

# Introduction

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The former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and socialist writer, Roy Hattersley, has told how he was asked by journalists during the 1987 general election campaign what were the philosophical foundations of his socialism. All he was able to say, he recalled, was 'T.H. Green'.<sup>1</sup> This book is an attempt to offer some explanation for how an explicitly Liberal thinker like Green could have influenced ethical socialists in the Labour Party such as Hattersley.

The idea that there is some connection between the British idealists and the doctrine of English socialism is not new to academic circles. There has been much discussion over many years about the true influence of Thomas Hill Green and his followers and the debate in the literature appears to have divided into two distinct camps.

What I will term the traditional view has maintained that Green's influence on the development of socialism was indeed significant. Adam Ulam perhaps offered the most substance to support his analysis of philosophical idealism and English socialism, but many of his contemporaries, from political philosophers like Sabine to practising socialists such as Sidney Webb, also identified a clear connection between T.H. Green and socialist thought.<sup>2</sup> Bowle summed up the thoughts of many when he argued: '[t]he first foundations of the Socialist State were laid by Liberal humanists and its legislation enacted by statesmen trained, as was Asquith, in this Oxford way of

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[1] Hattersley, speech in Ripon and York St. John's College, York on 24 May 1995.

[2] A.B. Ulam, *The Philosophical Foundations of English Socialism* (Cambridge Mass., 1951); G.H. Sabine and T.L. Thorson, *A History of Political Thought* (Orlando, 1973 [1st ed. 1937]), p. 667. Also see E. Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century: Imperialism and the Rise of Labour* (London, 1951) Vol. V, pp. 140-1. Sidney Webb claimed that around the work of Green and Toynbee there had grown a 'distinctly Socialist mode of thought': *Socialism in England* (London, 1893), p. 75.

thought'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed this argument was so persuasive as to lead commentators to see Green's influence in a wide variety of realms, from the creation of the welfare state to the establishment of a Labour Party.<sup>4</sup> Randall puts it at its strongest, when he argues: 'It is hardly too much to say that [Green's] social thought dominated the British Labour Party, in its non-Marxian divisions, down through G.D.H. Cole and Harold J. Laski'.<sup>5</sup> It must be said, however, that despite a wealth of different assessments of the idealists' influence, there was little provision of academic argument to support these claims.

Perhaps because of this latter point, the general presumption of a causal relationship between idealism and socialism has come under serious attack over the last thirty years or so. Melvin Richter's detailed textual and historical study of Green's thought acted as a catalyst for a general reassessment of the idealists' influence and specifically their impact on socialism.<sup>6</sup> This has been complemented by many contemporary studies into their political thought, spearheaded by Michael Freeden. Freeden is critical of the notion that Green had an influence on socialism, claiming that his ideas reflected rather than directed changes in political thought during the period.<sup>7</sup> Indeed there is now a growing body of literature that challenges the idea that Green and his colleagues contributed anything radical to the debate about the 'social question' whatsoever.<sup>8</sup>

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[3] J. Bowle, *Politics and Opinion in the Nineteenth Century: A Historical Introduction* (London, 1954), p. 276.

[4] G. Fry, *The Growth of Government: The Development of Ideas about the Role of the State and the Machinery and Functions of Government in Britain Since 1780* (London, 1979), pp. 45, 53; A. Warde, *Consensus and Beyond: The Development of Labour Party Strategy since the Second World War* (Manchester, 1982), pp. 36, 66–9; Peter D'a Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival 1877–1914: Religion, Class and Social Conscience in Late-Victorian England* (Princeton, 1968), p. 44; J. Hallowell, *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought* (New York, 1950), p. 286; P. Hinchliff, *Benjamin Jowett And The Christian Religion* (Oxford, 1987), p. 157; E.C. Midwinter, *Victorian Social Reform* (London, 1968), p. 47.

[5] J.H. Randall, Jr, 'T.H. Green: The Development of English Thought from J.S. Mill to F.H. Bradley', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 27 (1966), p. 218.

[6] M. Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T.H. Green and his Age* (London, 1964). See also P. Clarke, 'Liberalism', *History Today*, 33 (March 1983), pp. 42–3; S. Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L.T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1983 [first published 1979]), esp. pp. 43–6.

[7] M. Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (London, 1978), p. 18.

[8] I.M. Greengarten, *Thomas Hill Green and the Development of Liberal-Democratic Thought* (Toronto, 1981). Likewise in his study of the formation of the Labour Party, Henry Pelling argues Green contributed little to New Liberalism and was not read either by the working-class or by socialists: H. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880–1900* (Oxford, 1965 [first ed. 1954]), p. 11. Clarke argues that

The pendulum of academic opinion about the role of idealism in the formation of socialism has swung back considerably. It is the purpose of this work to discover where the true balance lies. I show that, while some of the more exaggerated claims about Green's influence are without foundation, the effect of the idealists' work on the development of socialism has been dismissed too swiftly. I do this, not by adopting any of the potential fallacies of ideological research which Freeden rightly identifies, but through a detailed analysis of the idealists' philosophy and ideology and its connections with socialism.<sup>9</sup>

The central claim of this book is that Green and his followers have played a significant role in the creation of a type of ethical socialism that has been adopted by figures such as R.H. Tawney. The role of the idealists was to establish a new philosophical settlement centred around an epistemological understanding of the world which emphasised its inter-relation, a moral and spiritual personality which acted as a counterbalance against materialistic assumptions and the rise of science, and an intertwined and organically related society, with individuals only able to achieve their potential with the assistance of their community. I claim that, just as empiricist philosophical assumptions could be said to have underpinned Classical Liberalism, idealism helped to shape the development of a new and different political tradition.

The essential features of this new idealist-inspired ideology were: a belief in a common good, which could unite the interests of different individuals; the support for equality of opportunity, to help create a less class-ridden society; a positive view of liberty, meaning more than simply freedom from interference; and the belief in the role of the state as more than a 'policeman', but as the representative of the whole community and able to help shape social conditions for the better. It is these features which distinguished the idealists' work from traditional liberalism, and these elements which they turned into a justification for socialism.

Before I enter into the detail of the work, I think there are two initial challenges which need to be disposed of. The first is a methodological point about the definition of ideologies. The second is an historical claim about the influence of the idealists.

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Green was more 'a moral regenerationist' than 'moral reformist' and was certainly not an architect of the welfare state: P. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 14-15.

[9] M. Freeden, 'The Stranger at the Feast: Ideology and Public Policy in Twentieth Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1990), pp. 9-34.

[snip]

# Conclusion

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This book has been about two projects. On the one hand I have given a measured assessment of the political impact of British idealism. On the other I have identified the philosophical foundations of ethical socialism. The two have come together in a tradition spanning the works of T.H. Green and R.H. Tawney.

The idealists' contribution to the philosophical foundations of a new tradition of socialism was significant. Green and his colleagues promoted a philosophy that rejected the atomistic individualism and empiricist assumptions which were believed to have underpinned Classical Liberalism. Instead their idealism emphasised a unity in the thought and understanding of the world, which in social terms term was reflected in the coming together of individuals in an organic society. Equally as important, Green and the idealists placed the development of moral personality at the centre of their work. Human perfection, akin to the life of Christ, was achievable only through individuals and their moral fulfilment.

With certain exceptions, such as the distinction between absolute and personal idealists, Green's followers did not challenge these philosophical foundations. Indeed they repeated his new philosophical settlement in a host of different domains, from the top table at the Charity Organization Society to the pulpit of St. Paul's. However the extent that the idealists agreed over Green's political ideology has been a matter of dispute.

This book has offered a clear answer — the new arrangement of political concepts maintained by Green was largely left alone by his followers. The ideology was centred around four notions: the common good; a positive view of freedom; equality of opportunity; and an expanded role for the state. This new ideological ordering distanced the idealists significantly from Classical Liberalism, while at the same time offering a means of rejecting the doctrines of revolutionary socialism which were emerging at about this time. Of the

four, the role of the state has proved most controversial. Despite a perceived difference between idealists such as Ball and Bosanquet, Green and his followers followed a remarkably consistent line. The state's role was to be neither that of policeman nor nanny. Instead they saw it as a helping hand to raise all to a certain level, below which moral action was not possible, and a barrier to hold back any forces, whether economic or social, which would work against the common good.

Of course there were areas where the idealists developed Green's work. Ritchie used the developments in Darwinist biology to take for idealism the concept of evolution. Holland and Toynbee fought to beat off the defenders of natural law and *laissez-faire* economics. Haldane applied equality of opportunity to the question of female suffrage. Yet these developments were in keeping with the principles established by Green. They added to, not contradicted, the political ideology set down in Green's work.

Assessing the relationship between the different idealists and how this relates to their portrayal in modern literature on the period has also provided a useful opportunity to revise the standard interpretation of Bernard Bosanquet. Reviled by many as an individualist and defender of minimal state action, on close inspection Bosanquet appears clearly as an advocate of state intervention. His perceived reticence on the question of the state is perhaps derived from his insistence that any state action must be founded on the correct principles — not to force good action on individuals, for this would interfere with their moral development, but to offer them a means of helping themselves. Put in this way, Bosanquet's work appears too close to that of the majority of the idealists to make any meaningful distinction.

This work has not just been concerned with the ideas of the idealists. It has also looked at their application and reception in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. The Christians Holland and Gore provide one useful example of the way that idealism was applied. It is particularly significant because, while they may have dressed idealism in religious robes — in a way that Green is unlikely to have approved of — they saw his work as the inspiration for both their religious and their social thought. The 'Christian socialism' developed in the meeting rooms of the Christian Social Union was as much down to the work of T.H. Green as it was to the pages of the Bible.

The legacy of Green has also hung over New Liberalism. This has not been the place to pursue to a full extent the role of Hobhouse in the development of an idealist-inspired socialism. In many ways to do so would be to miss the point. The idealists made significant con-

tributions to the growth of New Liberalism themselves. Ritchie, Ball and Haldane all saw a close relationship between the work of Green and a revised doctrine of liberalism. This was a view shared by both commentators at the time and many academics today. It appears from this that idealism's role in the formulation of New Liberalism has recently been discounted in a way which ignores much of the evidence.

Finally, I have shown how the political ideology, which was formed by Green as a prop to the Liberal Party, ended up helping to undermine the Liberals in Parliament by assisting the growth of a Labour Party. Clearly simplistic judgements about the relationship between political affiliation and ideology have to be set aside. Many of the idealists, such as Ball, developed a doctrine of ethical socialism from within the ranks of the Liberal Party. Haldane, in contrast, eventually found himself defending his version of progressive liberalism from within the ranks of a Labour Government. Yet that people such as Haldane and Tawney could work alongside each other so closely, even before the former's switch to Labour, shows the similarity in their thinking on many issues.

Tawney himself has represented the culmination of my study. He was the ethical socialist of the twentieth century and his work has been profoundly influential within the ranks of the Labour Party. Yet the extent that he drew his own thought from the work of the British idealists had never fully been explored. I have shown that Tawney shared a close relationship with many of the leading idealists, but that his debt to them was due to more than friendship. He adopted the key features of the idealists' philosophical settlement and used them to help shape his own notions of true freedom and equality. Even if he lacked an obvious philosophical interest, Tawney was as much a part of this tradition of thought as Ball and Haldane.

That this study ends with Tawney is not, however, meant to imply that the tradition of ethical socialism also finishes here. For the student of modern British politics, there will already be obvious other parallels with recent Labour figures. Whilst Neil Kinnock and John Smith also acknowledged debts to ethical socialism, Tony Blair provides the best example of a generation of Labour leaders who have recorded a link with these traditions. Blair is significant because he has also been influenced by the work of Green and the idealists, primarily through the work of the philosopher John Macmurray. Blair's own definition of ethical socialism also strongly reflected the ideological settlement established by the idealists, with notions such as common good, rights and responsibilities, and an organic society

in which individuals can flourish only by working together, placed centrally in his thinking.<sup>1</sup>

At the start of the twenty-first century, the application of the idealists' political concepts may be different, but the ordering and relationship is largely the same. Yet Green himself would not be surprised by this need for modernisation. As he wrote in his lecture 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract':

The nature of the genuine political reformer is perhaps always the same. The passion for improving mankind, in its ultimate object, does not vary. But the immediate object of reformers, and the forms of persuasion by which they seek to advance them, vary much in different generations. To a hasty observer they might even seem contradictory, and to justify the notion that nothing better than a desire for change, selfish or perverse, is at the bottom of all reforming movements. Only those who will think a little longer about it can discern the same old cause of social good against class interests, for which, under altered names, liberals are fighting now as they were fifty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

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[1] For a preliminary discussion of the links between Blair, Macmurray and T.H. Green, see M. Bevir and D. O'Brien, 'From Idealism to Communitarianism: The Inheritance and Legacy of John Macmurray', *History of Political Thought*, Vol. XXIV (2003, forthcoming).; P. Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London, 1998), p. 233; J. Rentoul, *Tony Blair: Prime Minister* (London, 2001), p. 42.

[2] Green, 'Liberal Legislation', p. 196.