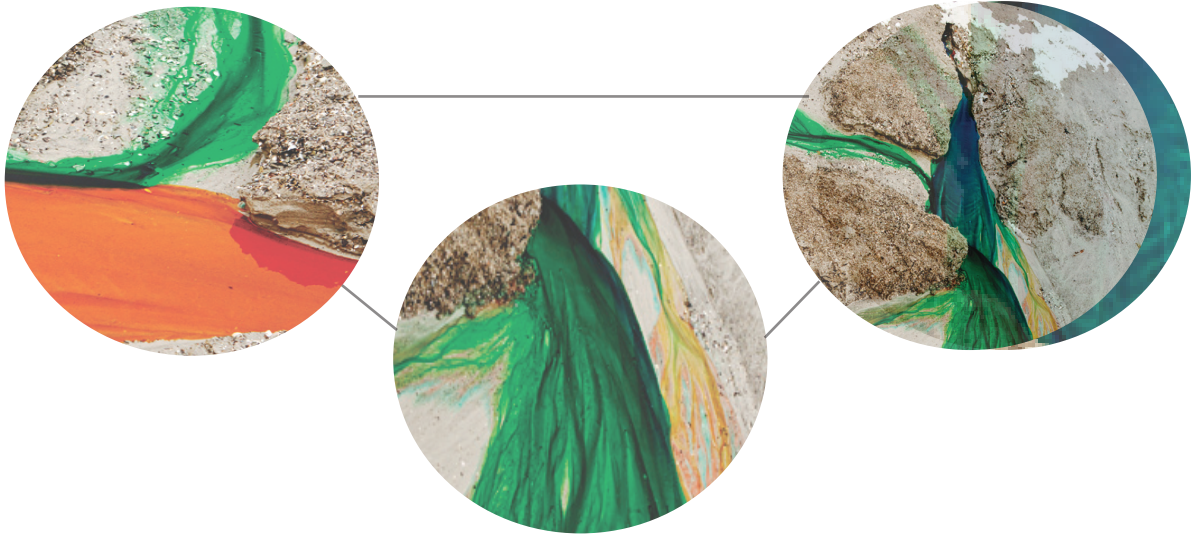


The Liberal Consensus and the Socialist Idea

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A recent *Economist* (1 June 2013) carried two articles celebrating a revival of classical liberalism in Britain ('The strange rebirth of liberal England', p. 11, and 'Generation Boris', pp. 29-30). The main contention is that liberalism in a general sense – or perhaps a more specific sense of 'classical' liberalism – both socially and economically – has become very popular among the young. 'Young Britons have turned strikingly liberal, in a classical sense.' (p. 11) The *Economist* stretches the point out a little with rhetoric, tending to suggest that the entire population of Britain under 24 have become ardent fans of Adam Smith, and that they are therefore likely to vote for Boris Johnson. Yet in many senses I think these articles are correct: there is a sense in which the younger generations favour a set of political ideas, or at least a style and form of politics, which is both more individualist and socially liberal, and more sceptical about the state, than is the case with older generations.

The *Economist* articles also offer some explanation of this situation which seems sound. Whereas older generations continue to benefit more from the welfare state, 'society has become less generous to [the young]' (p. 11). The second article makes the point more explicitly: 'Just as the construction of the post-war welfare state helps to explain the collectivist instincts of the old, today's economic adversity and dwindling welfare payments appear to be forging a generation of dogged individualists' (p. 30). For the feature-writers of the *Economist*, it appears, this is a positive thing – but we could take these points still further, while reversing the valuations. If the young tend to be 'cynics' about the welfare state, this may be because of the degradation of the whole enterprise since its foundation in the 1940s, from standards of universal provision to increasing privatisation and marketisation. If they 'are relaxed about the growth

of giant supermarkets' (p. 11), this may be less out of active principle than from a lack of any sense of an alternative. Who indeed has been offering one, in mainstream politics, over the lifetime of the generations born under Thatcher, Major and Blair? Certainly we have to see the attitudes not as judgements on abstract questions of political theory, but as choices within a very limited range determined by actual social pressures. The failure may be less that of the young to choose better politics, than of the left to provide them with anything to choose. The evidence that the Economist marshals – such as its survey of a crowd of 17- and 18-year-olds outside a London school at lunch hour – may be read as indicating political apathy among the young at least as much as it demonstrates 'liberalism'.

What the information presented by the Economist suggests, then, is hardly an actively liberal, let alone 'classical liberal' generation, but one which is likely to accept, somewhat passively, an liberal and individualist style of politics. In that specific sense the argument is correct, and important, for it applies not just to the apolitical and disengaged, but across the spectrum of mainstream politics. The high student votes for the Lib Dems and the Greens are significant, for these are parties which can be seen as generally 'progressive', socially liberal and (especially with the Greens) left-wing, yet which have no associations with the 'collectivist' aspects of Labourism. That is, they do not appear to insist on either an omnipresent state or on those forms of class, trade-union and Labourist loyalty which were often associated with traditional Labour areas. Again, an important part of the invention of New Labour was the distancing of the Party from these associations: the weakening of the power of the unions, the continuation of Thatcher's breakup of the welfare state, talk of 'equality of opportunity' rather than more substantial kinds of equality. These common styles and modes of politics can certainly be taken as 'liberal' in a vague general sense, and they are defining characteristics of mainstream British politics: less the shape of any one political party than the mould into which each must be poured, if it is to succeed. In a sense, the two Economist articles make the same point that was made after the death of Margaret Thatcher, albeit in less provocative language, with references to Mill and Smith rather than Maggie. But the message is the same: within mainstream British politics, we are all Thatcher's children now.

More than this, there is a sense in which more thoroughly left-wing or socialist politics, in order to break into the 'mainstream', has had to become more liberal in tone – or perhaps, only those elements of it which were or could appear liberal have so broken through. An interesting test case is the avowedly and vocally leftist Socialist Workers' Party. In the recent furore around the SWP's handling of a rape accusation, it was pointed out that the party had at least two solid recent achievements to its credit: its role in the opposition to the Iraq war and in anti-fascism. This certainly seems to be true – it was in these two areas that the organisation broke through most obviously into mainstream politics. But the interesting thing about both these movements is that there is nothing specifically socialist about them: both pacifism and anti-fascism are liberal and progressive causes which by no means necessarily imply socialism. It is also worth reflecting, perhaps, on the negative nature of both demands: stop the Iraq war, and 'fascists go home'. Not that these are unimportant demands, but they contain no positive programme, only a desire for other people to stop doing things, to leave us (or the Iraqis) alone. It is indeed possible to see both movements as belonging to a generalised 'liberal' set of attitudes among British people, which was represented by the 'far-left' or socialist organisations only due to the dereliction of duty on the part of British liberals –

the courage of J. S. Mill and Bertrand Russell replaced by nothing but a chorus of cautious whimpers, plus the treachery of Christopher Hitchens's support for the Iraq war.

Nor is this radical-liberal mood confined to Britain. Recent movements of young people in a range of countries – the the student protests in Britain, the Occupy wave, the current protests in Turkey – seem to have something of the kind in common. This is of course a vast spectrum, and it is difficult to generalise. But one prevalent common feature, the potential unifying factor, seems to be a vaguely defined 'activist' radicalism generally opposed to statism, leaders and established organisations of any kind; plus perhaps a laudable social liberalism. The point is that this is once again an individualist kind of politics – derived perhaps indirectly from an anarchist as much as a 'classical liberal' tradition. Again, it may be wrong to emphasize this, as against those other, collective identities – class-based, national, religious, even international – which are certainly real forces. Perhaps this general global 'activist' culture is itself merely a fashionable vogue which has attached itself to a range of differently based and disparate movements. Yet nothing else seems to have emerged as a plausible common factor: no other 'international', even of a shadowy kind, appears to link these movements – while the various collective identities have remained on a more local level: this civic or class situation, that sense of national unity. To the extent that these people have a shared language – and indeed it seems probable that only limited numbers of them do – it is of this kind. At least a sort of general image can be derived from these movements which is not wholly out of step with the Economist's projections of a 'liberal' Britain – even if here 'liberalism' takes on, among the activists, a much more radical aura. The common mood among young protesters in these different countries may be seen – perhaps too easily – as similar to the mood of 1968, minus the 'traditionalist' leftist elements which then still persisted: voluntarist, anarchizing if rarely explicitly anarchist, suspicious of the state and organisation in general.

Suspicious too, it might be added, of traditional leftist organisations, seen as tending to authoritarianism, or simply as outdated and irrelevant. And these criticisms may be in many cases justified. One thinks, in this country, of the autocratic behaviour of the SWP leadership in the matter of the rape allegations¹; or of the fact that a recent leftist effort (Left Unity) was born specifically out of Ken Loach's film *Spirit of '45*, a reference to a past which may seem somewhat distant to those born in the last quarter-century. But the main question here for socialists is, to my mind, not one of political style or even political organisation. It is: what, in all this, has become of the socialist idea? What has happened to the basic concepts of solidarity, of collective will and action, so often seen as the particular property of the working class and the socialist tradition? Edward Thompson once quoted an account of collective action among miners in the eighteenth century, which seems to symbolize this spirit: 'a great crowd of men, women and children with oaken bludgeons coming down the street bawling out, "One and all – one and all".'² And that 'one and all' implied, for much of the socialist tradition, the need for a total break with capitalism – which had an important corollary: a sense of the sheer power of the capitalist system, of the quantity of effort and commitment it would take to effect a real change. These, it seems to me, are real strengths

² EDWARD THOMPSON, *WRITING BY CANDLELIGHT*, 1980, p. 66

³ SEE, FOR INSTANCE, ANTHONY ARBLASTER, 'LIBERAL VALUES AND SOCIALIST VALUES,' *SOCIALIST REGISTER* 9, 1972

of the older socialist tradition, which the younger 'activism' has only imperfectly learned.


For much contemporary political discussion, even among radicals and leftists of a younger generation, is conducted in basically individualist terms. There is a good deal of social liberalism, plenty on the iniquities of the state and especially the police, and there is opposition to big business. But it is more rarely, to my mind, that one finds a sense of social cohesion and interdependence, of solidarity and collective will. Indeed, there can often be little which challenges capitalism directly and as such – much of the attack is often directed against the massive corporations, in terms which suggest that this is really an extension of an anti-statist argument. The objection seems to be, that is, to a large organisation controlling our lives, rather than to atomisation and competition: it is (individual) freedom that is demanded, from the controlling corporation, rather than stronger and more egalitarian ties of cooperation and indeed of social control.

There is of course much of great value in the youthful radical consciousness described above, not least the fact that it is radical, as opposed to quiescent; social tolerance, suspicion of authoritarian states, and opposition to corporate capital are excellent things, as far as they go. But – and this may seem a harsh thing to say, but I think it has to be said – they do not in fact seem to me to go very far, very often. They may go beyond this or that point of mainstream liberal politics, but they do not often go beyond the general consensus of liberal values – as the socialist tradition does or did. It is not so much that liberal values in a general sense are incompatible with socialist values³ but it often seems possible, in such an atmosphere, to forget that this other tradition ever existed, or to regard it – as the Economist would doubtless wish – as a mere archaism, a survival from a primitive age of wage bargaining and working men's clubs. But there are crucial distinctions to be made here. Doubtless much of the trappings, the rhetoric and time-honoured practices of traditional leftism, can be seen – and I think rightly – as residual. By this I do not mean that they are hopelessly outdated but that, while still active and shaping elements of the present, they are generationally marked and likely to dwindle with the generations that express them. But can this judgement be extended – as the Economist means to extend it – to the whole socialist idea? Has this basic principle expressed by the eighteenth-century miners – 'one and all' as opposed to 'each against each' – died along with the mining industry, leaving only a dwindling residue in the form of tiny socialist sects, red and black colour schemes, and a rhetoric of 'solidarity'? Is the society of individual competition – with the hope of, perhaps, more equal terms of competition between races, genders and nationalities – all we can reasonably look forward to?

Certainly the Economist thinks so – and indeed it welcomes the prospect. It argues that the radicalism of the young is becoming, with each passing generation, more individualist, anti-collectivist, and liberal, seeing its enemy not in capitalism but in 'Leviathan', the idea of an omnipresent state. (p. 29). (Of course socialism, for the Economist, was merely a particularly dangerous version of this 'Leviathan', now thankfully superseded.) And these Economist articles give us a glimpse of the kind of society which we can now expect – which is to a great extent already with us. To complete a passage quoted earlier: 'Just as the construction of the post-war welfare state helps to explain the collectivist instincts of the old, today's economic adversity and dwindling welfare payments appear to be forging a generation of dogged individualists. Rosina St James, a 22-year-old student who chairs the British Youth Council... describes a sense that "you're running against

the person next to you". "People in our generation are incredibly competitive with each other," she says.' The article then cites James Tilley: Britain 'is a materialist society with a flexible labour market; its citizens chart their lives on social media with more zeal than most – all things that tend to contribute to a competitive, individualist mindset' (p. 30).

On the facts this may be true or otherwise – but there is the further question of values. For this sense of being pushed by 'economic adversity' into a sense of 'running against the person next to you', this 'materialist society' with its 'competitive, individualist mindset' which are apparently approved by the Economist, are things I find alienating on a very deep level. To me these are not descriptions of a society of principled 'dogged individualists', but of an alienated and confused set of social atoms, at the mercy of a system beyond their control. It is in opposition to this that the socialist idea is still needed. We cannot allow it to die with the old leftists, with the memories of 1945 and Spain in the '30s, and be replaced by nothing more substantial than a vaguely anarchising radicalism which submits to the general liberal consensus. The styles and modes of much older socialist politics are of course dated; many of the old political judgements, indeed the whole cast of that politics, may now look deeply flawed; but certain central insights and values must be preserved and renewed for the younger and future generations. The socialist idea must be made to survive the death of traditional socialist politics – for the alternative is the utopia of the Economist, in which always 'running against the person next to you' is lauded as a virtue.



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