

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL THEORY IN CULTURAL STUDIES: MODERN POLITICAL TRADITIONS

THE RADICAL TRADITION

Radicalism is derived from the Latin "radix" meaning root (the vegetable "radish" has the same etymology). In political doctrine it invariably indicates a desire for wholesale reform of an existing system usually regarded as completely corrupt as in **William Cobbett's** "Old Corruption" description of parliament in the first part of the nineteenth century. The radical movement in Britain dates from the American Revolution and the publication of **Tom Paine's The Rights of Man** with demands for reform of the electoral system to widen the franchise. Some radicals sought republicanism, abolition of titles, redistribution of property and freedom of the press. As the radical movement continued with the onset of the French Revolution it became regarded as potentially revolutionary, especially when the new industrial worker class attempted to organize and embrace some of the principles of Paine's work. The term Radical was first applied to the Whig politician Charles **James Fox** for his support of the French Revolution. However, Fox, whatever his beliefs, was still a member of the aristocracy, in fact a descendant of an illegitimate son of Charles II. There were "philosophical radicals", such as **Mary Wollstonecraft**, whose **Vindication of the Rights of Women** (1792) argued that women only seemed to be inferior to men due to a lack of education.

The substantive radical tradition owed much the **Leveler** tradition of the English Civil War. Middle class and artisan individuals published pamphlets and organized "corresponding societies" to argue for the vote. They were infiltrated by government spies and often captured by the authorities with transportation to Australia as the mildest penalty. A number of leaders were hanged after trials for sedition on the evidence of informers. The most notorious action by the authorities was the **Peterloo Massacre** of 1819 where men women and children were killed as a militia dispersed a mass demonstration demanding parliamentary representation. Although in their short lifetimes their activities appeared unsuccessful they established a working class tradition of political action which led to the **Chartist movement** of the 1830s and 1840s. This, too, demanded parliamentary reform which had not been given to urban workers in the Reform Act of 1832. The Chartists were able to mobilize enormous demonstrations and it is possible that there would have been an attempt at revolution in 1848 to match similar revolutions in continental Europe.

However, parliamentary radicals such as **John Bright** and **Richard Cobden** had formed the **Anti-Corn Law League** in 1838 to demand an end to tariffs on foreign imports of grain. The famines of the mid-1840s and the league's effective campaign persuaded the Prime Minister, **Sir Robert Peel**, to repeal the Corn Laws and thus inaugurate an era of cheap food. This destroyed much of the momentum of the Chartists and contributed to the political stability of mid-nineteenth century Britain. Following the reorganization of political parties after the repeal the parliamentary radicals joined with the Whigs and Peelite Tories to form the Liberal Party.

The working class radical tradition continued in the gradual legitimization of trade unions and the gradual extension of male suffrage in the reform Acts of 1867 and 1884. Radicalism was replaced by revolutionary doctrines which had only local and marginal influence on British political traditions and ideology.

COLLECTIVISM

Collectivism is the political philosophy or ideology that emphasizes the significance of groups and tends to analyze issues in those terms. Collectivism is a cultural element that exists as the reverse of individualism and stresses the priority of group goals over individual goals and the importance of cohesion within social groups. Collectivism can be divided into horizontal collectivism and vertical collectivism. Horizontal collectivism stresses collective decision-making among relatively equal individuals and is usually based on decentralization. Vertical collectivism is based on hierarchical structures of power and on moral and cultural conformity and is therefore based on centralization. A cooperative enterprise would be an example of horizontal collectivism, whereas a military hierarchy would be an example of vertical collectivism. Raymond Williams in *Keywords* has a useful note on the first appearance of "collective body" in Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* (1597), its use by the Radical, William Cobbett in *Rural Rides* (1830) and its appearance in the emergence of democratic consciousness in the later nineteenth century.

In Samuel Beer's classic *Modern British Politics* collectivism refers to the style of politics associated with the Labour Party. Like the Liberal Party, which dominated British politics from the mid-nineteenth century to 1922 and the Conservative Party which has dominated British politics to the present day the Labour Party reflects many historical strands of ideology. At the end of the nineteenth century there was a movement to have working class representatives in parliament. **Keir Hardie** and two other working class candidates were elected as independents in the 1892 election and this beginning encouraged the trade unions to press for a political party which would truly represent the working class. The **Independent Labour Party (ILP)** was formed after a conference of socialist parties which included, the Social Democratic Federation allied with the German Social Democrats, Marxists represented by Karl Marx's son-in-law, and the Fabian Society which advocated gradual reform of society. From the outset there was a mixed bagged of political ideals. In 1895 no candidate was elected and even Keir Hardie lost his seat.

The ILP always tried to influence the trade unions to support a working-class political party. They wanted to collaborate with trade unionists with the ultimate object of getting trade union funds to achieve Parliamentary power. The socialism of the ILP was ideal for achieving this end. It lacked a coherent theoretical basis accommodating practically anything a trade unionist was likely to demand. The socialism of the ILP could accept with only a little strain, temperance reform, Scottish nationalism, Methodism, Marxism, Fabian gradualism and even Burkean conservatism. The mixture had the one virtue of excluding nobody on dogmatic grounds, which at the time was the correct strategy for attracting support. It also left a lasting tension which has surfaced again in the current struggle over the leadership of the labour party.

The ILP, Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society struggled along until 1899 when the Labour Representation committee was formed with the express purpose of gaining representation in Parliament. It was formed from the ILP, the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabian Society and representatives of the Trade Unions. By 1906 it was able to gain 29 seats and became established as a major force in British politics. In the 1920s the Labour succeeded in gaining the progressive vote after the collapse of the Liberal Party and formed two brief governments in 1924 and from 1929 to 1931. The Crash of 1929 and subsequent economic depression brought out the potential rifts in the Labour due to its mix of heterogeneous ideologies with the Liberal heirs joining a national government and the socialists remaining outside as a Labour opposition which also expelled the "National Labour" members who joined the government.

Labour collectivism was achieved in the 1945-1951 governments with vertical collectivism in nationalized industries, the National Health service and other social welfare measures such as unemployment benefit and old age pensions. They were so successful that the subsequent Conservative governments did not attempt to change them back until the era of Mrs. Thatcher from 1979 to 1997 when a large proportion of government-owned industries and services were privatized. Labour and Conservative government collectivism was both vertical and centrally directed and to a certain extent horizontal in the organization of health and education. This was also dismantled during the Thatcher years with aspects of both services becoming vulnerable to privatization. Even the expression "collective" is now a politically charged term often regarded as indicating a left-wing socialist or Marxist tendency.

In 2016 the political parties are underpinned by capitalist individualist ideologies with only a section of the Labour Party and parts of the Scottish National and Welsh National parties adhering with any conviction to collectivist ideals.

IMPORTANT THINKERS

Tom Paine (1737 – 1809) was an English-American political activist, philosopher, political theorist, and revolutionary. One of the Founding Fathers of the United States, he authored the two most influential pamphlets at the start of the American Revolution, and he inspired the rebels in 1776 to declare independence from Britain. Paine emigrated to the British American colonies in 1774 with the help of Benjamin Franklin, arriving just in time to participate in the American Revolution. Virtually every rebel read (or listened to a reading of) his powerful pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), proportionally the all-time best-selling American title which crystallized the rebellious demand for independence from Great Britain. *Common Sense* was so influential that John Adams said, "Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain."

William Cobbett (1763 – 1835) was an English pamphleteer, farmer and journalist, who was born in Farnham, Surrey. He believed that reforming Parliament and abolishing the rotten boroughs would help to end the poverty of farm labourers, and he attacked the borough-mongers, sinecurists and "tax-eaters" relentlessly. He was also against the Corn Laws, a tax on imported grain. Early in his career, he was a loyalist supporter of King and Country: but later he joined and successfully publicized the radical movement, which led to the Reform Bill of 1832, and to his being elected in 1832 as one of the two MPs for the newly enfranchised borough of Oldham. Although he was not a Catholic, he became a fiery advocate of Catholic Emancipation in Britain. Through the seeming contradictions in Cobbett's life, his opposition to authority stayed constant. He wrote many polemics, on subjects from political reform to religion, but is best known for his book from 1830, *Rural Rides*, which is still in print today.

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) was a philosopher, economist, sociologist, journalist, and revolutionary socialist. Born in Prussia to a middle-class family, he later studied political economy and Hegelian philosophy. As an adult, Marx became stateless and spent much of his life in London, England, where he continued to develop his thought in collaboration with German thinker Friedrich Engels and published various works, the most well-known being the 1848 pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto*. His work has since influenced subsequent intellectual, economic, and political history.

Marx's theories about society, economics and politics—collectively understood as Marxism—hold that human societies develop through class struggle: a conflict between ruling classes (known as the bourgeoisie) that control the means of production and working classes (known as the proletariat) that work on these means by selling their labour for wages. Through his theories of alienation, value, commodity fetishism, and surplus value, Marx argued that capitalism facilitated social relations and ideology through commodification, inequality, and the exploitation of labour. Employing a critical approach known as historical materialism, Marx propounded the theory of base and superstructure, asserting that the cultural and

political conditions of society, as well as its notions of human nature, are largely determined by obscured economic foundations.

Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) was an Italian neo-Marxist theorist and politician. He wrote on political theory, sociology and linguistics. He was a founding member and one-time leader of the Communist Party of Italy and was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime. His **Prison Notebooks** are considered a highly original contribution to 20th century political theory. Gramsci drew insights from varying sources - not only other Marxists but also thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Vilfredo Pareto, Georges Sorel and Benedetto Croce. The notebooks cover a wide range of topics, including Italian history and nationalism, the French Revolution, Fascism, Fordism, civil society, folklore, religion and high and popular culture. Gramsci is best known for his theory of **cultural hegemony**, which describes how states use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies.

Samuel Beer (1911 – 2009) was an American political scientist who specialized in the government and politics of the United Kingdom. Beer published several books in his field. In 1965, **British Politics in the Collectivist Age** considered the conflict between liberal and conservative approaches in the UK following World War II. **Britain Against Itself: The Political Contradictions of Collectivism** (1982) analyzed the UK in the Thatcher era.

MAIN POINTS

- The Radical strand in British politics began with Tom Paine's Rights of Man in support of American independence and with William Cobbett's attack on government corruption. Paine was a true Radical in wishing to have democratic government and in his attacks on religion. Cobbett began as a Whig, but was outraged by the corruption in parliamentary elections.
- Paine's desire for democracy and Cobbett's desire for honest elections fused in the Chartist movement, a working class movement motivated by the desire for democratic representation and better economic circumstances. Eventually after the mid-nineteenth century the radical movement formed an important strand in the Liberal party which formed most of the governments in the second half of the nineteenth century.
- Collectivism emerged with the Labour Party at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. The Labour Party was the heir of the principles of the Liberal Party which vanished as a major party after 1922.
- Collectivism was also the heir of Chartist principles which demanded universal male suffrage for those over the age of twenty-one. It should be noted that votes for women was not regarded as a major principle until relatively late.
- Additional principles were added as the Labour Party became permeated with a number of Socialist ideas based on both the work of Karl Marx and a Christian Socialism based on Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Liberalism still contributed particularly in the Beveridge report of 1942 whose implementation created the Welfare State.

SEMINAR EXERCISES

- What do you understand by the concept of „radical“ in Slovak culture and Slovak politics?
- Why is Radical almost always a left-wing idea in British politics?
- Identify the radical strand in British conservative politics. Use the career of William Cobbett and Conservative social reformers as a basis for the discussion.
- Why did the Liberal Party lose its position as the main progressive party? Was it only due to the misbehaviour of Lloyd George?
- Is collectivism in British politics a liberal or socialist idea? Look at the principles of British Trades Unions.
- Why was the Conservative Party able to accept the Welfare State in the 1950s? Is there an element in High Tory principles where paternalism and collectivism coincide?

READING

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