

The Making of British Socialism

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Histories of British socialism are nothing new, with classic studies in the field going back to G. D. H. Cole. (1) Mark Bevir's new book, however, comes from a slightly different perspective, in that it focuses on the 'making' of British socialism in, broadly, the final quarter of the 19th century.

It has been argued (2) that British socialism is not really a fixed and definitive thing but something which is re-made and redefined from time to time. Even if Herbert Morrison's view that socialism is whatever a Labour Government does now seems a little implausible we can sense that the structure, framework and ideas of the socialist movement of the 1880s are not necessarily those that carry weight today.

There are already works on this period too. Studies of H. M. Hyndman, the leader of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), abound (3), and there has been considerable work on the relationship between labour, liberal and radical politics towards the end of the 19th century as well as discussion of the culture of socialism in the period.(4)

Bevir, however, argues that a further book is needed on several grounds.

Firstly, the international crisis of capital that has developed after the failure of Lehmann brothers in 2008 has provoked a return to the ideas of Marx and inspired to some degree a re-examination of those who were influenced by them to oppose Victorian capitalism.

If we can agree that socialism in 2011 is not exactly the same as it was in 1881 we might also concur that many fundamental ideas, for example about labour and wealth, remain valid. On the other side, the core of

market capitalism from that period is also still very much in place.

Secondly the activism that has developed as anger about the activities of bankers has grown – represented in particular by the Occupy movement – has provoked a new interest in the ideas and activities of earlier socialists. How did they understand capitalism and what strategies did they use to oppose and contain it?

There is thus a real case for the relevance of Bevir's book, and he has argued the point himself, pointing out that while the financial crisis has provoked a renewed interest in the history of socialist ideas there is little understanding of the diversity of thought that exists.⁽⁵⁾

What Bevir seeks to do is to show the breadth of the origins of the British socialist tradition, taking it well beyond the narrow Labourism that Ralph Miliband described in *Parliamentary Socialism*.⁽⁶⁾ Indeed in his 2005 book on New Labour ⁽⁷⁾ Bevir argues that there should be a lot more to left-of-centre politics in terms of breadth and variety than the familiar focus on moderate parliamentary reform from above

In an introduction which reviews issues of historiography and theory Bevir argues that the 'pulling down of the Berlin Wall' and the idea that 'global capitalism has swept all before it' are excellent reasons to 'reconsider the history of socialism' (p. 2). He aims therefore to 'retrieve lost socialist voices, their histories and their continuing legacies' (p. 3).

It may be argued that for the generation of the left that was around in the 1960s and 1970s the material that Bevir covers in the book is hardly 'lost', and it might be more accurate to say that he is revisiting and reviewing figures and ideas from the last quarter of the 19th century that have been little looked at in the last 30 years.

Historiographically Bevir situates himself beyond the 'old' labour history which took a top down look at the men [it was nearly always men] and the institutions that had helped to build 'this great movement of ours'. He adheres firmly to a post-E. P. Thompson 'history from below' focus and also takes something from the now somewhat dated 'linguistic turn' which privileged the language used by radicals. Although Bevir does not dwell on theory, he indicates that what people say has to be related to material developments. In other words he is not a postmodernist.

His focus on leaders, unavoidably mostly men, does however lead Bevir to argue that 'the making of British socialism was, at least initially, a middle class affair' (p. 37). He does not come from a labour history background, and so fails to discuss the 'gentleman leader' ⁽⁸⁾, a category which can help to explain the origins and behaviours of many leaders of the working-class movement in the 19th century from Henry Hunt onwards.

The book contains summaries of many of the leading late 19th-century figures of the socialist movement together with assessments of the ideas that they held and their wider impact.

With some justification he adopts a chronological approach, looking at Marxism and the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabians and finally what he broadly terms 'ethical socialists', including anarchists and others. The movement developed in this way from the early 1880s so his categories make sound historical sense.

To a degree Bevir has written a book of synthesis and interpretation rather than original research. However, the scholarly apparatus is there to allow those interested to pursue matters further.

Bevir's background in the history of ideas is unusual for someone writing on the history of British socialism. The majority of authors in the field are socialist activists and/or theorists who do not have other academic pedigrees.

Bevir has a well worked-out position on the history of political ideas and in particular on how political traditions develop and relate to each other.⁽⁹⁾ The book focusses on 'theory' rather than 'practice', but there

is also an indication that Bevir disagrees with mechanical or linear views of how political positions grow and develop

Before looking at the 'Marxists' (part one), Bevir has a chapter on the 'Victorian context', in which he deals with the political and religious ideas of the mid-Victorian period and argues that the early labour movement developed from these rather than broke with them. Here he looks at Gareth Stedman Jones' idea that Chartism led into Gladstonian Liberalism and hence to the labour movement. The point is to underline a continuity of radical tradition. The alternative is to see the working class movement developing in peaks and troughs. Chartism is one peak and then 30 to 40 years later come the further peaks of the SDF and Independent Labour Party. The point of this alternative view is to argue for a progress in labour history both in terms of ideas and of organisational strength.

The figures Bevir chooses to consider are familiar ones to labour historians, albeit, as I note above, not necessarily well-known to a modern audience interested in the history of the British socialist movement.

For the SDF he devotes a chapter each to Belfort Bax, Henry Hyndman and William Morris with a final section on the SDF itself. The quirks, idiosyncracies and eccentricities of the party and its leadership are familiar in labour history and often viewed with a certain disdain. Certainly well known members like Tom Mann were often active despite rather than because of the SDF's best efforts. Equally Engels disliked the mechanical, and worse, view of Marxism propounded by the SDF's leadership and favoured the less formally Marxist activities of the Independent Labour Party, which he saw as being more rooted in the working-class movement. This is an important point which I will return to below.

Nevertheless, as Bevir demonstrates, for all its distortions, the SDF did debate, more or less for the first time, some key issues for the labour movement. It looked at what political programme a Marxist political party should have and of course argued about it. When it came to whether or not to participate in Parliamentary elections no agreement was possible and a split took place. William Morris and a range of extra-Parliamentary and anti-Parliamentary socialists left to form the Socialist League. While Morris was a Marxist – albeit of a rather different type to Belfort Bax and Hyndman – some Leaguers were anarchists.

Labour history has portrayed both the SDF and the Socialist League as 'propaganda sects', that is organisations that proclaimed ideas rather than actually did a great deal on the ground. For that reason later generations have tended to view at least the SDF rather condescendingly. I'd argue that this is a mistake. For all its faults the SDF introduced a version of Marxist thought into the British working-class movement and had some real influence on later developments such as the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. But more particularly its very existence as an organisation promoted working-class activity at times, even despite itself. It turned up on demonstrations such as Bloody Sunday in 1887 in Trafalgar Square and itself encouraged agitation amongst the unemployed. It was of course primarily promoting its ideas but in just turning up it attracted supporters and indeed some of the very best working class activists and organisers. Its national structure helped to facilitate their activities even if that was not the idea of the SDF leadership. Bevir does not touch on this matter, and though it is not centrally what the book is about, if a discussion of the SDF helps to remind a new generation that it was not entirely a bad thing it will be useful.

Next Bevir turns to the Fabians. He notes (p. 133) that they were 'more interested in discussion than action', and so usefully he begins this section of the book with a review of Fabian theories on economics and rent. The point is to distinguish what Bevir identifies as a liberal radical view of political economy from the Marxist understandings of the SDF. Moreover if the SDF was hardly a large organisation, with hundreds and sometimes a few thousand adherents at best, the Fabians were even smaller than that. So here Bevir's focus on ideas fits very well indeed.

He makes some standard points on the Fabians which again are well worth revisiting. They had a number of strands and traditions within them, from varieties of Marxism to liberalism and radicalism. The left at this time, the SDF notwithstanding, did not recognise the more rigid distinctions between 'reform' and

'revolution' that later became such a familiar discussion. He also touches on the question of what influence the Fabians really had. He notes the point made by Eric Hobsbawm and others that they were a small group of middle-class intellectuals with little real influence on the growth of the labour movement.

Bevir's view is that Fabians' focus on theories of rent, politically therefore the question of ownership of land and nationalisation, allowed them to develop radical but non-Marxist economic theories. He argues that there was not one but several different Fabian approaches to the matter and that once this is understood the need to 'rethink the historiography of Fabianism' (p. 150) can be grasped.

Bevir's discussion of George Bernard Shaw and whether he was a Marxist, anarchist or something else, which follows, is one of the less satisfactory parts of the book. Certainly Shaw's politics are dealt with comprehensively. While Shaw may not be identified nowadays as a leading figure in the making of British socialism, he certainly played a major role for a few years in the 1880s, firstly in the SDF and then through the Fabians. In reality it is to be doubted if he had settled politics – hence the less than conclusive nature of the chapter – and that surely is the key point. This was a formative period of British socialist politics when it was possible to hold views which in later periods would have been seen as being in opposition to each other.

If Shaw is these days seen as a comparatively marginal figure in the development of British socialism, Bevir's next chapter deals with a figure who remains central, Sidney Webb. His treatment of Webb is an altogether more satisfactory one. He argues for a revision in the stereotyping of Webb as a Fabian Statist bureaucrat, starting with the need to review his earlier research material.

Bevir suggests that 'portraits of the Webbs as bureaucratic elitists rather miss the mark' (p. 188). He emphasises the impact of ethical positivist and evolutionary sociological thinkers – Comte, Darwin and Spencer – on their politics. In a detailed review of Sidney Webb's ideas and their practical implications Bevir argues that he was not in favour of the overarching State bureaucracy with which he has become associated.

A consideration of Webb's thought leads into a discussion of the practical political implications under the heading of 'permeation'. The SDF's dismal performance in Parliamentary elections suggested to many in the 1880s that trying to build a stand-alone left-wing party would not work. Shaw favoured a policy of working with, and trying to detach from the mainstream Liberal Party, more radical elements. By contrast Webb argued for a policy of working with and within the Liberal Party to persuade them of Fabian policies. Webb was in a minority and later changed his view as to the possibility of doing this.

There was however an alternative to the rather sterile propaganda of the SDF and the permeation strategies of the Fabians. This was to form an independent labour party relating to more progressive and newly-arising elements in the trade unions and to liberals where they could. Bevir notes the development of the ILP but it is not a major focus of his book. There is indeed a considerable literature on the foundation and early years of the ILP but it would have been interesting to read Bevir's substantive assessment, not least to allow a comparison with his analysis of the SDF.

The final section of the book deals with a range of ethical socialists, anarchists and others who, while they certainly believed in changing the world, thought this should start with changing oneself. Arguably the person most closely identified with this area is Edward Carpenter and Sheila Rowbotham has written several books around the theme of socialism and the new life covering his activities and ideas.[\(10\)](#)

While Bevir does not add substantively to previous research into ethical socialism, communal living and Labour Churches he still provides some useful analytical correctives to some of the earlier frameworks deployed to address them. He argues that they need to be understood in their own right and not as something which arose because society was becoming increasingly secular or because people were looking for substitute faiths. Further he points out that in the case of the Labour Churches not only were there strong links to the ILP but many leading figures actually retained formal religious positions. He might have added that in any case religion, particularly Methodism, continued to have a very strong place in the labour

movement of this period.

The book concludes by returning to the present day and suggesting a certain crisis of socialist ideas with the apparent dominance of the market and neo-liberalism. Bevir might well have concluded rather differently if he had been writing at the end of the momentous events of 2011. However his core argument that the history of British socialism contains statist and bureaucratic strains, but also much thought that differs from this, and that all elements of the tradition are worthy of consideration in any attempt to renew socialism, certainly remains valid.

Unsurprisingly, given his background, Bevir's focus is on more on ideas and theory than practice. Yet practice can tell us a lot. What people do is often a better guide to what people really think and believe than what they say in the meeting room. Hence the book contains no reference to E. P. Thompson's seminal 'Homage to Tom Maguire' for example.⁽¹¹⁾ The article notes that socialism at the time Bevir is writing of was really built not in London Head Offices by great men but in the shadowy areas known as the provinces by unknown activists like Maguire. Maguire, who did not live much beyond thirty, was tasked with trying to organise a new labour movement, divorced from tired liberal ideas and practices, in Leeds in the 1890s. He was well aware of national organisations and the debates between the SDF and Socialist League. But he had to organise workers, prosecute strikes and all the while convince those involved that socialist ideas were the way to take things forward. Maguire succeeded brilliantly as did similar organisers around the country, and this underlines the point that British socialism was built on the ground from the bottom up by unknown activists as much as it was by Hyndman, Shaw and others.

As a consequence, Bevir's book should be seen as a valuable summary of leaders and ideas that have been too little discussed over the past few decades, but it is far from the last historical word on the current debate about how the left should go forward.

For example, while historical argument about the role of women in the development of the working-class movement is covered in the introduction there is surprisingly little detail in the book. While the book's title refers to 'British socialism' there is very little mention of Scotland and Wales either. While his argument might be that developments in these countries were not substantively different to those in England, it does still need to be made.

That aside Bevir has made a useful contribution to what should be considered a historical work in progress.

Notes

1. G. D. H. Cole, *British Working Class Politics, 1832–1914* (London, 1941).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. H. Tsuzuki, *Hydman and British Socialism* (Oxford, 1961).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. C. Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture 1884-1914* (Manchester, 1990).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mark Bevir, 'Alternative pleasures', *Berfrois*, October 25 2011 <<http://www.berfrois.com/2011/10/mark-bevir-marxism-fabianism/> [2]> [accessed 3 January 2012].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (London, 1960).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Mark Bevir, *New Labour: A Critique* (London 2005).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See John Belchem and James Epstein, 'The nineteenth-century gentleman leader revisited', *Social History*, 22, 2 (May 1997).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge, 1999).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London, 2008).[Back to \(10\)](#)

11. E. P. Thompson, 'Homage to Tom Maguire', in *Essays in Labour History: in Memory of G. D. H. Cole, 25 September 1889–14 January 1959*, ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1960).[Back to \(11\)](#)

The author does not wish to respond.

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