Marxism had overturned the republican tradition he here evoked. When he drummed-up support among the workingmen's clubs in 1881, he aimed at a democratic republic to cure social ills; but by 1884 he aimed at socialism, with a democratic republic appearing as a corollary rather than a pre-requisite of social reform.

Hyndman's first writings, dating from the late 1870s, called for parliamentary representation for the colonies. In 1880 he campaigned for an extended suffrage whilst standing for Parliament in Marylebone. Nonetheless, initially, like many Tory radicals, he equated democracy with anarchy.¹⁷ Only after he met the republican radicals of the workingmen's clubs did he accept the term democracy as applicable to his vision of a strong legislature based on a broad electorate. He distributed a work to the delegates at the inaugural conference of the D.F. that expresses the main themes of republican radicalism. The work was emphatically political: it described manhood suffrage as a pre-requisite of social reform; it demanded equal electoral districts, payment of M.P.s, and triennial parliaments; and it called for a democratic and powerful legislature to end the tyranny of the landlords and moneylords.¹⁸ By 1884, however, Hyndman's beliefs had shifted

decisively as a result of his encounter with Marxism. For a start, his understanding of Marx's economic theory suggested that the source of social ills lay not with the corrupt political system but with a capitalist structure in which labour was bought and sold as a commodity. Marx had demonstrated that poverty and exploitation arose out of wage-slavery, where wage-slavery was an inevitable product of the development of the forces of production. The economic oppression of the people under capitalism was inevitable, irrespective of whether the state was or was not corrupt in the ways suggested by republican radicals. In addition, Hyndman's understanding of Marx's historical materialism suggested that political reforms were unlikely to end wage-slavery since the nature of the state reflected the relations of production. Socialism would come about as a result of the evolution of capitalism and the social revolution this would bring. The statesman's task was not to obtain political power, reform the state, and eliminate social ills. It was to ensure that the inevitable social revolution could occur without violence. By 1884, therefore, Hyndman was no longer calling for political reforms as a means of curing social ills. He was working rather to make the inevitable social revolution a peaceful one.

Hyndman's commitment to Marxism had overturned the republican themes in his Tory radicalism. Because the cause of social ills lay in the economic logic of capitalism, not unjust laws passed by a corrupt state, the key issues had become social not political ones. Social ills were seen as products of the operation of capital, not the distribution and private ownership of land nor even the profiteering of bankers and other moneylords. Moreover, because the key issues revolved around the way in which the operation of capital entailed exploitation of the workers, the vital division in society had become that between two classes defined by their economic relationship, not that between a corrupt political elite and a virtuous people. Finally, because the basic problems arose from the nature of the capitalist economy, not a corrupt state, the solution lay in social revolution, not political reform. Little of substance, therefore, passed from the republican tradition into Hyndman's Marxism. What did do so was a belief in popular government - the democratic ideal. In "Our Republic", Hyndman said, "a republic must be preferred to a monarchy and parliamentary government to dictatorship."¹⁹ Even here, however, a

significant change is apparent. Although democracy remained the ideal system of government to be established after a social revolution, Hyndman sometimes suggested that democratic issues were irrelevant under capitalism. Just as some republican radicals had thought social problems could not be addressed until the political system had been reformed at which point they would cure themselves, so Hyndman sometimes implied that political problems should be left until after the social revolution at which point they would cure themselves. Indeed, the point of "Our Republic" was to affirm this view against the suggestion that the D.F. had no interest in democratic issues. Hyndman said, "when we [the D.F.] declare that forms of government are indifferent to us we speak only of such forms as exist and are chiefly advocated today."²⁰ He still believed in democracy, and he still called regularly for measures to strengthen the popular element within the state, but at times he saw such measures as irrelevant to the struggle for socialism.

The popular radicals within the D.F. overturned the republican tradition in much the same way as did Hyndman.²¹ Unlike Hyndman, however, they never had any qualms about using the term democracy to describe their ideal of a strong, popular form of government. Several had been active chartists and prominent members of the National Reform League, and a few had been members of the International. Charles Murray supervised the arrangements for O'Brien's funeral and served on the General Council of the International. His brother, James, was a chief mourner at O'Brien's funeral and an organiser of the republican rally in Hyde Park in support of the Paris Commune. In 1874, Morgan, the Murray brothers, and other popular radicals formed the Manhood Suffrage League (M.S.L.), the name of which indicates their debt to republican radicalism, as do those of the other workingmen's clubs that provided early support for the D.F. - the Clerkenwell Patriotic, the Marylebone Democratic, and the West Central Democratic.²² Dunn expressed the beliefs of many popular radicals on the eve of the formation of the D.F. when he said that the cause of the people's plight was that they were not represented in Parliament. He did not ignore social problems, he just thought that the way to cure them was by political reform. Moreover, the social evils to be cured were those associated with landlords and moneylords, with capitalists at most being equated with the latter. We

should not be surprised, therefore, to find the popular radicals enthusing about the initial programme of the D.F. Morgan told the M.S.L. that the "programme meant a thorough reform of the House of Commons," which was essential because "it was useless to expect any radical reform from a House that was composed of landlords, capitalists, contractors, employers of labour, and speculators."²³

By 1884, however, most of the popular radicals in the D.F. had rejected the political focus at the heart of the republican tradition. They did so, at least in part, because of their encounter with socialist economic theories. Not only did Hyndman talk of his debt to Marx, publish numerous books, articles, and tracts, and lecture at workingmen's clubs; in addition, Richard Deck, Herman Jung, Andreas Scheu, and other exiles, who had fled from the aftermath of the Paris Commune or Bismarck's anti-socialist laws of 1878, began to introduce the popular radicals to the work of Lassalle, Marx, and Proudhon. The popular radicals, prompted by such influences, began to develop an economic analysis of capitalist exploitation. Typically they argued that capitalists obtain surplus value by purchasing labour for less than the value of its products. Capitalists can do this because there exists a class of workers who have to sell their labour to survive and a class of capitalists who possess a monopoly of the means of production that enables them to force these workers to accept "a bare subsistence wage."²⁴ Here the popular radicals began to divorce social ills from political causes. Exploitation arose out of the economic relationship between workers and capitalists, a relationship that existed not because the state was corrupt, but because of social facts. Social evils have their roots in social causes, and this means that "social changes need social action."²⁵ Thus, the popular radicals now sought a social revolution to end the exploitation of a social class rather than political reforms to liberate a virtuous people. A socialist revolution "will abolish all distinctions of class, or difference between wage-payers and wage-earners, and will render the workers their own employers."²⁶

The popular radicals, like Hyndman, had overturned republican radicalism by 1884. Most of them now regarded the key issues as social rather than political ones. The condition of the workers stemmed from their economic relationship to landlords and

capitalists, and their relationship to the latter at least was independent of the nature of the state. Capitalist exploitation rested on a monopoly of the means of production, rather than corrupt laws. The attention of popular radicals in the D.F. shifted, therefore, from demands for political reform to calls for social reconstruction. Political reform remained desirable, but the important question had become what the workers would do with the power that such political reform would give them. As James Murray explained:

Abolition of the House of Lords, Universal Suffrage, Payment of the Expenses of Elections out of the Rates, and Payment of Members - these measures would for the first time in our history, place supreme political power in the hands of the mass of the people . . . But, Fellow-Citizens, what will you do with the suffrage when you get it? . . . It has but one use, to enable the workers, as a class, to take possession of the power of the State so as to use that power for social purposes.²⁷

The main legacy of the popular radicals' debt to republican radicalism lay, as with Hyndman, in a continuing attachment to democracy. They sought a popular form of government characterised by a strong parliament kept under tight control by a broad electorate. Thus they argued that while socialists should work primarily for social reconstruction, they also should promote a democratic republic. Indeed, although they usually insisted that a democratic republic would not guarantee social reform, they certainly thought that it would facilitate it. Because they did not see the state as impotent in relation to society, let alone as a passive reflection of a socio-economic base, they often suggested that a reformed state could act as an instrument with which to transform civil society. In 1884, for example, James Murray urged the D.F. to demand "universal suffrage, proportional representation and payment of members as a means of obtaining reduction of the hours of labour, socialisation of the means of production, and the organisation of Society."²⁸

Bax began to attend positivist meetings as a result of the inspiration he took from the republicans of the Paris Commune.²⁹ The positivists echoed many of the republican

themes of the popular radicalism of the nineteenth-century, although, of course, they did so from within a somewhat different philosophical context. Comte argued that the solution to current ills was a social republic governed by a scientific elite and based on a religion of humanity. A number of his British followers, including Beesly, Compton, and Frederic Harrison, rejected his religious views whilst adhering to a less authoritarian version of his social theory - they promoted a popular, democratic form of government as a cure for social ills.³⁰ As the Bee-Hive, their newspaper, explained, "the great cause of the downtrodden and degraded position of so many thousands of the working classes is, the robbery that capital has perpetrated on labour through legislation."³¹ Although Bax did not join the positivists, he attended their meetings for much of the 1870s, and his earliest articles in the late 1870s exhibit an obvious debt to positivism. He called for a new religion of humanity embodied in a socialist republic.³² Socialism, he said, required a series of related measures: "in Politics, the substitution of the international for the national idea, and the adoption of the Federal Republican solution through the splitting up of existing nationalities into independent sections; in Industry, co-operation under the immediate control of a democratic state; in Religion, the complete substitution of ethical for theological teaching."³³

In 1879, Bax read Capital; in 1881, he wrote an article on Marx's ideas; and in June 1882, having met Hyndman, he joined the D.F.³⁴ Bax was won over by Marx's economic theory which he described as "comparable in its revolutionary character and wide-reaching importance to the Copernican system in astronomy."³⁵ Nonetheless, he still wanted to support it with an idealist metaphysic and a positivist ethic. Bax used idealist metaphysics to argue that the dialectic was built into reality in a way which made socialism logically inevitable. Quite when the logical inevitability of socialism would translate into historical actuality depended, however, on economics and ideology. Once economic forces created the circumstances in which socialism could come into being, then the ensuing ideological struggle would give birth to the new society. For Bax too, therefore, popular government was no longer an integral part of the road to socialism. What mattered was rather the inexorable development of the capitalist economy together

with practical propaganda designed to promote revolution. Indeed, when Hyndman suggested that the S.D.F. should enter candidates in parliamentary elections, Bax objected on the grounds that their activities should be "purely educational."³⁶ His focus on the coming revolution left him uninterested in the use of a democratic government to promote social reform. Bax's conversion to Marxism led him to marginalise the struggle for a democratic state, and to look instead to a social revolution based on economic developments. Material circumstances would bring about a historical crisis at which point socialists needed to be ready to grab political power. Indeed, Bax departed even further from republican radicalism by adopting a form of revolutionary vanguardism instead of insisting that radical movements had to embody the democratic ideal. The fate of the Paris Commune showed, he believed, that revolutionary situations required strong dictatorship. Thus, socialists should concentrate on creating a "solid body of class-conscious proletarians" who would know what to do "in an emergency."³⁷ When the historical crisis arose, the decisive action of this revolutionary vanguard would sweep the masses along into socialism. Only after the revolution would democracy become relevant. Bax's positivist republicanism lingered on, therefore, in little more than his vision of a socialist society as one not only of co-operative communism but also of cosmopolitan republicanism. The revolution would inaugurate a democratic republic that would express the general will and thereby realise true liberty, that is, "the freedom of the individual in and through the solidarity of the community."³⁸

By 1884, the Tory radicals, popular radicals, and positivists within the S.D.F. had renounced the central tenets of republican radicalism. They no longer traced social ills to political sources, emphasised the contrast between a corrupt aristocracy and virtuous people, or looked to democracy as a panacea. Instead they focused on the internal workings of the capitalist economy, spoke of class conflict, and demanded collective ownership of the means of production. During the 1880s and 1890s, therefore, republican radicalism ceased to operate as a political belief-system. No doubt intellectuals and activists at times advocated republican measures and used words with republican

resonances, but republican radicalism had ceased to operate as a coherent set of beliefs in which a strong popular form of government would eliminate corruption and so cure all ills.

How can we explain the demise of republican radicalism? Clearly one cause was the dilemma posed by the democratic reforms of 1867 and 1884. As the British state became increasingly democratic while social ills remained as prominent as ever, so it became difficult to see democracy as the solution to social ills. Here the S.D.F.'s break with republican radicalism mirrors growing doubts among liberal radicals about the Benthamite model of democracy, doubts apparent, for example, in Graham Wallas and his turn to political psychology.³⁹ The experience of democracy prompted many radicals to reassess their views of the benefits it could bring. In doing so, radicals influenced by the republican tradition often came to a greater recognition of the relative autonomy of the social from the political. Such disappointment at the limited effects of democratic reforms in Britain often went along, moreover, with a growing disillusionment with the American republic. A recognition of the power of trusts in the American economy, the corrupt nature of its city politics, the conservative implications of the presidential veto, and the constitutional protection granted to private property, all these things made radicals look with growing suspicion on the republic they once had seen as a precursor of an idyllic future.⁴⁰ Here the S.D.F.'s break with republican radicalism mirrors the growing appreciation of the American state among liberal individualists and non-interventionists such as Lord Bryce and A. V. Dicey who began to eulogise an Anglo-American commitment to representative and responsible government, the rule of law, and a capitalist economy.⁴¹ Finally one also might relate the decline of republican radicalism to things such as the creeping advance of mass production and a sense of living through a Great Depression. No matter how slow the process of industrial change or how unreasonable the idea of a depression, there can be little doubt but that contemporaries experienced such things as real and struggled to understand them.⁴² There are some reasons, moreover, to suppose that mass production and depression had a particularly acute impact in the 1880s on London artisans such as our popular radicals: industries such as shoemaking and shipping moved out of London to places such as Northampton and Gravesend, while

innovations such as mechanical typesetting left little room for skills such as the hand-setting of type.⁴³

Yet we can not leave our explanation of the demise of republican radicalism there. After all, radicals often insisted that the reforms of 1867, and later 1884, had not created a democratic republic, and, of course, they could be equally dismissive of the American state. Thus, they could say that the reforms had not brought the expected benefits simply because the reforms had been insufficient so to do. The S.D.F.'s break with the republican tradition, therefore, probably owed as much to the impact of Marxism and related doctrines as to the experience of democracy or disillusionment with America. The late 1870s and early 1880s constitute a watershed not only because of the way Hyndman and Bax did so much to bring Marx to the attention of radicals, but also because the collapse of the Paris Commune and Bismarck's anti-socialist laws led to refugees coming to Britain, interacting with republican radicals, and introducing them to theorists such as Lassalle and Proudhon as well as Marx. Encounters with the work of continental theorists led members of the S.D.F. to place far greater stress on the social than had republican radicals.

Socialism and Democracy

By 1884, nearly all that remained of the republican tradition was a commitment among some socialists to radical democracy. Tory radicals such as Hyndman, popular radicals such as James Murray, and positivists such as Bax, had rejected most of the characteristic themes of republican radicalism, but they still believed that a democratic republic was the ideal form of government. Some of them, notably Bax, thought that democracy was little more than an ideal which socialists would establish after the revolution. But to others, including Hyndman and James Murray, democracy was also both an ideal which socialists should work towards before the revolution and a principle which socialists should enact in their own organisations. The history of the S.D.F. after 1884 shows Hyndman, James Murray, and those who held similar views, trying to defend them against other forms of socialism.⁴⁴ The members of the S.D.F. drew on the legacy of

republican radicalism to define a strong democratic programme that has been echoed by much of the radical left throughout the twentieth-century. But the dominant forms of British socialism derived from intellectual traditions deriving from the enlightenment and romantic movement, both of which often were at odds with republican radicalism. Thus, neither the Fabians nor the ethical socialists showed much sympathy for the strong democratic programme of the S.D.F.

One form of socialism that owed comparatively little to the republican tradition was the romantic utopianism of William Morris. Morris joined the D.F. when he converted to socialism in 1883.⁴⁵ His romanticism appeared in his belief that socialism expressed a natural harmony within civil society, a natural harmony that meant there was little, if any, need for the state. Morris, in other words, adopted an anti-political stance alien to republican radicalism. "We are very well off as to politics, - because we have none," explained a citizen of his utopia, where the old Parliament symbolically had been turned into a dung-market.⁴⁶ Morris denounced parliamentary action as useless, even as counter-productive in that it would corrupt the socialists who undertook it. What is more, his socialist vision was one in which the state had disappeared to be replaced by a decentralised polity characterised by face-to-face discussions leading to consensus. The tension between Morris's anti-political stance and the views of people such as Hyndman and the Murray brothers became increasingly acute until 27 December 1884 when Morris and his supporters passed a motion of no confidence in Hyndman and left the S.D.F. to form the Socialist League. The League rejected all political participation on the grounds that it could achieve nothing of value - "to hold out as baits hopes of the amelioration of the condition of the workers, to be wrung out of the necessities of the rival factions of our privileged rulers is delusive and mischievous."⁴⁷ Consequently the League restricted socialist activity to education in preparation for revolution - the aim was "to educate the people in the principles of Socialism and to organise such as it can get hold of to take their due places when the crisis shall force action on us."⁴⁸ We should not be surprised, therefore, to find that while Bax joined the League, Hyndman and the popular radicals did not, and even Bax later left to return to the S.D.F.

Against the League, the S.D.F. affirmed political participation as a method of securing piecemeal political and social reforms. A general meeting on 22 January 1885 passed a series of motions reasserting the positions that had come under attack from those who formed the League. The meeting expressed support for Hyndman, declared the S.D.F. would take "political action in whatever way circumstances and the tactics of our opponents may suggest," and reinstated a programme that called for political reforms as a means of securing some social reform.⁴⁹ Although the S.D.F. could be as critical of the existing political system as was the League, its position differed from that of the latter in two crucial respects. First, the S.D.F.'s ideal polity was not a heavily decentralised one from which the state was virtually absent, but a radical democracy. It wanted a parliamentary system based on universal suffrage, with popular control of parliament being ensured by measures such as annual elections, referenda, a principle of delegation, abolition of the House of Lords, and an elected civil service. Second, the S.D.F. believed that such a democracy, and also significant social reform, could arise out of stepping stones passed through the existing political system. Thus, it defended participation in the existing political system as a means of promoting socialism through piecemeal reforms. Indeed, when Hyndman spoke of the inevitability of socialism and the importance of ensuring it came about peacefully, he thereby expressed the S.D.F.'s belief in the possibility of piecemeal reforms transforming society so as to make violent revolution unnecessary. He said, "the coming struggle between landlords, capitalists and wage slaves could be peaceably settled by a democratic vote."⁵⁰ Even in the mid-1880s when the S.D.F. was associated with revolutionary rhetoric and mob violence, it remained firmly committed to parliamentary action as a means of securing piecemeal reforms and so a peaceful transition to socialism. Its official manifesto still declared, "as means for the peaceable attainment of these [its social] objects the Social Democratic Federation advocates: Adult Suffrage, Annual Parliaments, Proportional Representation, Payment of Members and Official Expenses of Elections out of the Rates, Abolition of the House of Lords and Hereditary Authorities, Disestablishment and Disendowment of all State Churches."⁵¹

Whereas the League forced the S.D.F. to defend its commitment to democracy against calls for social revolution, the Fabian Society, which was formed in 1884, forced it to do so against too ready an acquiescence in the existing parliamentary system. Many Fabians were influenced by forms of liberal radicalism and ethical positivism that owed more to enlightenment rationalism than to the republican tradition.⁵² Liberal radicals generally favoured democracy understood as a system of representation rather than a strong popular element in the state. They believed, following Bentham, that rational electors who knew their interests and acted accordingly would elect a parliament that would manage affairs in an exemplary manner. The Fabians, coming out of this tradition, often defined democracy as representative government, seeing comparatively little need for other measures to strengthen the popular element within the state. A Report, drafted by George Bernard Shaw, for example, announced that the Fabian Society understands "democracy . . . [as] simply the control of administration by the freely elected representatives of the people; . . . [it] energetically repudiates all conceptions as to a system by which the technical work of government administration and the appointment of government officials shall be carried out by referendum or any other form of popular decision."⁵³ Although the Fabians believed in democracy, their view of democracy differed, therefore, from that of people such as Hyndman and the Murray brothers. Indeed, the Fabians often implied that the British state was more or less a proper democracy. They wanted representative government, with the voters initially giving a broad mandate for the general direction of policy and then judging a government by the results of its policies. The details of everyday decision-making should be left to politicians advised by experts and civil servants.

Against the Fabians, the S.D.F. affirmed the importance of seeking a radical restructuring of the British state. The question of the referendum became the focus of this dispute, with Justice saying, "a declaration against the referendum is a declaration against democracy" for it shows that the "Fabian clique wishes to impose on the mass of Englishmen legislation which they either do not understand, or understanding do not accept."⁵⁴ Before long the S.D.F. found itself engaged in similar disputes with first the

Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) and then the Labour Party. When, for example, Keir Hardie dismissed the political emphasis of the S.D.F. as evidence that it espoused mere radicalism, Justice replied that "the S.D.F. is no less a political than a revolutionary body" since "the political machinery [suitably reformed] may be a means to secure economic freedom."⁵⁵ The fact was that both the I.L.P. and the Labour Party took a view of democracy far closer to that of the Fabian Society than to that of the S.D.F. Whereas the S.D.F. called for dramatic political reforms to turn the British state into an effective democracy, the I.L.P. and the Labour Party generally accepted that the British state was more or less democratic and insisted that the vital task was to work through parliament to improve the conditions of the workers. Thus, the S.D.F.'s commitment to radical democracy - the legacy of its debt to republican radicalism - left it outside of the main developments in British socialism.

The Labour Party drew principally on ideas found within ethical socialism and Fabianism in a way which marginalised the S.D.F. Numerous social historians have sought to explain why the Labour Party did not adopt positions closer to those found in the S.D.F. They have evoked, among many things, a labour aristocracy, the peculiar nature of the British bourgeoisie, the structure of the work-force, and the betrayal of the working-class by its increasingly middle-class leadership.⁵⁶ Yet we might wonder whether these historians are addressing a real problem. The S.D.F. advocated a strong democratic programme infused by republican radicalism and defined in part against representative democracy as advocated by liberal radicals and Fabians. Why, we might ask, should we expect the working-class or the Labour Party to favour the former? The republican radicals who formed the S.D.F. were not ordinary workers, but artisans - popular radicals - and their intellectual sympathisers - Tory radicals and positivists. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find the S.D.F. had a problematic relationship to the working-class. On the one hand, the S.D.F. tried to promote what it saw as the true interests of the workers, and also to appeal to them through various forms of propaganda. On the other, while the S.D.F. did appeal to some workers, its belief that it represented the true interests of the workers led it to bemoan, and seek explanations for, the fact that so many workers

remained deaf to its appeals.⁵⁷ When social historians ask why the working-class or Labour Party did not adopt a strong democratic programme, or some other variant of Marxism, they make the problematic assumption that the working-class has a natural affinity with such a programme.⁵⁸ Like the S.D.F., therefore, they celebrate workers who did adopt that programme, bemoan the fact that more did not, and seek explanations for this fact. They rely on a social theory developed by the radical left as it emerged out of republican radicalism.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Historians have traced republican themes through much of the popular radicalism of the nineteenth-century. Yet by the end of World War One the Labour Party had arisen as a working-class and socialist body in which republican radicalism played at most a very minor role. We have now traced the transition from republican radicalism to modern socialism. When the D.F. was formed, Hyndman, the Murray brothers, and others argued for an extension of the popular element within government both as desirable in its own sake and as a way of curing social ills. During the 1880s, however, they renounced the core themes of republican radicalism as they incorporated Marxist elements in their thought. They traced the origins of social ills not to a corrupt state but to capitalism itself, that is, to wage labour in the context of a monopoly of the means of production. Moreover, their new focus on capitalism itself led to a focus on the working-class, not the people, and to a concern with the socialisation of the means of production now as more urgent than political reform.

Even as the S.D.F. rejected the central themes of republican radicalism, however, so the legacy of such radicalism appeared in its commitment to a strong democratic programme. Three positions were central to this strong democratic programme - three positions that have continued to characterise much of the radical left throughout the twentieth-century. The first position was a call for a radical restructuring of the British state to strengthen the popular element within government. The S.D.F.'s emphasis on

popular control went beyond a demand for universal suffrage to cover things such as annual elections, proportional representation, abolition of the House of Lords, and even an elected civil service. The second position was a belief in democratic reforms as a way of easing the path to social reform. The S.D.F. often argued that popular democracy would radicalise and educate the workers thereby preparing them for socialist citizenship. The third position was a concern that socialist parties should embody the democratic ideal of popular control conceived as requiring more than representative institutions. The S.D.F., for instance, withdrew from the Labour Party in 1906 following constant complaints by its members that Labour M.P.s were not properly accountable to the movement as a whole. It wanted the Parliamentary Labour Party to be guided by a programme drawn up by the Party Executive and based on resolutions passed by the Party Conference.

However, even as the S.D.F. moved from the republican tradition to a strong democratic programme, so other traditions were generating other forms of socialism which came to hold sway over the Labour Party. Just as earlier we saw that the dominant strands in Victorian political thought derived from the enlightenment and the romantic movement rather than civic republicanism, so now we can say that the dominant forms of socialism in Britain owed relatively little to republican radicalism. Romanticism, often allied with liberal radicalism, inspired an ethical socialism, which, at least in people such as Morris and Edward Carpenter, encouraged a neglect of politics. And an enlightenment rationalism, again often allied with liberal radicalism, inspired the Fabian Society, most of the members of which regarded democracy as a matter of representation almost to the exclusion of other forms of popular control of the state. The strong democratic programme of the S.D.F. constituted a radical critique of the Labour Party at least in part, therefore, because the Labour Party was dominated by ethical socialism and Fabianism. Indeed, throughout the twentieth-century, a radical left with roots in republican radicalism has criticised a Labour Party based largely on ethical socialist and Fabian ideas for failing to live-up to the strong democratic ideal; that is, for its uncritical stance towards the state, its failure to lead popular agitations, and the paucity of its own internal democratic procedures.

¹ K. Marx, "Critical Remarks on the Article: The King of Prussia and Social Reform", in D. McLellan, Karl Marx: Selected Writings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 125.

² F. Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England (Harmondsworth, 1987).

³ See G. Claeys, Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-politics in Early British Socialism (Cambridge, 1989); M. Finn, After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874 (Cambridge, 1993); and G. Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism", in Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982 (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90-178. For a broader study that locates republican radicalism among other languages, including liberalism, see P. Joyce, Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848-1914 (Cambridge, 1991). Recent works exploring the complex relationships between republican radicalism, liberalism, and socialism, include E. Biagini & A. Reid, eds., Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour, and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914 (Cambridge, 1991); and E. Biagini, ed., Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals, and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931 (Cambridge, 1996).

⁴ See, in particular, G. Claeys, Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought (London, 1989); G. Claeys, "The Origins of the Rights of Labor: Republicanism, Commerce, and the Construction of Modern Social-Theory in Britain, 1796-1805", Journal of Modern History 66 (1994), 249-90; J. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton, 1977); J. Pocock, Virtue, Commerce, and History (Cambridge, 1985); and C. Robbins, The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

⁵ M. Bevir, "English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century", History of Political Thought 17 (1996), 114-27. On how popular radicals put new - often liberal - wine into old - often republican - bottles, see Joyce, Visions of the People.

⁶ J. S. Mill's concern with civic virtue is (over-)emphasised in E. Biagini, "Liberalism and Direct Democracy: John Stuart Mill and the Model of Ancient Athens", in Biagini, ed., Citizenship and Community, pp. 21-44.

⁷ National Reformer, 3 October 1846; J. O'Brien, The Rise, Progress, and Phases of Human Slavery (London, 1885), p. 94.

⁸ On the place of county party views in Tory thought, see L. Colley, In Defence of Oligarchy: The Tory Party, 1714-60 (Cambridge, 1982). On popular loyalism in the early nineteenth-century, see L. Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837 (New Haven, Conn., 1992), partic. pp. 308-19.

⁹ See, generally, N. Gossman, "Republicanism in Nineteenth Century England", International Review of Social History 7 (1962), 47-60; on Bradlaugh and other secularists inspired by liberal or popular radicalism, E. Royle, Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans (Manchester, 1980); and on the positivists, R. Harrison, Before the Socialists (London, 1965).

¹⁰ On the origins and early history of the D.F., see M. Bevir, "The British Social Democratic Federation 1880-1885: From O'Brienism to Marxism", International Review of Social History 37 (1992), 207-29; and M. Wilkins, "The Non-Socialist Origins of England's First Important Socialist Organisation", International Review of Social History 4 (1959), 199-207. The official history of the S.D.F. is H. Lee & E. Archbold, Social Democracy in Britain (London, 1935). A more recent one is M. Crick, The History of the Social Democratic Federation (Keele, 1996).

¹¹ The D.F.'s membership averaged five hundred and eighty during the 1880s, and of these less than one hundred lived outside of London. See P. Watmough, "The Membership of the Social Democratic Federation, 1885-1902", Labour History Bulletin 34 (1977), 35-40.

¹² Radical, 12 March 1881.

¹³ Radical, 16 July 1881.

¹⁴ Justice, 1 August 1903.

¹⁵ Harrison, Before the Socialists. Republican issues really came to the fore only in support of the Paris Commune. See R. Harrison, ed., The English Defence of the Commune (London, 1971).

¹⁶ Justice, 14 June 1884. On Hyndman, see M. Bevir, "H. M. Hyndman: A Rereading and a Reassessment", History of Political Thought 12 (1991), 125-45; and C. Tsuzuki, H. M. Hyndman and British Socialism (Oxford, 1961). His autobiographical works are H. Hyndman, The Record of an Adventurous Life (London, 1911); and H. Hyndman, Further Reminiscences (London, 1912).

¹⁷ H. Hyndman, "The Dawn of a Revolutionary Epoch", Nineteenth Century 9 (1881), 14.

¹⁸ H. Hyndman, The Text Book of Democracy: England for All (London, 1881).

¹⁹ Justice, 14 June 1884.

²⁰ Justice, 14 June 1884.

²¹ On the impact of popular radicalism on the socialists of the 1880s, see Bevir, "British Social Democratic Federation"; and J. Lawrence, "Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain", Journal of British Studies 31 (1992), 163-86.

²² On the clubs, see S. Shipley, "Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian England", History Workshop Pamphlet No. 5 (1971).

²³ Radical, 25 June 1881.

²⁴ Justice, 19 January 1884.

²⁵ Justice, 29 March 1884.

²⁶ Justice, 10 May 1884.

²⁷ Justice, 12 July 1884.

²⁸ Justice, 19 January 1884.

²⁹ On Bax, see M. Bevir, "Ernest Belfort Bax: Marxist, Positivist, and Idealist", Journal of the History of Ideas 54 (1993), 119-35; and J. Cowley, The Victorian Encounter with Marx: A Study of Ernest Belfort Bax (London, 1992). His autobiography is E. Bax, Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian (London, 1918).

³⁰ Harrison, Before the Socialists.

³¹ Bee-Hive, 14 September 1867. Cited in Lawrence, "Popular Radicalism", 169.

³² E. Bax, "The Word Religion", Modern Thought, May 1879; and E. Bax, "Modern Socialism", Modern Thought, August 1879.

³³ Echo, 7 July 1878.

³⁴ E. Bax, "Karl Marx", Modern Thought, December 1881. Although Marx thought Bax had made some mistakes, he was both pleased with and impressed by the article. See K. Marx & F. Engels, Letters to Americans 1848-1895, trans. L. Mins (New York, 1953), p. 131.

³⁵ Bax, "Marx", 350.

³⁶ Bax, Reminiscences, p. 81.

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- ³⁷ E. Bax, A Short History of the Paris Commune (London, 1895), p. 82.
- ³⁸ E. Bax & J. Levy, Socialism and Individualism (London, 1904), p. 47.
- ³⁹ G. Wallas, Human Nature in Politics (London, 1908).
- ⁴⁰ See, for an example of such disillusionment, W. Clarke, "Industrial", in G. Shaw, ed., Fabian Essays in Socialism (London, 1890), pp. 62-101.
- ⁴¹ H. Tulloch, "Changing British Attitudes towards the United States in the 1880s", Historical Journal 20 (1977), 825-40.
- ⁴² On the persistence of traditional forms of production, see R. Samuel, "The Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain", History Workshop 3 (1977), 6-72. On the limited nature of the depression, see S. Saul, The Myth of the Great Depression, 1873-1896 (London, 1969).
- ⁴³ On the shift from artisans to workers in London, see G. Stedman Jones, "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working-Class", in Languages of Class, pp. 179-238.
- ⁴⁴ On debates within labour and socialist circles over the importance of democracy, see L. Barrow & I. Bullock, Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement, 1880-1914 (Cambridge, 1996).
- ⁴⁵ On Morris, see M. Bevir, "William Morris: The Modern Self, Art, and Politics", History of European Ideas 24 (1998), 175-94; and E. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (London, 1977).
- ⁴⁶ W. Morris, The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. 16: News from Nowhere, A Dream of John Ball, A King's Lesson (London, 1912), p. 85.
- ⁴⁷ The Socialist League, Circular to Socialists (1885). On the history of the League also see Thompson, William Morris.

⁴⁸ Socialist League, Circular.

⁴⁹ Justice, 31 January 1885 & 11 April 1885.

⁵⁰ Justice, 30 January 1888.

⁵¹ The manifesto was printed in Justice regularly throughout the mid and late 1880s.

⁵² On the influence of liberal radicalism and positivism on the Fabians, see W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism (New Haven, Conn., 1975).

⁵³ "Report on Fabian Policy and Resolutions Presented by The Fabian Society to the International Socialist Workers' and Trades Union Congress", Fabian Tract, No. 70 (1896), p. 5. Cited in Barrow & Bullock, Democratic Ideas, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Justice, 27 March 1897.

⁵⁵ Justice, 21 October 1893.

⁵⁶ See respectively E. Hobsbawm "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain", in Labouring Men (London, 1964), 272-315; T. Naim, "The Fateful Meridian", New Left Review 60 (1970), 3-35; R. McKibbin, "Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?", The Ideologies of Class (Oxford, 1990), pp. 1-41; and R. Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism (London, 1972). The last of these arguments has had a particularly long life, at least from J. Clayton The Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, 1884-1924 (London, 1926); to Barrow & Bullock, Democratic Ideas.

⁵⁷ For a study of workers who later became associated with organisations such as the S.D.F., see S. MacIntyre, A Proletarian Science (Cambridge, 1980).

⁵⁸ Not surprisingly this assumption has been subject to criticism by those associated with the linguistic turn in social history. For vehement criticism, see Joyce, Visions of the People, pp. 3-5; and P. Joyce, "The End of Social History", Social History 20 (1995), 73-91; and for a more gentle reconsideration, see G. Stedman Jones,

“Rethinking Chartism”; and, though now with little faith in the linguistic alternative, “The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s”, History Workshop Journal 42 (1996), 19-35.

⁵⁹ Often we can trace the legacy of the strong democratic programme in the work of social historians who took a linguistic turn from within the radical left. Stedman Jones, for example, describes the early Labour Party in these critical terms: “it was not accountable directly to its constituency, but indirectly via the trade unions . . . its mode of organization presumed mass passivity punctuated by occasional mobilization for the ballot box.” Stedman Jones, “Working-Class Culture”, p. 238.