

Radical Roots – Corbyn and the Tradition of English Radicalism



The idea that Jeremy Corbyn is possessed with a hatred of his country and its traditions, born out of a commitment to the ‘alien’ ideology of Marxism/Communism – as though he was a foreign agent dropped in from Moscow to act as an internal fifth-columnist – could barely be wider of the mark. Indeed, what could be more characteristically English than contempt for ‘the toff’, that wealthy, elite-educated specimen of a sclerotic ruling class that has dogged our society for centuries?

Dig a little deeper below ‘official history’, with its imperious sweep of kings, queens, victorious battles and Brit-ain’s emergence as a global power ‘ruling the waves’, and we strike a rich vein of popular radicalism in England that anticipated and came to influence the emergence of socialist trends that continue to inform our ideas today. Familiar themes of radical English history are as powerful now as ever. Hunger, greed, poverty and the brutal treatment of those in need by the state, worklessness and the rapacious devastation of the natural environment – these are our challenges still, albeit in new forms, and Corbyn’s radicalism recalls voices that echo down the ages.

At its most basic, from the days of primitive accumulation onwards (when the ruling class seized possession of land, labour and other assets through violent force and murder), elites have sought to use their ability to appropriate or extract value either directly, in conditions of slavery or serfdom/bonded labour,

or indirectly via rents, profits or, subsequently, speculation. By contrast, the labouring poor have had a vital investment in developing the productivity of the land, putting their lives and livelihoods into cultivating its productivity (see page 26). Having access to sufficient land and a right to what is produced on it is a question of basic survival, of meeting the most essential preconditions for social reproduction.

But as the link between the words 'cultivate' and 'culture' indicates (from the Latin *cultus*, which means 'care', and from the French *colere* which means 'to till' as in 'till the ground'), productive labour is also the basis on which we shape our understanding of our place in the world and our sense of shared understandings. To be dispossessed of our work is to threaten a radical poverty of both body and mind. If this is true at the level of the individual made unemployed, how much more so when a whole class is subject to structural dispossession? By contrast, if we were fully empowered and resourced to pursue our own creative self-realisation, what would this mean for the kinds of identities and future worlds we could create? Questions of land, ownership and labour go to the core of our being and the kind of world we wish to inhabit.

The Norman yoke

The experience of the oppressed classes on these shores has given this particular clarity. According to the chronicler Ordericus Vitalis, writing in the early 12th century, William the Conqueror made a death-bed confession in which he regretted:

'I have persecuted the natives of England beyond all reason. Whether gentle or simple I have cruelly oppressed them; many I unjustly inherited, innumerable multitudes perished through me by famine or the sword: I fell on the English of the northern shires like a ravening lion.'

Manorial tenure was established on behalf of the Crown by the new aristocratic elite, dispossessing previous landowners and labourers of their access to the land, and establishing new property entitlements over agricultural production and apparently arbitrary powers of taxation. 'And so,' Ordericus glossed it, 'the English groaned aloud for their lost liberty and plotted ceaselessly to find some way of shaking off a yoke that was so intolerable and unaccustomed.' Even today at the level of language, 'Anglo-Saxon' English is associated with the direct, robust quality of demotic speech, whereas the rarefied discussion of legal and constitutional terminology bears the exotic influence of Norman French and Latin.

The spectre of the 'Norman yoke', with accompanying 'golden age' idealisation of the prelapsarian Anglo-Saxon dispensation of King Alfred, and dreams of a future in which the people were once again liberated from arbitrary aristocratic

rule, continued to animate the radical imagination at least half a millenium later, as the historian Christopher Hill has documented. Irrespective of its historical veracity, it was a powerful animating myth well into the disputes following the English Civil War in the 17th century and beyond.

Repeated revolt

A regular early source of discontent was the level of taxation demanded by the Crown to fight wars, leading to an in-tolerable burden on incomes and livelihoods. This grievance was to occur repeatedly, most famously in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, when Wat Tyler led a rebellion against the imposition of a poll tax. But well before then, the dues and services exacted from tenants by landlords were a constant source of friction. There are reports of rural workers in Newington in Oxfordshire in 1300 refusing to mow the lord's land and raising four pence a head for a 'strike fund' to fight the case in court – possibly the first such instance in British labour history.

Tyler's rebellion was significant in that it extended beyond issues of local grievance to connect up regionally and involve the artisan class as well as poorer labourers, marching on London from Essex and Kent. The poll tax became a by-word for unfair and arbitrary forms of taxation.

An important figure in the 1381 agitation was the radical clergyman John Ball, who attacked the complicity of the church with the hierarchical structuring of society. He argued that such social distinctions were a product of sinful humanity rather than divinely-inspired Creation. Evoking Eden, he famously asked, 'When Adam delved, and Eve span, who then was the Gentleman?' The notion that the contemporary church was too bound up with the power of the secular authorities was a major point of contention in social struggles over the centuries, and religious non-conformity against the established church has been a major influence on the ethics and politics of the radical tradition.

Just as the reformation rejected the authority of the pope and the whole priestly caste as a source of superstition and arbitrary power, interposing itself before the individual soul and its salvation through faith alone, so the monarchy and wider network of feudal power was seen as an alien imposition on the true birthright of the freeborn Englishman. The English Civil War culminated in the Commons asserting its authority and executing the monarch, but for the Levellers and their co-thinkers, much work was still to be done to conserve, realise and extend the gains of the revolution. Taking off the head of the king was only the beginning.

Levellers and Diggers

The Levellers had fought alongside Cromwell's parliamentary forces, but only those commoners with relatively large landowning interests had the franchise

and eligibility for election. The Levellers saw the deposing of the monarch as an opportunity for thoroughgoing reform of the whole constitutional settlement on republican principles, whereby sovereignty ultimately rests with the people. They sought to unpick the whole legal basis of feudal property relations and entitlements in order to (re)gain the liberties and security that were, or ought to be, their birthright. They prefigured a 'momentous shift', which would be of profound significance for later revolutionaries, 'from the recovery of rights which used to exist to the pursuit of rights because they ought to exist: from historical mythology to political philosophy', in Christopher Hill's words. At the Putney debates, Levellers debated the radical extension of the franchise. Thomas Rainsborough made the radical democratic case when he argued: 'Really I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he has not had a voice to put himself under.'

By contrast, commissary-general Henry Ireton made the case that appeal to 'natural law' effectively gave no value whatsoever to the basis of common law custom and practice upon which all forms of property ownership would ultimately have to be grounded. Having a significant 'stake' in the ownership of the kingdom was argued to be a necessary precondition for the franchise – an argument that was used against the universal extension of the franchise until the early 20th century. Ultimately, the division represented a class tension at the heart of the republican forces and foreshadowed the restoration of monarchy, albeit with concessions to the landed gentry, as emerged in 1688.

If the abolition of private property was arguably the unacknowledged telos of the democratic political theory of the most radical Levellers, it was the overt and conscious aim of the Diggers, who styled themselves the True Levellers. Gerrard Winstanley and his co-thinkers occupied St George's Hill in Surrey, in 1649, in an early form of direct action that saw an experiment in collective agriculture and common ownership, whereby every citizen was encouraged to refuse to serve their feudal masters and was welcome to work the land, sowing and reaping crops, with the harvest shared in common. The Diggers sought to recreate a primitive communism they saw as preceding the Fall, a religious inspiration with a secular component.

They argued, in terms that anticipate later liberation theology, that the Earth represents a 'common treasury' divinely created for all without distinction, with the implication that private property is a 'fallen' condition into which our sinful

natures have brought us. If the Levellers developed a radically democratic theory with implications for the formal character of legal and political institutions, the Diggers pressed the implications still further into substantive questions of social and economic relations – how property ownership and the productive economy themselves can be restructured for the benefit of all. The language of socialism would not appear for a further two centuries, but the seed had been planted.

The constitutional settlement that ultimately emerged was a compromise whereby a chastened feudal landowning elite accommodated the contending influence of the emerging bourgeoisie. It conserved the power of landed interests without inhibiting the development of capitalism. While the immediate interests of the parliamentary landowning classes might have been addressed, little had changed in the direction sought by the more radical elements of Cromwell's forces.

Revolutionary flame

Towards the end of the 18th century, the flame of revolutionary republicanism was to be spread from these shores to America and France, in the writings and person of Thomas Paine, whose Rights of Man represented an impassioned defence of the French Revolution and a plea for universal rights to be extended across every nation. As early as his tract Common Sense in 1776, Paine was making clear his contempt for the state and the claims of the monarchy and aristocracy to legitimacy via hereditary succession:

‘A French bastard landing with armed banditti and establishing himself King of England, against the consent of the natives, is, in plain terms, a very paltry, rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it... The plain truth is that the antiquity of the English monarchy will not bear looking into.’

But it was not until after the French Revolution (1789-92) – and particularly with Rights of Man (a polemical re-sponse to Edmund Burke's highly critical reception of events in France) – that Paine's work was published and disseminated extensively within his native country. E P Thompson describes Paine's text as a ‘foundation-text of the English working-class movement’ but ‘shocking, unnerving and, in its implications, dangerous’ for contemporaries. What made Paine's intervention so radical was less the originality of his ideas than that he was prepared to voice them so explicitly and unapologetically, without any sense of deference before his social ‘betters’. While the ‘Norman yoke theory was admissible within the polite discussion of precedents, and the restoration of ancient constitutional rights’, Paine was to shatter this frame altogether, ‘to bring hereditary monarchy, the peerage, and indeed the whole constitution into contempt’, as Christopher Hill put it. Whereas Burke sought to

establish the sanctity of an unbroken tradition handed from generation to generation, Paine believed that the 'French Revolution showed that men could reverse the verdict of history, and throw off the dead weight of tradition and prejudice'. The future was now up for grabs, re-made according to the principles of Reason.

Rights of Man also makes the vital link between a new political dispensation and the possibility of new programmes of social reform, including payments to the poor for expenses such as funerals, old age pensions as of right, public funds to educate all children, maternity benefits and even the construction of new workshops and houses for immigrants and the unemployed. Talk of new political rights and formal equality was linked to concrete questions of social welfare, addressing the acute distress and sense of indignity arising from poverty. While sections of respectable middle-class radicals took fright at some of Paine's rhetoric, this idea that a radical political challenge to the state could unleash a wave of positive measures to substantially improve people's living standards provided a source of inspiration that would long outlast the Jacobin agitation.

The English Jacobins argued 'for internationalism, for arbitration in place of war, for the toleration of Dissenters, Catholics, and free-thinkers, for the discernment of human virtue in heathen, Turk or Jew', in

E P Thompson's words. C L R James famously documented the slave revolts in the French colony of Haiti led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, inspired by the revolutionary precedent and its values. Mary Wollstonecraft would extend the logic to-wards a Vindication of the Rights of Women, a key document in the struggle to recognise the forms of gender oppression that afflicted successive generations both here and beyond these shores.

Private property and land

However, Paine was no socialist pioneer. He resented the state sanctifying the inheritance of wealth with reference to the hereditary principle, but was fully in favour of respecting the private property and wealth of those who had earned it through endeavour, diligence or labour. The notion of common ownership falls outside the Paineite tradition, which dominated radicalism for the following century, though not without challenge.

Take the question of land. Thomas Spence, for example, agreed with Paine's view that the feudal landowning class were originally bandits who robbed the people to lay their own claim to ownership. But Paine's proposed remedy in his Agrarian Justice was effectively restricted to the periodic taxation of the landowner in order to redistribute any windfall (not dissimilar from land value tax schemes advocated by the American economist Henry George in the 19th

century, pursued by Lloyd George's Liberals in the early 20th century and still advocated today).

By contrast, Spence argued that 'we must destroy not only personal and hereditary Lordship, but the cause of them, which is Private Property in Land'. Implicitly appealing to a mythical form of Anglo-Saxon society in which local, parish-based forms of ownership and administration were autonomous from the remote forces of the state, Spence argued explicitly that the local parishes should become the sole owners of the land, which would be put to the benefit of the common weal, an idea similar to that of Winstanley.

Spence's slogan 'The Land is the People's Farm' would be cited by successive generations. Significantly, his view was based on the understanding that equal rights to the fruits of working the land were essential to social reproduction more generally. Hence Spence wrote of 'The Rights of Infants, or, the Imprescriptible Rights of Mothers to such share of the Elements as is sufficient to enable them to suckle and bring up their Young'.

As a successor to Spence, Thomas Evans was to address the question of land ownership in a sufficiently radical form as a precondition for the realisation of any desirable form of society:

'First, settle the property, the national domains, of the people on a fair and just foundation, and that one settlement will do for all... and produce a real radical reform in everything; all attempts to reform without this are but so many approaches to actual ruin, that will not disturb the relative classes of society.'

When George Monbiot recently argued, 'Want to tackle inequality? Then first change our land ownership laws,' he was reaffirming the Spencean position.

Reform agitation

The pace of enclosures was at its greatest between 1780 and 1830, accelerated by the demands of developing industrial production methods and the need to drive workers towards the rapidly growing urban centres. The traumatic psychological impact of this violent eruption of industrial modernity into the pastoral English landscape is memorably captured by Romantic poets of the period, urban and rural. For Blake, the whole country was now 'charter'd', every street, and even the very river running through the city subject to the claims of private ownership – with such 'mind forg'd manacles' leaving behind injurious 'marks of weakness, marks of woe' – while the giant new textile mills take on 'dark, satanic' proportions.

Together with the return of soldiers from the Napoleonic wars, and a series of failed harvests forcing up the prices of basic foodstuffs, unemployment, poverty and starvation was a daily reality. This is the face of human misery on which William Cobbett would report in his *Rural Rides*. It would be a key impetus

towards political radicalism and waves of reform agitation.

By this time the 1832 Reform Act had been passed by the Whig government, but was widely received as comprising only minor concessions meant to head off more radical democratic demands. These culminated in the tumultuous years of the Chartist struggle in 1838-42.

Irishmen such as James Bronterre O'Brien, George Julian Harney and Feargus O'Connor were acutely aware of the misery arising from pitiless enforcement of rent arrears and evictions pursued against poor tenants by absentee English landlords. As Malcolm Chase writes in *Chartism: A New History*, for the Chartists, 'It was a practical and moral imperative, not only to maximise agricultural production and alleviate poverty but also to deploy land reform as a means to right a political injustice and bring down the citadel of economic and political power.'

The key aspect separating this approach from that of middle-class radicals like John Bright and Richard Cobden is that the latter shared the Paineite assumption that 'freedom' entailed the right to own, buy and sell private property. Land reform that limited itself to ending the hereditary principles of ownership in no way empowered the labouring masses. It prepared the ground for a new landed class to establish itself. However, the Chartist plan for the common ownership of land was not merely nationalising it under the control of the state but was a locally-based, autonomously-integrated form of ownership from below, in the same essential tradition as imagined by the Diggers.

Sadly, their lack of immediate success in realising their ambition to extend the suffrage led some Chartists to back an initiative led by O'Connor, who convinced the movement to develop a fatally flawed Land Plan, an early attempt at mutual ownership aimed at allowing people to meet the minimum property qualification for the franchise. But the land ownership question would be taken up again by Chartist leaders in the later period, when the main agitation around the franchise was beginning to ebb. Among those still pushing the issue was Ernest Jones, a personal acquaintance of Marx, who has recently been credited with dramatically broadening the latter's outlook on questions of colonialism.

Land and resistance

Marx was not the only significant radical to be influenced by Jones. Another was Michael Davitt, a figure for whom hatred of landlordism and the British ruling class bred a passionate interest in using land reform to liberate the Irish people from poverty and colonial subjection.

Davitt would leave behind the violent methods of his Fenian past and join up with Charles Stewart Parnell in the Irish National Land League, which fought a 'land war', actively organising resistance to evictions and fighting for a

reduction in rents. Ultimately, the battle against the landlord class involved a fight against the British state and its claim to Ireland. The question of land reform in Ireland was therefore intimately connected to the agitation in favour of home rule. While Davitt's role in Irish history is acknowledged, the extent to which he was consciously drawing upon the radical English tradition of opposition to landlordism and for common ownership of land has been perhaps underplayed. The Irish and English struggles share common roots in opposition to the imperialism of the British state.

By the 1880s and 90s it was hardly possible to find anyone on the left who was not in favour of some form of land reform. The Independent Labour Party and Social Democratic Federation, forerunners to the Labour Party, were both committed to the socialisation of land ownership, but not necessarily clear on how specifically that should be achieved. The proposals for taxing land values would ultimately be part of the programme that delivered a landslide for Lloyd George's Liberals in 1906 – alongside Irish home rule and Lords reform – but it was incapable of delivering on its promises. Labour would ultimately inherit not just unrealised policy prescriptions or objectives but the hopes and dreams of a people, as embodied in a radical tradition going back centuries.

Labour traditions

Unfortunately, the mainstream philosophy of Labour governments (crudely, from Fabianism and corporatist methods, through post-1945 traditions of bureaucratic state control and welfarism through to the neoliberal managerialism of New Labour) have been marked by the belief in delivering for people, rather than helping them organise for themselves. This is a narrative formed by the priorities of policy 'experts', trade union bureaucracies and Whitehall wonks.

The English radicalism of the Levellers, followed by the Chartists, projected a vision of representative political institutions that were also participatory. Raymond Williams described this aptly when he wrote of 'representation in the sense of "making present" in a continuing and interactive way those who are represented'. It is an entirely different idea from the professional, materially-cushioned political class that dominates the present day, incorrectly-named House of Commons – another consequence of Labour's marginalisation of this radical tradition.

The alternative tradition has been sustained in the memory through the collective effort of generations of socialists and communists. We must also acknowledge the enormous influence of Tony Benn in synthesising key themes and concerns of the tradition, and consciously promoting political education of this distinctive radical history and ethos. It was no doubt partly through the

educative role of Benn that Corbyn developed his own politics, connecting him to the whole tradition and way of viewing the world that is so deeply embedded on English soil.

This tradition has been passed down the generations not from dusty tomes on the bookshelves, but as part of a living culture that persists even in our rituals and cultural practices – such as at the Durham Miners Gala or the Tol-puddle Martyrs festival. Corbyn's cycling and visits to the allotment are viewed as slightly cranky hobbies by the snobby Westminster elite. But if we remember the socialist cycling clubs of the Independent Labour Party, or the influence for early socialists of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau on self-sufficiency, these simple pleasures make perfect sense.

To explicitly locate Corbynism in this context is only to draw out what is latent throughout. But awareness of these connections can help us to view the dimensions of his project with a renewed sense of clarity and coherence, and enable us to reinvigorate our sense of historical mission and radical ambitions.