Chapter Thirty-Two

The Socialism of R.H. Tawney¹

A Review of Richard Henry Tawney, The Radical Tradition

The deaths of R.H. Tawney and Hugh Gaitskell occurred so close together that they provide an apt symbol for the end of a period in the history of the British labour movement. It was a period in which the right wing of the Labour Party was hard put to it to provide a rationale for its policies, which would both justify its opposition to Marxism and yet enable it to escape from the platitudes of merely liberal goodwill. The number of those who might have provided such a rationale was surprisingly few. The Webbs defected to Stalinism from the Fabian Society (consistent élitists who believed throughout their career in socialism imposed from above, they merely changed in their choice of élite); John Strachey only defected to the Fabian Society from Stalinism at the end of the 1930s; and G.D.H. Cole was always too much of a Marxist to work within the limitations that the Labour Right imposed upon itself. Tawney therefore stood almost alone.

The present collection of essays, written at various dates between 1914 and 1953, reiterates themes from all Tawney’s major work. In *The Acquisitive Society*, he criticised capitalism because it encouraged economic power without social responsibility. The right to property had become separated from any obligation to discharge a useful social function. In *Equality*, he attacked the view that the natural inequality of man in respect of ability justified inequalities of wealth and status; rather, so he argued, it would be in an egalitarian society that diversity of abilities would flourish most for the common good. In *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, he studied the origins of acquisitive individualism. The present collection of occasional pieces on social history, on education, and in defence of the programmes and performances of British social democracy, accompanied by a preface by Rita Hinden and by Gaitskell’s address at the 1962 Memorial Service for Tawney, makes an illuminating book.

The heart of the matter for Tawney is the moral deficiency of capitalism:

The revolt of ordinary men against Capitalism has had its source neither in its obvious deficiencies as an economic engine, nor in the conviction that it represents a stage in social evolution now outgrown, but in the straightforward hatred of a system which stunts personality and corrupts human relations by permitting the use of man by man as an instrument of pecuniary gain…. It is this demon – the idolatry of money and success – with whom, not in one sphere alone but in all, including our own hearts and minds, Socialists have to grapple.

Sentences like these are scattered throughout Tawney’s writings. One need not be a cynic or an immoralist to find so much cliché-ridden high-mindedness suspect. The answer of his admirers may be to stress, as Gaitskell does in his address, Tawney’s personal goodness: ‘I think he was the best man I have ever known.’ The difficulty is that what both the reminiscences and Tawney’s own writings communicate is a banal earnestness rather than the manifold virtues ascribed and praised. It is fairly clear what is missing. The moral denunciation of British capitalism took its content and its interest not from the morality of socialists but from the immorality and evil of capitalism. What we miss in these essays is the social context of the 1920s, of poverty, of unemployment, of suffering.

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2 Tawney 1964.