
BIJDRAGE

Freedom, Freethought and the State in Nineteenth Century Britain

Edward Royle, professor Department of History University of York

British freethinkers were strong advocates of personal freedom and generally hostile to interference from the state. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Marxist socialist influences were growing, their leaders remained implacably opposed to state socialism, preferring to support liberalism and even libertarianism and anarchism. Attempts to set up freethought socialist societies were largely unsuccessful, and the mainstream of British freethought either remained liberal in its politics or sought refuge in a political neutrality which invited the charge of irrelevance. As a result it lost its extreme position within the liberal spectrum of nineteenth-century politics and ideas to become in the twentieth century a non-partisan pressure group situated somewhere between the humanitarian left and the radical right. The purpose of this article is to suggest reasons why the main section of British freethought remained liberal rather than socialist, preferring a negative definition of liberty ('freedom from') rather than the more Germanic idea of positive freedom ('freedom to'). The latter raised expectations of state action to promote better economic and social conditions for the people whereas the freethinkers believed that individuals could benefit only when they had learned to rely upon themselves.

The British freethought movement

During the second half of the nineteenth century, freethought and Secularism were synonymous in the public mind. The origins of Secularism can be traced to the efforts of George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) who, after several attempts in the later 1840s to organise post-Owenite anti-clerical radical sentiment under such titles as 'Rationalism' and 'Theological Utilitarianism', in 1851 hit upon the word 'Secularism' to describe his programme of republican, anti-religious reform. Through his perio-

dical, the *Reasoner*, which he published weekly between 1846 and 1861, he arranged lectures, encouraged local societies throughout the country, reported their proceedings, organised campaigns in favour of freedom of speech and publication, and agitated for law reform to win full civil rights for those unable to accept the Christian or any other religion.

Though Holyoake continued active in all these campaigns for the rest of the century, in the 1860s he was largely superseded by Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) who in 1866 announ-

ced the formation of an organisation to bring national coherence to Secularism, the National Secular Society (NSS). Bradlaugh set the tone for Secularism through his dominance over the NSS. On occasions he was challenged by rivals and opponents within the movement, some of whom were more sympathetic to socialism than either he or his successor as president of the NSS, George William Foote (1850-1915). Nevertheless, because Bradlaugh's powerful personality and energetic leadership of the NSS fixed him in the public mind as the embodiment of Secularism, British freethought in the second half of the nineteenth century was invariably associated with freedom of the individual and opposition to state socialism⁽¹⁾.

The republican tradition of Thomas Paine

To understand the attitude of nineteenth-century freethinkers to the state, one must examine the source of their political ideas in the writings of Thomas Paine (1737-1809) whose *Rights of Man* (1791-2) and *The Age of Reason* (1794-5) were the founding documents of popular republican and anti-Christian polemic in Britain. Paine was not an atheist but his ideas on the nature of freedom and the role of the state were profoundly important in shaping political attitudes among British freethinkers. The majority of those whom Holyoake attempted to bring together into Secularism in the later 1840s and 1850s came from the lower orders of society - artisans, small tradesmen, and some workers in factories and mines. His movement was an expression of intellectual independence by self-educated working men (and some women), allied to a programme of political rights in a country which only slowly and reluctantly was conceding the vote to all its male citizens - a right not fully achieved until 1918⁽²⁾.

Such people easily identified with the political programme set out by Paine, arising out of the European Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason, science and utility. However, his political ideas should not be regarded as the politics of 'the working class' - or of any other class for that matter - not least because the concept of 'class' was largely foreign to the intellectual world in which his ideas were formed. His concern was to attack aristocratic privilege and corruption, and he saw himself speaking for 'the People', by whom he meant all worthwhile citizens. His ideal was a career open to talents, a free society based upon political equality. The basis of this political equality was private property. Property was the guarantee of independence, the first condition of democracy, so Paine did not advocate the more equal distribution of private property, not its abolition. His political theory was rooted in a belief in natural rights which had existed in a mythical state of nature. Civil Society had been created for mutual protection; and civil rights had then replaced natural rights to which they continued to owe their validity. Civil rights could not therefore be denied because they were rooted in natural rights.

Paine's ideal political system was one of small, independent and roughly equal property owners. He recognised, however, that there could never be complete equality, for there was no natural equality of talent. The essence of this society was freedom. Government existed only to secure the individual's civil - and thereby natural - rights. It had no other cause to interfere with the freedom of the citizen. As he wrote in *Rights of Man*,
"Every man wishes to pursue his own occupation, and to enjoy the fruits of his labours, and the produce of his property in peace and safety and with it the least possible expense. When these things are

accomplished, all the objects for which government ought to be established are answered"⁽³⁾.

This was a world fit for small shopkeepers, independent artisans and small farmers whose aspirations were well-understood by Paine, himself an artisan. His message appealed to his kind of people in both Britain and America. Much of what he said was within the mainstream of later-eighteenth century reformist thought, except that, in proceeding from an attack on aristocratic corruption and privilege to democratic conclusions expressed in plain language he was reaching out beyond the existing circle of gentlemen to the more socially threatening lower orders who frequented debating societies in tavern upper rooms and, insofar as Paine identified himself with the American rebels against King George III in 1776 and joined the first group of French Republicans in 1791, he went beyond what even most British radicals were prepared to contemplate in advocating a democratic republic

For the most part Paine's economic ideas were derived from his own experience and his political principles. He believed not in equality but in equality of opportunity. Whatever the position in the mythical state of nature, in civil society private property was the safeguard of natural rights. In his ideal state there would be low taxation, freedom for enterprise and minimal government. Paine's political language was the language of the market place. As he wrote in *Rights of Man*,

"All the great laws of society are laws of nature. Those of trade and commerce, whether with respect to the intercourse of individuals or of nations, are laws of mutual and reciprocal interest. They are followed and obeyed, because it is in the interest of the parties to do so, and not on account of any formal laws their governments may impose

or interpose"⁽⁵⁾.

Economic freedom ran alongside political freedom:

"Several laws are in existence for regulating and limiting workmen's wages. Why not leave them as free to make their own bargains, as the lawmakers are to let their farms and houses? Personal labour is all the property they have. Why is that little, and the little freedom they enjoy to be infringed?"⁽⁶⁾.

There is nothing of socialism here, despite the claim sometimes made that Paine leaves us standing on the threshold of socialism⁽⁷⁾, because there is no clear idea of a division of economic interest as a necessary consequence of the existence of private property. There is just the voice of the poor, small man crying out against the rich and the great. Despite the welfare proposals in *Rights of Man*, and their later development in *Agrarian Justice* (1796), Paine did not cross the divide from individualism into socialism. His argument in *Agrarian Justice* was not against the private property in land that exists in civil society, nor against those who cultivate the land receiving the benefits of their cultivation: value added through labour created legitimate private property. The landed monopoly was the enemy not because it exploited labour in civil society but because over generations it had accumulated all wealth to itself and had denied to the poor the original value of the land which in the state of nature had once been *"the common property of the human race"*⁽⁸⁾. Because the creation of civil society safeguards but does not supplant any natural rights, those now dispossessed of land still had a natural right to some part of the income. The redistribution to the poor of their rightful income from their inheritance in the land, by means of a progressive tax on real estate, would make the poor laws redundant and enable their replacement with work for the unemployed, education for the children, pensions for the aged and the pay-

ment of gifts of money on the occasion of births, marriages and deaths. This was indeed radical, but is not - in economic terms - socialist. Paine continued to believe that government should be minimal and cheap.

The political economy of Secularism

These views of Paine were adopted by mainstream freethinkers throughout the nineteenth century. Although Owenite socialism, with its rejection of classical political economy, was the direct predecessor of Secularism, Holyoake like John Stuart Mill was happy to work with a version of classical political economy moderated by co-operative economics and lacking any positive role for the state. Robert Owen (1771-1858) was, like Paine, a child of the Enlightenment, believing in the power of humankind to reconstruct society on rational principles but, unlike Paine, he did not offer any theory of the state but merely expected his 'new moral world' of communities to replace existing arrangements. Thus while Marx was developing socialist theories for which political action was essential and the exercise of state power integral to the creation of a better world, Owen's 'utopian' brand of socialism was offering a superior alternative to politics which would lead directly to the transformation of the conditions of human existence. Once Owen's scheme for building communities had failed, therefore, there was little in his socialist legacy to suggest a positive role for the state to offset the negative attitudes embodied in the legacy of Paine. In place of communities, the latter-day Owenites advocated instead co-operative economics, offering consumers and producers alike the possibility of creating through free associations an alternative to capitalism without any role for the state. As G. J. Holyoake reasoned in a letter

to the German translator of his 'History of the Rochdale Pioneers' in 1889,

"When Lassalle taught German workmen to look to the state, the Rochdale Pioneers had made so little profit in their early years of effort that he thought workmen could never amass capital. In England we have shown now that members of stores can by unity save enormous sums, and German workmen are quite as capable as Englishmen of doing the same thing in the same way. By establishing workshops in which the profits of labour are divided among the earners, the workmen may soon make themselves independent of the state and labour attain an independence greater and a dignity higher than that of rank"⁽⁹⁾.

Most freethinkers adhered to this ideal of co-operative economics and voluntary association within the capitalist system, though Bradlaugh lacked the Owenite experience and placed his emphasis less on co-operation and more on the laws of political economy. As he explained in his pamphlet, *'Jesus, Shelley, and Malthus'* (1861),

"An acquaintance with political economy is as necessary to the working man as is a knowledge of navigation to the master of a ship"⁽¹⁰⁾ and like Paine, he believed that because the political economists taught what was rational and useful they did not need the state to enforce their views.

This difference between radicals who accepted the basic correctness of classical political economy and those who adhered to socialist economics is best brought out in the controversy over Malthusianism and the population question. An interest among freethinkers in birth-control can be traced back to the writings of Richard Carlile (1790-1843), who was the principal radical publisher to re-issue the writings of Thomas Paine in the early nineteenth century. Apart from his work propagating Paine's repu-

blicanism and developing his rational deism into materialistic atheism, Carlile was also an early advocate of what became known as neo-Malthusianism; that is, the view that poverty results from over population which can be prevented by a knowledge of how to regulate fertility. Carlile's ideas on this probably came from Francis Place, a former follower of Paine who by the 1820s was a supporter of Benthamite Utilitarianism and classical political economy⁽¹¹⁾.

Bradlaugh took up these ideas in the late 1850s, with their implication that poverty was an individual concern, the remedy for which was a matter for individual knowledge and action. Socialists adopted a different view, seeing poverty as a social question needing public resolution through state action. As Frederick Liddle, a socialist member of the Land and Labour League, asserted in 1872, attacking those who favoured emigration for the working classes, "We utterly deny that population has anything to do with the poverty of the working classes, which we maintain is solely due to the defective and unjust arrangements of society, which give the produce of industry to idlers"⁽¹²⁾.

Following the prominence given to the birth-control issue by the decision of Bradlaugh and Annie Besant to republish Charles Knowlton's *The Fruits of Philosophy* in 1877, some older Secularist lecturers could be found advancing this same view, that poverty resulted from the wrong distribution of resources and not the individual ignorance and imprudence of the poor⁽¹³⁾. Although some socialist converts within the Secularist movement of the later 1880s, including Besant herself, did come to support the neo-Malthusian movement, more than any other issue Bradlaugh's advocacy of birth-control had the effect of identifying mainstream Secularism with free-market economics in op-

position to both the co-operative economics of Owenism and the socialist theories of the new Marxism. It is perhaps ironic to note, therefore, that some supporters of Bradlaugh's Malthusian position were advocating as early as 1884 state compulsion to restrict the size of families, although most Secularists seem to have rejected this suggestion out of hand⁽¹⁴⁾.

The usual reaction of Secularist leaders to poverty was to seek its elimination through individual voluntary action. Self-help not state intervention was the only effective solution to the problem. Thus in his debate on the question, 'Will Socialism Benefit the English People?' with the Marxist H. M. Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation in April 1884, Bradlaugh maintained,

"I object that in a Socialistic State there would be no inducement to thrift, no individual savings, no accumulation, no check upon waste. I say that on the contrary you would have paralysis of endeavor... I urge that the only sufficient inducement to the general urging on of progress in society is by individual effort, spurred to action by the hope of private gain"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Indeed, to do otherwise would not only constitute a denial of freedom but would also destroy the moral integrity of the individual. As a result, freethinkers later in the nineteenth century could sometimes sound like poor law officials or agents of the middle-class Charity Organisation Society. G. W. Foote, for example, writing on the Mansion House Fund for the unemployed in 1886, observed,

"The upper class patrons of the working classes had, as a rule, far better leave them to their own devices. It is open to all of them to imitate the thrift and forethought of those who already belong to friendly societies. Charity, properly understood, is a noble thing; but charity, as it is ordinarily practised, pauperises and degrades"⁽¹⁶⁾.

State hand-outs were to be avoided, for socialism degraded humanity with its readiness to sacrifice freedom in pursuit of material well-being. Foote again, this time commenting on Annie Besant's conversion to socialism in 1886, wrote,

"A pinched stomach is bad enough, but there are worse things to anyone with a sense of human dignity. A full trough is dearly paid for at the price of being a pig. In a democratic age there is a natural thirst for greater equality, and the levelling of human conditions is to some extent desirable. Levelling up is a slow process, which irks impatient spirits, but it is a sure one. Levelling down is a swifter process, and that is the aim of Socialism"⁽¹⁷⁾.

Socialism was, according to the individualist Frederick Millar, fit only for Christians ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Freedom of expression and publication

This economic liberalism merely reinforced the nature of freethought, which was to expect an individualistic outlook in its adherents. Freethought was hostile to all received opinions, asserting the integrity of the individual conscience as it searched for its own understanding of truth. Church authority, especially when upheld by the legal authority of the state as was the case with the Established Church of England, was abhorrent to freethinkers. Holyoake and other dissident Owenites who stressed their opposition to religion, like Carlile before them challenged the Common Law on blasphemy which was used to control the expression of anti-Christian views, and they suffered months in prison for their efforts. The state was, as upholder of these discriminatory laws, seen as the enemy of freedom. One purpose of Secularism was to campaign against these laws and to win full civil rights for non-believers.

In 1851, when Holyoake first began the Secularist movement, the law in both England and Scotland not only protected Christians from blasphemies against their religion, but also all legal processes required Christian oaths to be sworn. This meant that those unable or unwilling to take the oath could not bring cases in court, act as witnesses or serve on juries. Gradually this law was modified to admit Unitarians, Jews and Quakers to the legal process, and in 1855 anyone with a religious objection to the oath was permitted to make a civil affirmation instead of an oath, but those with non-religious objections had to wait until 1869. Even so, as Charles Bradlaugh found in 1880, this relaxation did not apply to the oath required of all Members of Parliament, an anomaly not removed until Bradlaugh's Oaths Act of 1888.

G. W. Foote used the occasion of threatened amendments during the passage of the 1888 Act to contrast democratic socialism 'based upon the right of the majority to do what it likes' with his personal commitment to freethought,

"All thought is personal, and therefore Freethought must be personal. My brain is my castle, my conscience my sanctuary. No one has a right there but I. This involves religious equality. But deny this principle, and you have no standpoint [....] I regard Freethought as primary, above all forms of government and all social institutions"⁽¹⁹⁾.

The state, even the democratic state, was therefore seen as a potentially persecuting and unfair power, not to be trusted with authority over the free individual, and this mistrust was not confined to matters of freedom of thought. Holyoake made this clear in his debate in 1856 with F. R. Lees, a champion of the application of the so-called 'Maine Law' - the prohibition of the sale of alcohol as in the American state of Maine. It was not that Holyoake did not sup-

port temperance in the use of alcoholic drinks, but that he opposed state legislation in the regulation of individual conduct. He argued that "Between the advocates of Sabbath restriction and maine-laws, there will soon be neither liberty nor enjoyment left to the poor man [...]. Force is a present evil. It is saving drunkards and making tyrants. Even good forced upon another is evil to him. 'The world is too much governed.' Laws are the expedients of governments that, not knowing the conditions of nature, are obliged to substitute those of art and force. It is bad enough when Governments impose coercive regulations - it is worse when the people ask for them in order to subjugate each other"⁽²⁰⁾.

Years later, when W. E. Gladstone as prime minister offered Holyoake a pension, he rejected it with the comment, "I maintain always and everywhere that the people should keep the state, not the state the people"⁽²¹⁾.

The argument against state interference with the individual was most powerfully developed for nineteenth-century liberals in John Stuart Mill's celebrated essay *On Liberty*, published in 1859, which took some of its examples of contemporary hostility to freedom from Holyoake and his campaigns⁽²²⁾. Experiences in the history of freethought throughout the nineteenth century and beyond repeatedly confirmed this view that the exercise of state power was a threat to freedom. Secularism was therefore a natural home for extreme liberals. The socialist E. Belfort Bax later recalled of J. H. Levy, a college lecturer who over the initial 'D' was one of the leading writers on the *National Reformer* throughout the 1880s, that he "used to pride himself on being an ultra-individualist. While holding in the main most of the planks of the old political Radicalism, his gospel always remained Mill's 'Essay on Liberty.' His hatred of all State action, other than the barest and most

necessary police regulation, was an abssession with him. His political faith might be summed up in the phrase *laissez faire à outrance*"⁽²³⁾.

This was the man who set the tone of many leading articles in Bradlaugh's paper at the time when socialist ideas were becoming a matter of public controversy.

The same attitude towards the state is marked in Bradlaugh's own work as a politician. In 1884 he clarified his views on the state in words which echoed those of Paine nearly a century earlier, "To my mind, the duties of the executive authority should be as far as possible limited to the general protection of the peace, internally and externally, including in this the general enforcement of law; but I hold that the evils affecting the individual are in the main more effectually cured by him than for him. I regard it as a fatal error on the part of the modern Democracy throughout Europe to be constantly turning to the central authority to redress wrongs and remove present evils"⁽²⁴⁾.

When in parliament in 1889 he voted against the bill for an eight-hour working day on the grounds that he did not as a matter of principle think it was or ought to be "the business or duty of Parliament to fix the hours during which adults may work"⁽²⁵⁾. The previous year he rejected the idea of free meals for school children because this undermined parental responsibility. Though it could be argued by this date that Bradlaugh was out of touch, and indeed a number of leading Secularists were prepared to compromise with socialism on such matters, his views on school meals and much else were shared by the younger G. W. Foote, his successor as president of the NSS⁽²⁶⁾. After a decade of fierce resistance to the onset of new socialist ideas, both old and new leaderships remained firmly in the camp of the liberal individualists.



The first cooperative shop of the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844

The rise of Marxist socialism

One reason why Bradlaugh was so fiercely opposed to the state in the 1880s was his identification of state intervention with the Marxist variant of socialism. Marx's writings began to make a significant impact on British radical politics only in the 1870s, at which time some interest in his theories was taken by Secularists opposed to Bradlaugh. Mrs Harriet Law, for example, who had been elected a member of the general council of the International Working Men's Association in 1867, published a short biographical piece on Marx in her periodical, the *Secular Chronicle* in 1878⁽²⁷⁾ and a few weeks later she gave him access to her columns in which to reply to George Howell's criticisms of him when no other paper would print his response⁽²⁸⁾. This is not to suggest, however, that Mrs Law therefore favoured state socialism. Rather, she supported Marx's right to be heard and probably resented Bradlaugh's attempt to monopolise radicalism. The same theme was continued into the 1880s. Those Secularists prepared to keep an open mind on the new socialism tended to gravitate towards Bradlaugh's opponents who formed the British Secular Union in rivalry with the NSS and conducted alternative periodicals to the *National Reformer*, such as the *Secular Review* edited by Charles Watts and the *Republican*, edited by George Standing.

One of the principle issues to engage radical minds in the early 1880s was land reform. As in the late eighteenth century, there were two schools of thought. The first, in the tradition of Thomas Spence, held that the land belonged to the people with the implication that it should therefore be returned to them; and the second, in the tradition of Paine, believed that the value of the land could be returned to the people

through taxation without disturbing private ownership. In general, those Secularists inclined towards socialism and state intervention favoured the former; Bradlaugh and his supporters advocated the latter. For Bradlaugh, the extent of state interference should be restricted to the compulsory purchase of cultivable waste lands at the actual value of their produce - which was nothing. When Annie Besant tried to suggest that this amounted to socialism, he rejected the word, describing himself as a pragmatist opposed to land nationalisation in principle⁽²⁹⁾. Though Bradlaugh had shared a platform with socialists in the Land and Labour League in 1869⁽³⁰⁾, by the 1880s he and they could operate only through different organisations as he fought what became a personal crusade against their growing influence.

In 1879 Bradlaugh proposed forming a Land Law Reform League and early in 1880 he called a conference to which organisations and individuals known to favour land nationalisation were not invited. Even so, some attended but their motion in favour of nationalisation was defeated⁽³¹⁾. The nationalists instead formed a rival organisation which in 1882 was relaunched as the Land Nationalisation League. On the provisional council, socialists like E. Belfort Bax, Stewart Headlam and Herbert Borrows mingled with anti-Bradlaugh Secularists like Charles Watts and W. Stewart Ross, now co-editors of the *Secular Review*⁽³²⁾. It was in the latter paper that the nationalists got their most sympathetic hearing. The debate about socialism in the 1880s, therefore, was taking place not only between Secularists and others, but among the Secularists themselves. At a meeting of the London branch of the anti-Bradlaugh British Secular Union in December 1878, for example, a paper was read and then discussed covering such topics as land nationalisa-

tion, universal suffrage and government control of capital; and in 1880 an article on *Modern Socialism* by Sam Standring in his brother's paper, the *Republican*, defined socialism sympathetically as "the groans of down-trodden people yearning for a share of that liberty and justice which belong by natural right to all humanity" (33). Controversy was engaged in earnest when J. H. Levy and J. L. Joynes argued the merits of socialism over several weeks in the pages of the *National Reformer* during the winter of 1882-3, while in the *Secular Review* Belfort Bax offered 'A defence of Scientific Socialism' in which he championed Marx's *Das Kapital* in the month of Marx's death (34). This growing interest in socialism was stimulated further in the periodicals and on the platforms of Secularism in the early 1880s with the publication of a cheap edition of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* in late 1883, followed a few months later by the challenge offered to old-style radicalism by state socialism with the conversion of the Democratic Federation to Marxist ideas under the leadership of H. M. Hyndman.

Bradlaugh took up the issue of socialism in a series of lectures entitled 'Will Socialism help the English People?' on Sunday mornings at the London Hall of Science in February 1884. Here he characterised the new socialism as a poor amalgam of philosophic socialism from Germany, the bourgeois-hating socialism of France and the anarchism of southern Europe (35). These lectures in turn led in April to the set-piece debate between Bradlaugh and Hyndman who had become Marxist on reading *Das Kapital* in 1880. The subsequent discussions of this debate in NSS branches throughout the country did a great deal to spread the ideas of Marxist socialism and divided both the leadership and membership of the NSS irrevocably (36).

It is hard to escape the conclusion that, apart from defending the liberal assumptions of individualistic freethought, one of the main reasons why Bradlaugh rejected the new socialism was his personal dislike of Marx and foreign - especially German - ideas. Ever since the Paris Commune of 1871, when Bradlaugh had supported the Republican cause and deplored what he saw as the violence of the Communards, he had seen himself as the champion of 'English' ways of doing things against opponents whom he identified with 'German' socialism. In her report on Bradlaugh's February lectures, Annie Besant - at this time Bradlaugh's most loyal lieutenant - commented on the strong opposition of 'foreigners' to his views. At a subsequent lecture on Socialism at the South Place Institute, opposition was described as coming from Rabbinowitz (a Russian Pole), Kitz (a violent German) and Abraham (a foreign Jew) (37). The xenophobic sense of superiority which lay behind this opposition to socialism is brought out in Annie Besant's account for the *National Reformer* of the Bradlaugh-Hyndman debate, "There were a considerable number of Socialists present, mainly Germans... The Germans, who form the greater part of the party in England, may be readily pardoned their bullying ways, for they have revolted against a despotism, and, like all suddenly-freed slaves, desire to use over others the tyranny from which they have themselves suffered. But a party will never succeed in England which has not learnt the alphabet of liberty. It is all very well for the Germans to revolt against the repression of Bismarck; it is not so well for them to try to pose as petty Bismarcks in England, and to try to play a sixteenth-rate 'blood and iron' farce among the sons and daughters of a nation whose political liberty is the envy of their own enslaved and police-ridden land" (38).

Holyoake was later to remember Marx similarly for his anti-libertarian views as an advocate of 'Imperialistic Communism and State Socialism' by which he meant an autocratic centraliser in the style of the heartily-disliked Emperor Napoleon III⁽³⁹⁾.

The image of Secularism in the eyes of its leaders was, therefore, of an organisation both English and liberal. Socialism was something which appealed to foreigners with their limited understanding of democracy. But the nature of Liberalism itself was changing in the later nineteenth century. Even Bradlaugh was, as Besant pointed out in 1887, prepared to contemplate state tenants on waste lands, municipal control of market rights and tolls, and state interference to prevent employers paying their workmen in kind instead of cash⁽⁴⁰⁾. Younger Liberals like J. M. Robertson, editor of the *National Reformer* after Bradlaugh's death in 1891, were willing to concede that "*the future of Liberalism might lie in a socialist direction*"⁽⁴¹⁾. Annie Besant moved from being the foremost supporter of Bradlaugh and co-editor of the *National Reformer* to becoming a freethought socialist demanding a graduated income tax, municipal control of land, an eight-hour day, and nationalisation of the railways, in addition to the usual Secularist demands for universal suffrage and the abolition of all oaths⁽⁴²⁾. Lesser leaders such as William Heaford and George Standing took a similar path. By the mid-1890s dissident Secularists were forming alternative organisations to Foote's NSS just as they had in Bradlaugh's day, with George Standing's paper, *Secular Work*, allowing open criticism of Foote's prejudice against socialism⁽⁴³⁾.

Libertarians, Anarchists and Libertines

Annie Besant thought that Bradlaugh's mistake lay in identifying socialism with Kropotkin and the anarchists⁽⁴⁴⁾. She may well have been right, but anarchism itself posed a dilemma for Secularists, for there was little difference in principle between the advocacy of liberty, libertarianism and anarchism. The latter could easily appeal to Secularists with their long tradition of opposition to the state.

In 1871 followers of the libertarian philosopher, Auberon Herbert, formed the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights to protect and enlarge the sphere of personal liberty and individual rights including those of women and children. It was renamed The Personal Rights and Self-Help Association in 1876, and the editor of its journal, founded in 1881, was J. H. Levy of the *National Reformer*. This organisation was welcomed in the Secularist press⁽⁴⁵⁾ but its limits were tested in 1893 by an organisation called the Legitimation League, founded in Leeds with support from local Secularists to agitate for the inheritance rights of illegitimate children. Levy was invited to become first president, but withdrew when he realised that its true objective was the legitimation of free love, and thereafter the journal, *Personal Rights* was hostile to the League. Another libertarian, Wordsworth Donisthorpe of the Liberty and Property Defence League (LPDF), was chosen as president instead. The LPDF had been formed in 1882 in succession to the State Resistance Society (1880) to advance the cause of extreme individualism as advocated by Herbert Spencer⁽⁴⁶⁾. Though inclined to champion liberty as a means of blocking social reform, like the Personal Rights Association it attracted Secularist support. Donisthorpe himself has been described as a 'philosophical anarchist'⁽⁴⁷⁾.

In 1892 Frederick Millar, a member of the LPDL and regular correspondent of the *Agnostic Journal*, successor to the *Secular Review*, defended individualism in the paper on the grounds of Social Darwinism,

"that the freest competition should exist between individuals and between societies, that the ablest and best, the physically and mentally strong - those best adapted to the conditions of existence - may flourish, and that those condemned by nature as unfit may disappear"⁽⁴⁸⁾.

A response to this view came in the same paper a few weeks later under the heading *Is Socialism Natural?*⁽⁴⁹⁾ Its author, J. Greevz Fisher, agreed with Millar that it was not, but argued that sympathy was too strong a sentiment to be abandoned to the socialists. Rather, Fisher feared that socialism would, by enforcing compulsion, undermine the natural sympathies of human beings on which progress alone could rest. His recommendation therefore was neither Social Darwinism nor Socialism but Anarchism. Fisher was an eccentric ex-Quaker free-thinking Irishman who managed to combine his anarchism with running a successful small business in Bradford. One can get a sense of what he meant by anarchism by examining his manifesto when he offered himself as a Liberty candidate for East Bradford in the general election of 1892. He advocated voluntary taxation, no compulsory education, liberty for Ireland with no government, the abolition of professional monopolies, and female freedom - what J. M. Robertson called "*anarchism without dynamite*"⁽⁵⁰⁾. This was Secularist individualism taken to its extreme.

In 1893, Fisher was a founder member and vice-president of the *Legitimation League*. At first, its object "*To create a machinery for acknowledging offspring born out of wedlock, and to secure for them equal rights with legitimate children*" was

one to attract other Secularists to its support, including the Social Darwinian, Millar⁽⁵¹⁾. But when the secretary, Oswald Dawson, began openly advocating Free Love he alienated most ordinary Secularists⁽⁵²⁾. The complicated and alleged links between the Legitimation League, its periodical the *Adult: the journal of sex*, and the spurious 'Watford University Press' with its implications of sexual and political anarchism cannot be dealt with here⁽⁵³⁾. Certainly they caused a problem for G. W. Foote, who, though used to defending liberty against socialism, was less than comfortable when called upon to defend free thought against free love. Political anarchism was by comparison almost straight forward, though the problem was the same - how to define and defend the limits of freedom against the tyranny of majority opinion.

Foote was personally not willing to go so far as Fisher, and in 1900 he was attacked in the Bradford-based *Truth Seeker*, with which Fisher was associated, for clinging "*with a faith child-like in its simplicity, to the despotism of Government and Law*"⁽⁵⁴⁾. This was perhaps a little hard, though it illustrates how far the debate had moved on since the 1880s. In fact, Foote had given his measured and considered view of anarchism in 1893. In principle, he welcomed it. Referring to the distinction made by Paine between Government and Society, he supported anarchists who opposed government which was, at best, "*only a necessary evil*". He did not favour legislation to suppress the anarchism of a Proudhon or a Bakunin, but he did demand the right to protect himself if they attacked him. On strictly Utilitarian grounds, punishment was an evil and was justified only to prevent a greater evil⁽⁵⁵⁾. Foote returned to the theme following the Barcelona outrages in 1897, arguing that, "*Freedom is necessary as well as government. But as you may have too much government of the indi-*

vidual, so you may have too much freedom by the individual. We are entitled to just as much freedom as will go all round"⁽⁵⁶⁾.

So he remained a supporter of minimal government, but not of no government at all.

Socialists and Freethinkers

Though the mainstream of Secularism, guided successively by Holyoake, Bradlaugh and Foote, adhered to liberal ideas in the radical tradition of Thomas Paine, this position was under attack in the 1890s and 1900s not only from extreme individualists and anarchists but also from socialists as increasing numbers of the followers of Secularism grew restive with Foote's policy of nominal political neutrality but actual support for liberalism. While some correspondents to the *Freethinker* argued that Secularists should remain strictly politically neutral, though on the Left, and some transferred their allegiance from Secularism to socialism in protest at Foote's Liberalism, a small minority attempted to link vigorous freethought with outright socialism.

Socialism, though, suffered from a parallel dilemma to that of Secularism. Whereas Secularism was increasingly compelled to emphasise its political neutrality in order to maintain its common platform on religion, so socialism had to adopt a neutral attitude on religion in order to maintain its common platform on politics and economics. Despite the hostility of Marxist theory to religious ideas, in fact in Britain socialism drew considerable strength from its association with religion and members of the Christian churches. Though this confirmed Secularist leaders in their opposition to socialism and in their conviction that religious and political tyranny were allied threats to individual liberty, it presented a problem for freethinkers who were also socialists. Indeed, the small group who

adopted the advocacy of extreme freethought and extreme socialism appear to have attracted little support from either side. Neither did they resolve for themselves their attitude to the state.

The leader of this freethought socialism was J. W. Gott of Bradford in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and his main support came from the towns of Bradford and Leeds. Centred on an eccentric and deliberately provocative periodical, the *Truth Seeker*, which Gott edited from 1901, the movement's main aim was to challenge the limits of free speech with an aggressive style of freethought evangelism which soon ran foul of the laws prohibiting blasphemy. They aimed to demonstrate their contempt for Christian authority and the capitalist state, and Gott's friends and supporters made no secret of their socialism or their contempt for religious socialists. In about 1909 they formed a short-lived Free-thought Socialist League⁽⁵⁷⁾. However, it is hard to know what sense to make of this group of enthusiastic propagandists whose numbers included the anarchist Greevz Fisher, the future Communists Guy Aldred and T. A. Jackson, and the provocatively blasphemous Gott. Their programme, such as it was, is best summed up in the words of one of their number in 1903 as "*the economics of Socialism, the politics of Anarchism, the common sense of science, the class-consciousness of the SDF and the self-consciousness of the disillusioned Ego, freed from social, sexual, political, moral and religious superstitions and sophisms*"⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Conclusion

Freethought in Britain might appear to have travelled a long way from the eighteenth century republicanism of Thomas Paine to the

anarchism of the Legitimation League and the Freethought Socialist League, but in the mainstream there was a remarkable consistency which was to be its eventual downfall. From Paine to Bradlaugh there was scarcely any movement in thinking about the state, despite huge changes in society and a growing recognition of a positive role for the state in an increasingly complex industrial and urban society where individuals on their own were unable to defend themselves. The state for Bradlaugh and Foote remained no more than a necessary evil. Socialism was a foreign remedy for social ills, bred in conditions of political oppression which sought to achieve its ends in a potentially repressive manner. From Paine to Gott, the blasphemy laws reminded freethinkers that the state, whether aristocratic or democratic, remained an instrument of oppression. When Secularists articulated an alternative economics to those of free-market capitalism, they more often than not turned to co-operation to bring a redistribution of wealth and social betterment to the people by voluntary means. Their belief that state action to improve society was democratising for the people brought some freethought leaders close to the position held by the radical right. But as a new century dawned in which the politics of the left would be identified with state oppression while the politics of the right would come to represent individual freedom, and in which progressive Christians would play an increasing part in advocating social reform such as would have astonished an earlier generation, the British freethought movement lost much of its coherence and appeal to the wider public. And yet its message of freedom for the individual against oppressive minorities and majorities in government was to remain powerfully relevant in a coming century of people's democratic socialist republics.

- (1) For a general survey of British freethought, see E. ROYLE, *Secularists and Rationalists, 1800-1940*. In: S. GILLEY and W. J. SHEILS (eds), *A History of Religion in Britain*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, pp. 406-22; S. BUDD, *Varieties of Unbelief. Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1950*, London: Heinemann, 1977.
- (2) See S. BUDD, *Varieties of Unbelief*, pp. 81-103; E. ROYLE, *Victorian Infidels. The origins of the British Secularist movement 1791-1866*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974, pp. 304-5; E. ROYLE, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980, pp. 126-32.
- (3) T. PAINE, *Rights of Man*, edited with an introduction by H. COLLINS, London: Pelican Books, 1969, p. 220.
- (4) T. PAINE, *Rights of Man*, p. 187.
- (5) T. PAINE, *Rights of Man*, p. 279.
- (6) H. COLLINS introduction, p. 43. In: T. PAINE, *Rights of Man*.
- (7) T. PAINE, *Agrarian Justice*, p. 611. In: P. S. FONER (ed.), *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, New York: Citadel Press, 1961, pp. 605-23.
- (8) Co-operative Union, Manchester, Holyoake Papers no. 3173, G. J. Holyoake to H. Hautschke, February 1889. *The Geschichte der redlichen Pionere von Rochdale* was published in Berlin in 1888.
- (9) C. BRADLAUGH, *Jesus, Shelley, and Malthus; or, Pious Poverty and Heterodox Happiness*, London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1877 edition. The quotations are from p. 11.
- (10) A. MCLAREN, *Birth Control in Nineteenth Century England*, London: Croom Helm, 1978, pp. 51-8.
- (11) *International Herald*, 16 November 1872.
- (12) For example, reports of lectures by Jesse Cocks in *Secular Review*, 3 November 1877 and Nathaniel Ridgeway in *Secular Chronicle*, 13 October 1878.
- (13) *National Reformer*, 27 April 1884; *Progress*, December 1884; see also *Republican*, January 1886.
- (14) C. BRADLAUGH and H. M. HYNDMAN, *Will Socialism Benefit the English People?* London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1884, p. 17.
- (15) *Progress*, April 1886.
- (16) *Progress*, June 1886.
- (17) *Agnostic Journal*, 2 November 1889.
- (18) *Freethinker*, 22 April 1888.
- (19) *Public Discussion on Teetotalism and the Maine Law*, between G. J. Holyoake and F. R. Lees, quoted in E. ROYLE, *Radical Politics 1790-1900. Religion and Unbelief*, London: Longman, 1971, p. 123.
- (20) Co-operative Union, Manchester, Holyoake Correspondence nos 2627-9, G. J. Holyoake to W. E. Gladstone, 11 March 1881.

- (21) J. S. MILL, *On Liberty*, London: J. M. Dent, 1910, p. 90.
- (22) E. B. BAX, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a mid and late Victorian*, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1918, pp. 229-30.
- (23) *National Reformer*, 27 April 1884.
- (24) C. BRADLAUGH, *The Eight Hours' Movement*, London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1889, p. 3; see also *National Reformer*, 17 March 1889.
- (25) *National Reformer*, 21 October 1888; *Radical*, October 1888.
- (26) *Secular Chronicle*, 7 July 1878.
- (27) *Secular Chronicle*, 4 August 1878.
- (28) *Our Corner*, March 1886; *National Reformer*, 25 April 1886, 13 May 1888; *Progress*, July 1886.
- (29) *National Reformer*, 24, 31 October, 7 November 1869.
- (30) *National Reformer*, 19 October, 23 November, 14 December 1879, 25 January, 15 February 1880; *Secular Review*, 7, 14, 21 February 1880.
- (31) *Republican*, November 1882.
- (32) *Secular Review*, 21 December 1878, 25 January 1879; *Republican*, 3 June 1880.
- (33) *National Reformer*, 5 November 1882 - 18 March 1883; *Secular Review*, 24, 31 March 1883.
- (34) *Our Corner*, 10, 17 February 1884.
- (35) The consequences of the Bradlaugh-Hyndman debate for Secularism are discussed in E. ROYLE, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, pp. 233-5.
- (36) *National Reformer*, 11 May 1884.
- (37) *National Reformer*, 27 April 1884.
- (38) G. J. HOLYOAKE, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, 2 vols., London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892, II, p. 263.
- (39) *Our Corner*, June 1887.
- (40) *National Reformer*, 15 November 1891; *Freethinker*, 23 February 1895.
- (41) *Our Corner*, December 1887.
- (42) *Secular Work*, July, December 1896.
- (43) *Our Corner*, April 1887.
- (44) *Secular Review*, 3 December 1876; *Secularist*, 16 December 1876.
- (45) O. DAWSON, *Personal Rights and Sexual Wrongs*, London: W. Reeves, 1897; N. Soldon, 'Liberty and Property Defence League'. In: K. F. D. BROWN (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History. Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain*, London: Macmillan, 1974, pp. 208-33.
- (46) N. SOLDON, *Liberty and Property Defence League*, p. 211.
- (47) *Agnostic Journal*, 3 August 1889.
- (48) *Agnostic Journal*, 14 September 1889.
- (49) *National Reformer*, 26 June 1892.
- (50) O. DAWSON, *The Bar Sinister and Licit Love*, London: W. Reeves, 1895, pp. 21-55
- (51) *Freethinker*, 13 June 1897.
- (52) A. CALDER MARSHALL, *Lewd, Blasphemous and Obscene*, London: Hutchinson, 1972, pp. 193-229; E. ROYLE, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, pp. 253-4, 276-7.
- (53) *Truth Seeker*, 5 September 1900.
- (54) *Freethinker*, 17 December 1893.
- (55) *Freethinker*, 15 August 1897.
- (56) See E. ROYLE, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, pp. 239-41, 277-82.
- (57) Malfew Seklew in *Truth Seeker*, January 1903.



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