

R. H. Tawney's Ethical Socialism

R. H. Tawney was one of the most influential radicals of 20th century Britain. Today, his ethical socialism is often claimed by moderates – but, unlike them, he was committed to deep social transformation.



R.H. Tawney came to socialism through Sunday School. At the age of seven, he was taught there that God made the laws to protect the worthy rich from the vicious poor. This statement made such an impression on him, Tawney later recollected, that he set out to establish the truth of it for himself. In 1962, nearly eighty years on from that formative lesson, the dying Tawney would be eulogised as one of the great socialists of the century.

Today, Tawney is largely forgotten. And even where his ghost is summoned up, it's usually to serve as a proxy in a particular kind of political dispute. Tawney is used as a representative for '[ethical socialism](#)', a nebulous label best understood by what it's not: not Marxist, not 'extreme', alive to rhetorical invocations of community and dead to concrete questions of political or economic power.

One such séance was carried out by the [Guardian](#) after last year's Labour leadership election. Immediately after a plea for Labour to offer 'constructive criticism' of Boris Johnson's government came the suggestion that Keir Starmer should turn for guidance to Labour's 'neglected communitarian tradition' — and in particular, to Tawney. Centrist journalists, right-wing Labour politicians, and acolytes of Blue Labour all

look to Tawney to justify an apolitical politics; an ‘ethical socialism’ heavy on ethics and light on socialism.

But such claims couldn’t be more wrong. Certainly, Tawney’s political journey wasn’t a straightforward one. But his morally charged worldview was always inseparable from his commitment to radical political change.

Becoming a Socialist

Tawney’s background wasn’t radical. Born in 1880—the son of a prominent orientalist, scion of a wealthy manufacturing dynasty—Robert Henry Tawney was a child of the establishment. Educated at Rugby School and Balliol College, Oxford, ‘Harry’ Tawney was expected to ascend to the academic firmament at the end of his undergraduate degree. But to the surprise of his friends—and the fury of his father—he performed poorly in his final exams.

Shut out from academia, Tawney took up a job at Toynbee Hall, a charity for the working poor in the East End of London. Hosting figures like William Beveridge, architect of the welfare state, and Clement Attlee, a future Labour prime minister, Toynbee Hall was a hothouse of social research — and political activism. Plunging him into the poverty and struggle of working-class life, Tawney’s work there confirmed his conversion to socialist politics — and set the course of his life.

In the evenings at Toynbee Hall, giving lectures to workers on the origins of the industrial revolution, Tawney discovered a passion—and a talent—for history. That passion led him to begin a career as a historian, dividing his time between academic posts and part-time teaching with the Workers Educational Association. Tawney’s work with the WEA—providing higher education to workers—was to continue for decades.

But Tawney’s work as an educationalist was cut short on the outbreak of World War I. Like most British socialists, Tawney supported the war; but unlike many, he enlisted. As a regular soldier and not an officer, he spent his time in arms mixing with former factory workers. Badly injured at the Battle of the Somme, Tawney was medically discharged in 1917, and lived the rest of his years in pain from his wounds. These experiences would deeply shape him. Time and again he related his political thought to the kind of man he had lived and worked beside in the trenches. But his life in wartime also gave him a darker vision of human beings. In his earlier life, socialism had been a great cause for Tawney: a ‘moral crusade’ he was proud to take part in. After the war, it became the only cause worth fighting for.

Against the Acquisitive Society

And in the 1920s and ’30s—through his books, speaking, and activism—Tawney fought like few others. Publishing *The Acquisitive Society* in 1920, he threw down a gauntlet to the apologists of profit. Capitalism was morally evil, he argued, in inception as well as outcome. In enshrining acquisitiveness as the guiding principle of society, Tawney argued, both rich and poor were corrupted. Seen only as a means to enrichment, work is reduced to drudgery; seen only as collective self-interest,

community is degraded. Competition replaces honesty; egoism drives out fellowship, and all human joys and sorrows are slaved to ‘the monotonous beat of the factory engine.’

In 1931, Tawney published *Equality*; his attack on the most cherished belief of the liberal ‘intellectual aristocracy’ he was born into: equality of opportunity. Noble in principle, capitalism had distorted the meritocratic ideal by turning it into a platitude; ‘decorous drapery’ masking the brutal realities of a society built on avarice.

For equality to become a fact, rather than a slogan, it had to be the rule across the board; the poor must be richer, the rich poorer, and good educations available to all, not just the fortunate. Votaries of examination and selection were adherents of ‘The Tadpole Philosophy’: they were so many lucky frogs, lecturing a pond of their former peers ‘on the virtue by which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs.’ If *Equality* and *The Acquisitive Society* exposed the rotten fruits of the profit-system, Tawney’s third major work looked at that system’s historic roots. Cutting across the history of economics, politics, and theology from the reformation to the restoration, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* told the story of how the development of capitalism paralleled the decline of Christianity. The passage from the ‘doctrineless communism of the open field’, as Tawney termed the medieval commons, to the acquisitive society was not a smooth one. Rebellions and clerical backlash punctuated the steady growth in the power and prestige of commerce.

But what Tawney called the *lues anglicorum*—the worship of money—eventually won out. As Mammon tightened its grip on England, the voices of criticism heard so frequently in earlier centuries gradually fell silent. Christians, once intimately concerned with economic questions, confined themselves to the private sphere. But although the Christian church had let the torch of social justice fall, other hands would pick it up. ‘The true descendent of the doctrines of Aquinas,’ Tawney noted, ‘is the labour theory of value. The last of the Schoolmen was Karl Marx.’

In these three books, blending the romantic ideals of William Morris, Anglo-Catholic socialism, Marxism, and a host of other inspirations, Tawney made the case for a particular kind of politics. Socialism, he insisted, involves a moral transformation, not just an economic one. Ethics, of key importance to Tawney, wasn’t a substitute for political action, but a necessary foundation for it.

Socialism requires an alternative understanding of what it means to be human; the distinction between a socialist and a capitalist is in their anthropology as much as their economics. Against Fabian critics, Tawney insisted on the nonutilitarian case for socialism. Capitalism was morally evil, Tawney wrote in 1913, ‘not because it hinders the production of wealth, but because it produces wickedness.’ Real freedom—the freedom only a socialist society could offer—was the freedom to be good.

For a Free Humanity

Tawney saw individual liberty—in the broadest sense—as the highest political good. Class society distorted the human personality, promoting our worst qualities, instituting ‘a war of all against all’ in place of fellowship and community, and crushing the individual between the brutalities of the market and an uncaring state.

Against an impoverished, atomised liberal individualism—which offered rights without obligations, and where political liberty was hollowed out by economic dependence—Tawney proposed a renewal of community. But he combined his critique of liberalism with a defence of the individual—the everyman he referred to as ‘Mr Dubbs’—against ‘Superior persons’ of any political stripe. He had a particular disdain for authoritarian models of socialism: ‘a herd of tame, well-nourished animals, with wise keepers in command.’ Utopia, Tawney noted on more than one occasion, was a world in which anyone could tell his neighbour ‘Go to Hell, but no man wants to say it, and no man need go when told.’

Tawney’s future socialist citizen might have been meek and mild; Tawney, in verbal combat with his political opponents, was anything but. Frustrated with Labour’s poor showing in the 1931 general election—and disgusted by the repeated betrayals of Labour governments—Tawney wrote a notorious polemic: *The Choice Before The Labour Party*.

Labour needed to give up, Tawney warned, on ‘offering the largest possible number of carrots to the largest possible number of donkeys’ and make the case for a classless society. As long as Labour settled for winning votes rather than converts, it would fail to carry through social transformation, in or out of office. This was Tawney at his most ferocious, contemptuous of compromise. He was particularly vitriolic toward those socialists who put stock in the customs of parliamentary life: ‘To kick over an idol,’ Tawney quipped, ‘you must first get off your knees.’

Idols were thick on the ground in the 1930s. Tawney spent the rest of the decade in political activism — attacking appeasement, supporting the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, and trying to push Labour to the left through groups like the ill-starred ‘Socialist League’. With the advent of World War II, he worked on education policy for Winston Churchill’s Tory-Labour coalition government; after it, nearing seventy, he started to withdraw from public view.

Postwar

But in the last act of Tawney’s life, he began to head in a new political direction. A long-time supporter of workers’ control in industry, Tawney was critical of Attlee’s government for a model of nationalisation he saw as insufficiently democratic. If public ownership involved no change in the rights and responsibilities of ordinary workers, he argued, it thwarted the kind of moral uplift essential to socialism. In order for the working class to become masters of their own destiny, the state first had to treat them as such.

This critique should have led Tawney to support the then-insurgent Bevanite left; instead, he consistently backed their right-wing opponents. The thinker who excoriated Ramsay MacDonald for his betrayal of socialist principle now condemned ‘ultra-left’ activists calling for expanded public ownership. The writer who condemned militarism in *The Acquisitive Society* endorsed NATO and expressed his support for Britain’s nuclear weapons.

Was Tawney, like many socialists, following a radical youth with a reactionary senescence? It’s an easy answer: but there are reasons to be sceptical of it. The leader

of the Labour right, Hugh Gaitskell, was a friend and protégé of Tawney's; they were united by their elite background, their Euroscepticism, and their distrust of the trade unions. But although Tawney supported Gaitskell, he had significant reservations about his old pupil's revisionist politics.

Tawney was perturbed by Gaitskell's drive to remove public ownership from Labour's constitution; taking up Anthony Crosland's *Future of Socialism* with interest, he finished it 'with some anxiety'. The clarity of his vision of social transformation was dimmed by age, but not diminished. He frustrated canvassers in the 1960 election by refusing to say if 'he was Labour'. Tawney replied that he was a socialist: nothing more, and nothing less.

Tawney's political vision—sweeping, intense, uncompromising—enthused readers and inspired disciples. It kept him from succumbing to the false comforts of conventional wisdom, or the security offered by the settled doctrine of parties and sects. But his intense sense of politics as a moral vocation hampered his ability to navigate the contradictions of politics as a practical pursuit. Tawney had a grand vision; but like many visionaries, he was ignorant as to the limits of his sight. Like his contemporary George Orwell, Tawney's sincere patriotism and resolute emphasis on the importance of the individual preserved him from support for Stalinism. But, like Orwell, that same attitude prepared him poorly for the more complex realities of the Cold War. A critical attitude toward the Soviet Union gave way to an uncritical endorsement of the American empire, and quiet acquiescence to what E. P. Thompson called '[Natopolitan ideology](#)'.

Tawney was sceptical of the state, but not particularly critical of it. The state was, he argued, an instrument: those who disagreed were 'bluffing'. His contempt for those entranced by titles and honours was never translated into a programme for—or even an interest in—constitutional reform.

It's difficult to disagree with Alasdair MacIntyre's judgement that Tawney, a man of the Victorian era, struggled to navigate postwar Britain: a world where capitalism could reconcile itself with public ownership, public education, and even socialist governments. And some of Tawney's views were dated, even within his lifetime: uninterested in the oppression of women, his critiques of British capitalism tended to ignore gender, race, or imperialism.

Tawney rebelled against his class but he never left it. The close friendships he established at Oxford with his brother-in-law William Beveridge and William Temple, future Archbishop of Canterbury, endured throughout the rest of his life. And although he threw himself into educational and trade union work, Tawney's friends and cothinkers were primarily other intellectuals.

Older, patrician instincts lingered in his generation's belief that workers would need to be educated before the new social order could be built. Programmes of education, after all, require someone to do the educating. Tawney knew that socialism would be created *for* working people, but never quite reconciled himself to the idea that it might be created *by* them.

But in spite of his errors and mistakes, there are many reasons to return to Tawney. His richly allusive prose is still a pleasure to read. He was a diligent and innovative

historian, an insightful critic of liberalism, and an articulate, relentless defender of socialism as freedom.

For all his shortcomings, he was a radical with flaws, not a reactionary with virtues. And in an increasingly mechanised, controlled world, Tawney's case for a moral transformation of society, for a system that liberates human beings instead of destroying them, has a new relevance. MacIntyre delivered his verdict on Tawney's life in 1966: 'Being good is not enough.' Being good might not be enough. But it's a good place to start.