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## A Literature Lost

The socialist idea spans a century and a half, in round terms, starting in the 1840s.

Its literary sources, however, reach back into the last years of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when revolution (it is strange to tell) first became a radical word and when theories of social difference began their continuous life. Without revolution and class, the story cannot be told. So this book is about the gestation of socialism as well as its life – a study of origins and sources as well as of triumph and decay.

The literature of a political idea that lasted for less than two centuries looks manageable as a theme, for an historian or a political scientist. I am neither, and it may be asked why a literary critic, of all people, would choose to deal with it or expect to be heeded if he did. The answer lies in seeking out texts and reading them. Some authors are by now wholly obscure and forgotten. To read them, or the less famous works of famous men, is to attend to what they say rather than to what they are traditionally supposed to have said or to what their modern disciples wish they had said. ‘The struggle of man against power’, as Milan Kundera proclaimed, ‘is the struggle of memory against forgetting’.

That is the task. The critical mind tests traditional assumptions to destruction, if it is dutiful and alert, and instinctively distrusts anything that looks or smells like a received idea. It is a task that can make enemies as well as friends. By an odd reversal the Left in recent years has grown more fearful of innovation than those who call themselves conservatives, as if its defensive postures in matters of state – no cuts, no pit closures – had entered into its habits of thinking about the socialist past. Time, which looked to be on its side a century ago and more when Bernard Shaw edited *Fabian Essays*, is no longer that, as it knows, and it can easily take offence at any hint of blasphemy against its canon of saints or alarm at the thought of what the socialist pioneers may have said or done. By the mid-twentieth century the intellectual Left had turned nervously reverential and conformist, muttering to itself sacred names like Chartism and the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht – and above all Lenin who, as a recent historian of the Russian Revolution has remarked, became after his death in 1924 the object of a hagiography strongly messianic in flavour: ‘self-denying devotion to the cause, modesty, self-discipline, generosity’, his life being modelled on the

life of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Christology was seldom far distant from the socialist idea and, always state-centred, it was ideally suited to become an established religion. In the classic shift from subversion to orthodoxy few doctrines can have had so little distance to travel.

By the 1960s – if not earlier – it had become impious in the western world to probe into what the fathers of the faith were once supposed to have believed. That reverent mood was well caught by J.G. Merquior in *Western Marxism*, where as an ex-Marxist he delicately and remorselessly exposed the philosophical pretensions of recent academic and semi-academic theorising about social history and the sociology of thought. The book was a brave one, since the philosophy of socialism had by then become something like a no-go area for the faithful, rather like the inner sanctum of a temple cult; and anyone who wants to understand piety would do better to read back-numbers of the *New Left Review* than the *Church Times*. There were things which, in the heyday of the Left, one was simply not supposed to mention, like the idea of conservative revolution, the early resistance of socialist leaders to the welfare state, or the openly Tory allegiance of early socialists, some of whom were proud to declare Toryism their chief reason for being what they were. Public ownership, after all, was always a demand to make the biggest capitalist of all bigger still. Who, for that matter, cared to remember the long and unique socialist tradition of racial discrimination and genocide? In the writing of history what men choose to forget is as significant as what they strive to remember.

Impiety, then, seems inevitable here, and it is a prospect calculated to stimulate and embolden. This is autopsy-time. It is part of the proper business of the critic, after all, to be impious, and if I invade the territory of political thought here, and not for the first time, it is in the sober conviction that the writings even of the famous are little studied and seldom pondered. The very names of some notable theorists have now wholly faded from view. There are still social historians who take it for granted, for example, that comprehensive theories of social difference began with Marx, though Marx himself did not think so. For this reason I have devoted a chapter to John Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* of 1771, unsocialist though it is, since it is the first theoretical book on the subject in all Europe and a work now utterly passed out of mind; another to a neglected aspect of Tocqueville's view, as an early liberal, of the dangers to liberty inherent in social equality; another to the Tory tradition of socialism since the nineteenth century, since there were always socialists who hated progress and demanded a return to ancient values. It is a myth born of incuriosity to suppose they invariably thought of themselves as left-wing; from first to last there were socialists who believed in a privileged class and said so, and the fat privileges of the Soviet *nomenklatura* were

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1. Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919*, pp. 341, 345.

not an unpredicted or unintended consequence of Lenin's seizure of power in 1917. It was admirably candid of Todor Zhivkov, the former Communist dictator of Bulgaria, to admit at his trial in Sofia in February 1991 that his large gifts to friends and relatives were normal socialist practice. 'This was the situation in all the socialist countries', he said. And so it was.

The neglect of texts in political theory is remarkable, as the fate of John Millar's book illustrates. Or of Alfred Sudre's *Histoire du Communisme* – the first history of the subject in any language, and a work now so little known that I have yet to find anyone in France, or anywhere, who has so much as heard of it, though it won a prize from the French Academy when it first appeared, went through several editions and translations, and bristles with acute observations and pertinent predictions. Composed by a young Parisian lawyer who had just taken part in the revolution of 1848, it does not even mention Marx or Engels; so the tradition of communism, as Marx and Engels knew, is older than the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 – though perhaps not as old, as Sudre implies in his thoughtful book, as Plato or Sir Thomas More. The socialist tradition of racial extermination, again, though touched on fleetingly in F.A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* in 1944, is now so seldom mentioned that even experts can look blankly incredulous to be told of it, and I have known some to look blank even after works by Marx and Engels, Shaw and Wells, are quoted to them. The very titles are largely unfamiliar. Who, after all, has read H.G. Wells's *Anticipations* of 1902, which in its last pages calls on a socialist utopia to destroy the 'grey confusion' of democracy through a world state governed by a self-appointed white élite that would purify mankind by exterminating the dark races? Wells's aim was efficiency, in a tradition of socialist genocide and white-supremacy doctrines spanning two centuries; as Michael Coren implied in *The Invisible Man* in 1993, he was part of a long tradition. 'The world is a world, not a charitable institution', Wells wrote grimly in his concluding pages, demanding genocide. When Hitler called his movement National Socialism the title was widely condemned by German socialist parties as a deceitful manoeuvre secretly inspired by high finance, but its racial policies, for good reason, were not seen as unsocialist. The real objection to communist ideas, Hitler once told a confidant, is that 'basically they are not socialist', since they create mere herds without individual life.

This book seeks to lift layers of whitewash, and it is prompted by the conviction that the texts of socialism, for and against, are often simply unread and even unheard of, and surprising enough, in consequence, to repay attention. It is about a lost literature – at times, one feels, an embarrassing literature, a literature deliberately lost. 'Some people', said Mao Tse-Tung in a speech of March 1957 – it is penultimate among his *Thoughts* – 'have read a few Marxist books and think themselves quite learned, but what they have read has not penetrated, has not stuck in their minds'. That sounds like

a job for a literary critic to do: it involves rediscovering a body of texts, reading them and paying attention to them. In 1992 a Conservative prime minister in the flush of victory called socialism a museum-piece. If so, it is like a medal that has lain in a locked case for a century and more, and no one has troubled to turn it over. It is high time somebody did.

The present case, however, it must be confessed at the outset, represents a highly exceptional and puzzling instance of how a literature can get lost and stay lost. Socialism was always a scriptural doctrine, after all, in the sense of being avowedly based on famous texts: texts almost always available, and for long periods compulsory reading for hundreds of millions in eastern Europe and Asia. There are three historical phases here, and my emphasis will fall largely on the first, the age of conception from the 1840s to 1917. It was followed by an age of fulfilment culminating in the Communist seizure of power in China in 1949 and an age of decline that ended with the fall of the Wall in 1989. Oddly enough, the age of fulfilment (1917-49) was also one of neglect, in the sense that it engendered a mood in which socialism was widely venerated and little studied. Perhaps it was studied so little because it was venerated so much, and anyone who has spent a lifetime working in universities will know how widely, in that age and for years after, it was a word held to sanctify argument and silence debate. There were always anti-socialists. But they were supposed to be sceptics and cynics, and the possibility of a radical, idealistic anti-socialism has never quite taken root in the western mind. Even among its enemies socialism is still widely believed to have been a generous and benevolent notion fatally flawed by a set of technical difficulties which its disciples, by some oversight, highmindedly failed to predict. This book is designed to destroy that myth.

To a literary historian the world of political history must always look surprising. Historians of political thought are no doubt aware that great thinkers of past ages wrote books; but they often seem strikingly incurious about what is in them. That paradox will emerge in the pages that follow. The first history of socialism, for example, which thought it a conservative idea, was promptly dismissed by Proudhon in about 1850 as a mass of platitudes; but nobody a century later would have thought it platitudinous to call socialism conservative, which shows what a short life platitudes can have. In a letter of July 1864 Gustave Flaubert, who was reading socialist authors like Charles Fourier with a view to writing his novel *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, complained that he felt weighed down by the tedium of the task. Socialist writers were authoritarian and boorish, he complained (*despotes et rustres*), their reactionary minds stuck in the Middle Ages and obsessed with class or caste consciousness (*l'esprit de caste*), with hardly anything in common, what is more, except a hatred of liberty and the French Revolution. It was like doing the dreariest schoolwork: '*Le socialisme*

*moderne pue le pion*'. By mid-century it was not unusual to see socialism as backward-looking and snobbish; and the author of *Madame Bovary*, a connoisseur equally of tedium and of class-consciousness, does not sound much surprised by what he found.

His impatience was natural. A critic of any age – it must be conceded at once – and of any persuasion, would hesitate to make high artistic claims for much of the literature of socialism. What can be said in its favour can be quickly said. With *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 Marx wrote a good pamphlet, and among English authors Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells are plainly readable; so are some novelists and poets, French and English, of the 1930s. But the dust grows thick on most of these works, and perhaps the nearest approach to a great socialist novel in any language remains *The Man of Property*, the first volume of the *Forsyte Saga*, where John Galsworthy deftly illustrated the destructive ethos of an owning class through the tragedy of an unhappy marriage, where a sense of material possession destroys love.

As their most ardent admirers would probably agree, what is more, the classics of socialism do not usually demand great subtlety of interpretation. In an enthusiastic article called "The literary achievement of Marx" which she wrote for *Modern Quarterly* (1947), Pamela Hansford Johnson praised his style as richly characterised by Gothic imagery and a 'cleansing anger', but seldom if ever by obscurity. Even Marx's irony, as she saw – while confessing that she had read him only in translation – is an irony instantly decipherable: 'always uncomfortable, never ambiguous'. That is an apt and significant point, the more so since it is not a judgement anyone would make of the political writings of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment or of its liberal heirs in the nineteenth century and since; or of such conservative thinkers as Benjamin Disraeli or Michael Oakeshott. Socialist literature may not always be a joy to read, but it commonly leaves the interpreter little to do. But then it believed, in its heyday, that the world around it – the capitalist world – was just about to end, and that is a conviction unlikely to encourage the graces of art.

Even sex, it is surprising to report, seldom succeeds in animating the writings of the socialists. Charles Fourier, of whose style Flaubert complained, died as early as 1837, and he was best known for inventing the phalanstery – a rural community ideally of 1,620 people – where life, labour and its rewards were to be governed by elaborate rules. At his death he left a manuscript called *Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux*, composed in 1817-18, a utopia in the pre-Marxian vein composed at a time when other radicals like Shelley were interesting themselves in free love. Fourier sought to harmonise the passions and instincts of mankind by releasing them from repression, which he saw as the source of such perversities as sadism and homosexuality, and by linking sexual urges to the movements of the heavenly bodies. Unknown to Flaubert, the book lay unpublished as a whole in five notebooks until 1967,

a time that might be thought propitious to a theory of sexual freedom and social revolution, but in the event it went largely unnoticed. Even free love, it seems, does not survive long stretches of socialist prose.

The conservatism of the socialist idea was familiar to at least some Victorians as an argumentative point. That familiarity, however, did not last. Utopias are evidently characterised by the brevity of their shelf-life, and there seem to be truths that each generation has to discover for itself. When George Orwell and Arthur Koestler revived the point in the 1940s they made no reference whatever to the Victorian debate, and it seems clear that they believed they had discovered it for themselves. A generation later, however, in the 1960s, the essential conservatism of socialism had been forgotten all over again, and it was almost universally believed that it had never been thought of as anything but left-wing. It is hard to judge how much here is indolence, how much suppression. Dull as the materials often are, there must also have been a refusal to look – an ideological refusal all the easier to maintain because there were so few literary masterpieces demanding to be read. But if the Tory and genocidal traditions of socialism have been suppressed rather than forgotten, this must count as one of the most successful acts of suppression in intellectual history; and a considered challenge to such incuriosity, whatever its motives, was bound in the end to be made.

The best is neglected along with the worst. Alexander Herzen (1812-70), a Russian revolutionary exile in London after 1852, left memoirs little known until they were translated in the 1920s, and his distaste for violence had only a modest influence on his own century. Politics is the art of the possible, as he knew, and he disliked his fellow-exile Marx and esteemed Robert Owen (1771-1858), who believed in enlightened benevolence rather than class war. Herzen met the old man in Sevenoaks soon after his arrival from St Petersburg, and they conversed happily through an interpreter – an encounter of like minds. Both lived affluently and saw no reason to apologise for how they lived. Socialism was not worth a death, as they both saw, still less a murder.

Benevolent socialism, however, was to remain largely an hypothesis – a road not taken – and Herzen's memoirs speak the language of enlightened self-interest in a fashion that now looks fresh and strange. 'The slavery of poverty is frightful,' he wrote, justifying the ingenuity of his lawyers in bringing his fortune out of Tsarist Russia. 'I did the important thing.' After all, 'money is independence and power – a weapon – and no one flings a weapon away in time of war.' The avowal is almost unique in radical literature, and worth pondering. Those who rule hardly need private wealth, after all, since they can live like high party members in the Soviet Union or China on the privileges of office. It is above all radicals who need money, and they have no reason, accordingly, to feel ashamed to be rich.

The paradox of a literature at once venerated and forgotten must remain forever striking, and the paradox was there as early as the nineteenth century. When William Morris joined the Social Democratic Federation in 1883, as he explained in “How I became a socialist”, he had ‘never so much as opened Adam Smith or heard of Ricardo or Karl Marx’, though he later managed to read and enjoy the historical parts of Marx’s *Capital*.<sup>1</sup> But then socialism, for Morris, bluntly meant equality of condition, which he would not have found in Marx. H.G. Wells, meanwhile, who once boasted an irreverent desire to see Marx shaved, claimed in *Russia in the Shadows* (1920) that he was already a complete Marxist by the age of fourteen, which was in 1880, and ‘long before I had heard the name of Marx’; so that Marx, who died in 1883, seems even in his lifetime to have joined that distinguished band of authors – Machiavelli and Freud are perhaps other instances – whose works are felt to be understood without acquaintance. Shortly after the infant Wells, if he is to be believed, had thought of Marxism without any help from Marx, the young Bernard Shaw went to a London meeting of H.M. Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation. That, as he tells in “How I became a public speaker” in *Sixteen Self Sketches* (1949), was in 1884, while he was still in his twenties. He was ‘contemptuously dismissed as a novice who had not read the great first volume of Marx’s *Capital*’. So he promptly read it in a French translation in the British Museum and joined the Fabian Society. ‘Immediately contempt changed to awe; for Hyndman’s disciples had not read the book themselves.’ That set a pattern destined to continue, and it seems clear that in the realm of political theory it is not reading that most commonly converts. Raymond Williams would freely admit that he belonged to a generation that read very little Marx, implying perhaps that he thought other generations read a lot of him, and in a radio interview Eric Hobsbawm has recently told how, as a schoolboy in pre-Hitler Berlin, he became a Marxist without reading a word of him, and only began reading him at all because his schoolmaster told him he did not know what he was talking about. In *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1966), similarly, Alfred Kazin has revealed of his teenage self that socialism in those early years was ‘a way of life’, since ‘everyone else I knew in New York was a socialist, more or less’. No other view was heard. Socialism was not a gesture of revolt but an unthinking act of conformity, and reading had nothing to do with it. It is always rash to assume that intellectuals admire only authors they know.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when socialism ruled a third of mankind, vast portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao, all of them voluminous authors, adorned public festivities in the Soviet empire and China – they were jocularly known as the Decline of the Beard – and the *Thoughts* of Mao Tse-Tung was a best-seller that easily outran, for a time, the Bible and

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1. *Justice* (16 June 1894), reprinted in William Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 242

*The Pilgrim's Progress*. But who, even among the most earnest disciples or dedicated opponents, ever read more than the tiniest percentage of what they wrote? Then confirmation came, and it was swift and terrible. In 1992 literary Paris was startled and shocked by the posthumous autobiography of Louis Althusser, *L'Avenir Dure Longtemps*, where one of the most internationally celebrated of academic Marxists revealed that he had read hardly any of the writings he had been expounding as a philosopher in Paris for decades: not a word of Aristotle or Kant, for example, though he had lectured on them, and among Marx's own writings only the early works. The author of *Lire le Capital* (1967) had not read *Das Kapital*.

The case, on reflection, looks unique. The great scriptural religions, after all, like Christianity and Islam, do not behave in that carefree way: they study their scriptures and squabble about interpreting them, and those squabbles are creditable to the extent that they demonstrate that reading is done and attention paid. Literary cults like Homer and Shakespeare, too, are based on reading and rereading, generation by generation and in the original texts, so that religion and literature both set commendable examples of attention-giving. It may be worth asking, then, why political theorists seldom behave in that way.

One provisional answer may be that theories of politics, even more quickly than religious dogmas, can ossify into positions held and proclaimed by groups, parties and interests; and like the easy assumption that socialism was always left-wing, they can rapidly entrench into slogans that come to represent institutions, mass parties and ruling élites. Giving them up can mean giving up the certitudes of a lifetime and everything that follows from those certitudes, which can include acquaintances and friends. It is a phenomenon called the Tyranny of the Terms. Few modern theorists have shared H.G. Wells's impious and outspoken ambition to see Marx shaved. It is an alarming thought. What is more, in France and Italy the terms Left and Right – in the English-speaking world largely the property of intellectuals – are common change in ordinary conversation and newspaper headlines to signify socialist and anti-socialist, so that some highly disabling assumptions are by now buried deep in the day-to-day usage of the ignorant as well as the learned. These assumptions are not to be questioned lightly, and it can look cranky, or worse, to question them at all.

A despair that one may never be read at all can afflict the very act of writing. Who, if anyone, is listening? In 1901, for example, Max Hirsch (1852-1909), a Prussian disciple of Henry George who in 1890 had settled in Australia, completed an extensive book called *Democracy versus Socialism* which he believed to be the first comprehensive refutation of socialism ever published. A radical himself, he saw socialism as the road to slavery, promising only 'an all-pervading despotism' by a new managerial class. That was nearly



half a century before George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. But Hirsch's preface, characteristically, holds out no realistic hope that his warning against tyranny will be heeded. That is because socialists cannot listen. Confident in their conviction that social reform can only mean socialism, they are 'deaf'. It is a book which, appearing in the first year of the twentieth century, sums up an age to come. Anti-socialists do not quote it; Orwell and Koestler, a generation on, do not appear to have known of its existence. It is a warning unheard.

By the later years of the twentieth century it was not only, or even mainly, the Left that would not listen. Deafness had become a nearly universal complaint. Conservatives too could feel they had a lot to lose from a revival of interest in socialism as a conservative regression to ancient values. A dud theory, what is more, made an ideal opposition. 'Whatever have the Conservatives done', a wit remarked after the 1983 British election, when Labour under Michael Foot lost disastrously on a socialist programme, 'to deserve the Labour party?' The Left-and-Right game, by then, looked like a game too good to spoil, and anyone who questioned it had about as much chance of a hearing as an outsider to Oxford and Cambridge who called for a third team in the Boat Race. The conviction, above all, that socialism was always about class and never about race – that it cannot, for that simple reason, have advocated genocide – has been a near-universal illusion for decades. Conservatives have been as ready to accept it as socialists, and if the exclusive association of socialism with the Left had depended on socialists alone it would not have survived as sturdily as it did and does.

That world of assumption, it is now clear, was a superstitious world, in the sense of being indifferent to evidence and content to remain so. Samuel Johnson once remarked that there are superstitions not connected with religion, and anyone who has studied the recent history of political ideas is bound to be vividly aware of it. The significant contrast here is between Left and Radical. Left can easily be a cosy and self-consoling state of mind – a middle-class way of looking and feeling unguilty about a privileged upbringing – whereas the radical mind, by contrast, stands ready to doubt and question any assumptions common to debate. It would not occur to the Left, for example, to ask whether socialism is or always was left-wing: to the radical it is among the first of questions to be asked. Some of these chapters, accordingly, concern a contrast of individuals who illustrate the spiritual consolations of the Left, on the one hand, and the disturbing power of minds as radical as Tocqueville's and Orwell's on the other. Who now cares to recall that the British Conservative Party was once the chief anti-competitive party in Britain – dedicated, above everything, to protectionism, high spending, taxation and centralised power? Its hallmark, as John Stuart Mill remarked in a letter of October 1831, was 'a reverence for government in the abstract' and a deep conviction that it is 'good for a man to be ruled'. No wonder socialists often found themselves closer to conservatives than to

liberals. Some, like John Ruskin, even called themselves Tories or King's Men, and it was only as recently as the 1970s that British Tories began belatedly to discover the virtues of the free market.

To dig is to find treasure, and some of the notions of the early socialists may be found worth reviving on their merits. No one, after all, has ever demonstrated any conservative social effects to a competitive free market, or any necessary or probable connection between centralised economic planning and the abolition of poverty; and there was always plenty in socialist doctrine to attract the aristocratic temperament and established interests, as the struggle of conservative communists against Boris Yeltsin in the Russian Federation illustrated. Socialism could even mean a new style of royalism, for some, provoked by an industrial revolution and a fearful memory of the Terror.

Perhaps the first instance of royal socialism, and certainly the most improbable, was Queen Victoria's father, the Duke of Kent, one of George III's sons, though he belongs to the prehistory of the doctrine, since he died in January 1820 before the word was invented. In his autobiographical *Life* (1857) Robert Owen, the socialist pioneer, proudly tells how the Duke had openly admired his principles and called for 'a much more just equality' than any that yet existed – one that would 'give much more security and happiness to all than the present system can give to any'. The formula hints at a benevolence spurred by fear – a rational fear entirely natural to the great European aristocracies as the Napoleonic wars drew to an end. Socialism in that age could look like a preservative and prudent act. At all events the Duke of Kent was as much devoted to Robert Owen himself, if Owen's own account is to be believed, as to his ideas, and with an impressive assiduity he chaired a committee dedicated to promoting his *New View of Society* (1813-16). That is a striking fact, even granting a circumstance Owen does not trouble to mention: that the Duke owed him money he could not repay. But the Duke of Kent has no great reputation as a hypocrite, and if he had lived to be king, as he hoped and expected, he might now be remembered as the first socialist monarch in Europe. Instead he took his family, including his infant daughter Victoria, to winter on the Devon coast and died of an inflammation of the lungs a few days before the king his father.

The claim to be called the first socialist monarch, accordingly, belongs a little uncertainly to the Emperor Napoleon III of France, nephew of the first Napoleon and son of a king of Holland. The Napoleonic idea, as he understood it, was a heady cocktail of military glory abroad and a centralised administration at home under a command economy. His early life as an agitator under the July monarchy (1830-48), which imprisoned him, had led him into authorship, and his doctrinal position is fully known. A democracy needs central administration even more than an aristocratic government, he

announced in his mid-thirties, in *Les Idées Napoléoniennes* (1839) – Lord Acton, in his copy of the book now in Cambridge, has pencilled a large question-mark here in the margin – and the state, rightly considered, is not a necessary ulcer, as an economist had recently put it, or a mere drain on wealth, but rather the beneficent impulse of every social organism there is. Populist centralism perhaps takes its rise here. Composed in exile in England and published in Brussels and London as well as in Paris a dozen years before Louis Napoleon came to power in France, the book abounds in extravagant praise of his uncle Napoleon I, who not only achieved conquests abroad but rationalised old enterprises at home and founded new ones. True, it is not a socialist book, and it would be surprising if its author, as early as 1839, had heard of the word. He appears to know nothing of the doctrine of class struggle, in any case, and the work reeks of patriotism in the flamboyant style of the First Empire. But in its insistence on a centralised economy in the service of the poor it is a book calculated to create an atmosphere in which, in the 1840s and after, the nascent idea of socialism might begin to thrive; and in 1844, in prison, he wrote and published a pamphlet called *Extinction du Paupérisme* where he advocated distributing uncultivated land to the poor at public expense. Since his death Napoleon III has never been thought a hero of the Left, in spite of tolerating trade unions in 1864 six years before his defeat and deposition. But his enemies sometimes called him a socialist, and he reportedly called himself one. ‘How can you expect my government to get on?’ he once exclaimed half-seriously to a friend:

The Empress is a legitimist; Morny is an Orleanist; Prince Napoleon is a republican; I am something of a socialist. . . ; only Persigny is an Imperialist – and he is mad!<sup>1</sup>

One refreshing mood in which to approach the past of socialism might be to accept that an emperor could think of himself as a socialist and be thought of as one; and certainly Napoleon III was not the last socialist ruler to dignify himself with the trappings of royalty. In February 1864, just before he was killed in a duel, Ferdinand Lassalle wrote to a friend that he had ‘come to the conviction that nothing could have a greater future, or a more beneficent role, than monarchy, if it could only make up its mind to be a social monarchy’. That sounds much like the vision of Queen Victoria’s father and of Napoleon III.

The royalism of the socialist idea was sometimes evident, what is more, to its sturdiest opponents. T.S. Eliot was one. Fresh from his year in Paris in 1910-11, where he had known French legitimists, and lecturing in London as a young American in 1916, he remarked approvingly, as one who had always been a conservative, that ‘contemporary socialism has much in common with royalism’;<sup>2</sup> and his recent involvement in Paris in the world

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1. Alix de Janzé, *Berryer*, p. 64

of the Action Française, which was violently seeking to restore the French monarchy, does not seem to have made him think the notion a paradoxical one. Like conservatism, socialism sought to justify the state anew and to reinstate in democratic and industrial societies the vital and vanishing principle of subordination through regulation and planning. As Mill said, there are those who think it is good for a man to be ruled.

That mood is perhaps hard to recover, and by now it is easy to look original and even provocative by repeating truths that many Victorians would have thought too familiar to be worth emphasising. Repetition can be painful. Few discoveries, as Lord Acton once remarked, are more irritating than those that expose the pedigree of an idea. To rediscover the essential royalism of the socialist idea means reading texts more than a century old – often forgotten texts – and paying attention, and here the modern interpreter may find himself in a dilemma. If he notes only a few, like Napoleon III, Lassalle and T.S. Eliot, he may be accused of contenting himself with the occasional whimsies of famous men unscrupulously torn out of context; if he notes many, of the pedant's besetting vice of overkill. But at least the charge of overkill suggests that a point has been taken, however reluctantly, and faced with a familiar scholarly dilemma I have preferred here to be accused of that.

On a long view, then, this book should not be seen as original, or meant to be. It is about what was widely thought and said over the course of a century and more. An act of revival, not of innovation, it commemorates great and sometimes forgotten names, socialist and other, who have argued the case for and against revolution, class, equality and progress, and it appears at a moment – the first in Europe since the Enlightenment – when there are no fashionable ideologies or political gods, when the skies are suddenly empty of saints and messiahs. My motive is to revive argument in a sceptical and thoughtful age and to enrich and enliven a tradition which, with the sudden Soviet collapse of 1989 and the slow decay of the New Left, has fallen into disrepute and perhaps terminal decline. The socialist idea now needs to be rescued from the failing grasp of moralists who have left it with an unenviable reputation for woolly idealism and endless priggery. In its day it was more complex and interesting than that. It was not always dedicated to ideals of progress or hostile, in principle, to racialism, monarchy or aristocratic rule; it was not always a playground for prigs. It may not have worked, as a doctrine, but it is worth more than a wave of goodbye. One of the more imposing phenomena of modern intellectual history, it once excited advocacy and defiance in lively intelligences and passionate hearts. It is richer and more various than we know.

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2. Ronald Schuchard, "T.S. Eliot as an extension lecturer 1916-1919", in *Review of English Studies* 25 (1974) p.166