## CHAPTER IV

### *THE INTERPRETATION OF DEMOCRACY BY THE WORKING CLASS*

In examining the development of which the Act of 1832 was the first phase, we came to the conclusion that it was never the deliberate intention of the governing class, either before or after the first Reform Bill, to accomplish the transition to democracy that has actually taken place. They continued to lower the franchise because, having once begun, there was no particular reason why they should stop; and they seem hardly yet to be aware that in pursuing this apparently continuous course they have been leading society to the verge of a critical transformation. But when we turn from the debates in parliament and the rhetoric of the National Liberal Federation, to examine the course of opinion among the masses who have been gradually admitted to power, we find that, on the one hand, so far as they have come to political consciousness at all, they have adopted from the beginning the democratic programme; on the other, that their object, in desiring political power, has been pri-

marily to better their economic state, and more particularly, not only in the last ten years but also in the earlier decades of the century, has been conceived, with more or less distinctness, as a fundamental modification of the existing tenure of property.

Such an attitude was the natural and intelligible result of the position to which the working class were reduced by the new methods of industry. This is a story which has been written again and again, and need not be recapitulated here. It will be sufficient to observe that the more the dependence of the labourer on the capitalist increased, the more persistently the theory began to emerge and define itself, that his only hope of deliverance was in acquiring the control of the means of production. And though it is only in the last decade that this theory has taken the field as a vigorous and consistent collectivist propaganda, yet it was active, obscurely and confusedly, in the earlier revolutionary movements of the century, and gave a social significance to what appears on the surface to be a purely political agitation.

From the very beginning, in fact, the movement for parliamentary reform presented a phase, though no doubt a subordinate one, which in a certain vague sense may be called socialistic—that is to say, which proposed to benefit the poor at the expense of the rich. The second part of Paine's 'Rights of Man' is an elaborate scheme for supporting and educating at the public expense the

poorest part of the population; and for raising funds by a progressive tax upon the land, with the intention of compelling the division and sale of large estates. With a less definite programme, but inspired by a similar idea, John Thelwall attacks the oppression of the poor by the rich, and assigns as its cause the monopoly of the government by the opulent and the strong; and though opposed to the notion of 'equality of property,' clearly regards the question of parliamentary reform from a social rather than a political point of view, and in particular sees in it a means for putting an end to monopolies and combinations of capitalists.[1] The work of Godwin was of a more academic and abstract kind; but it may be noticed in this connection that in his 'Political Justice' (1793), which produced a great impression on its first appearance, he attributes to the established system of property evils in comparison with which those produced by kings and priests may be described as 'imbecile and impotent,' and lays down the communistic maxim that anything 'justly belongs' to him who most wants it, or to whom the possession of it will be most beneficial.[2]

[1] See his *Natural and Constitutional Rights of Britons*, 1795, pp. 42–3. At a meeting of the 'Friends of Parliamentary Reform,' October 26, 1795, he proposed the following motion: 'Monopoly, stimulated by insatiable avarice, and uncontrolled by those equitable laws which we might expect from equal representation, frustrates the beneficence of our seasons, and forbids the industrious poor the immediate necessaries of life.' *Ib.* p. 19.

[2] Godwin's *Political Justice*, ed. 1791, pp. 789, 791, seq.

Reference has been made to these thinkers rather as an indication of the early drift of ideas of reform towards socialistic ends than on account of any direct and important influence which they may be supposed to have exercised on working class opinion. But there were other writers more obscure than these in the history of thought whose propaganda was more immediately effective. Among these may be noticed in particular Thomas Spence,[1] who published (as early as 1775) a little tract called the 'Rights of Man' in which he traces all the evils of society to the institution of private property in land. 'He proposed to divide the nation into parishes, to which the land should be inalienably attached; the rents to be paid quarterly to the parish officers; and after subtracting the necessary expenses of the country and the State, the remainder to be equally divided among the parishioners.'[2] The present landlords were to be compensated not by anything so vulgar as money but by 'the full possession of the rights of citizenship in the fostering bosom of the most humane and just commonwealth that ever existed.'[3] And so attractive it was conceived would this millennial prospect appear that no serious difficulty was anticipated in making the transition

[1] For an account of Thomas Spence and his works and their influence, see *Add. MS.* 27,808.

[2] *Loc. cit.* f. 308.

[3] Spence, *The Restorer of Society to its Natural State*, p. 27, ed. 1801.

desired. 'The public mind being suitably prepared by reading my little tract, and conversing on the subject, a few contiguous parishes have only to declare the land to be theirs, and form a convention of parochial delegates. Other adjacent parishes would immediately on being invited follow their example and send also their delegates, and thus would a beautiful and powerful new republic instantaneously arise in full vigour.' [1]

The writings of Spence, though they had no direct connection with the movement of parliamentary reform—for indeed it was rather the abolition than the reform of parliament to which he looked forward—yet appear to have had considerable influence on the Radical leaders of the working class. The years from 1815 to 1820 were marked by a series of incipient and abortive revolutionary plots; numerous clubs were formed ostensibly to advocate parliamentary reform, but really to arraign the whole social system; and among these the principles of Spence appear to have been generally adopted. 'Some of these societies,' says a report of a secret committee of the Lords (1817), 'have adopted the name of Spencean philanthropists; and it was by members of a club of this description that the plans of the conspirators in London were discovered and prepared for execution: the principles of these last associations seem to be spreading rapidly among

[1] Spence, *The Restorer of Society to its Natural State*, p. 17.

the other societies which have been formed, and are daily forming, under this and other denominations in the country. Among the persons adopting these principles, it is common to disclaim parliamentary reform as unworthy of their attention. Their objects are . . . . a parochial partnership in land, on the principle that the landholders are not proprietors in chief; that they are but the stewards of the public; that the land is the people's farm; that landed monopoly is contrary to the spirit of Christianity and destructive to the independence and morality of mankind. . . . . At the ordinary meetings of these societies, which are often continued to a late hour, their time is principally employed in listening to speeches tending to the destruction of social order, recommending a general equalisation of property, and at the same time endeavouring to corrupt the minds of the hearers, and to destroy all reverence for religion. The landholder has been represented as a monster which must be hunted down, and the freeholder as a still greater evil; and both have been described as rapacious creatures, who take from the people fifteen pence out of every quartern loaf. They have been told that parliamentary reform is no more than a half measure, changing only one set of thieves for another; and that they must go to the land, as nothing short of that would avail them.[1]'

[1] 'Report of the Select Committee of the Lords,' 1817. *Journals of the House of Lords*, vol. li., p. 41.

The report is evidently written in alarm, and probably exaggerates the influence and extent of these associations;[1] but it shows clearly that to the working class the question of political reform had been from the beginning a question of property. It was misery that made them politicians. They were convinced that all their suffering was due to unjust laws, and that, therefore, the only remedy was the appropriation of political power by the sufferers. Society, as it was constituted, was an organised conspiracy to rob the working class; it was the order of society itself that needed to be reversed, and the means to that reversal was parliamentary reform. 'In 1831,' says Place, 'the impression generally prevailed among the working class that the aristocracy, under which term they included all who were rich and not engaged in some profession, in trade or commerce, were the cause of their low wages and of all their real and imagined grievances;' and the rejection of the Reform Bill by the Lords was regarded as conclusive evidence that they, 'the unproductive class, were resolved, cost what it would, to continue their oppression and robbery of the working classes.'[2]

[1] See *Add. MS.* 27809, f. 93, seq.

[2] The following resolution passed by one of the working class 'unions' is characteristic:—'That the robberies committed by the idle and useless on the useful and productive people of England are the main cause of the increase of crime. That nothing can remove the cause but universal suffrage, the ballot, and short parliaments, and that there can be no security for property until these shall be obtained.'—*Add. MS.* 27791, f. 19.

It followed that the real antagonism of the labourers was as much to the middle class as to the aristocracy, and that a measure which merely extended the franchise to 10*l.* householders was not calculated in the least to satisfy their demands. They would be as completely excluded from power as before, while the middle class, having secured their own position, would naturally ally themselves with the aristocracy against the enemies of property. We find, accordingly, that the Bill of 1832 was generally condemned by the extremer section of the working class,[1] and that it was with difficulty that the more moderate of them were induced to join in the popular agitation that carried it through.[2]

This attitude of hostility, so far from being appeased, was exasperated by the immediate effect of the new settlement. Even the middle class reformers were disappointed, and the worst expectations of the working class were confirmed. The distress so far from diminishing continued to

[1] For this attitude consult the *Poor Man's Guardian*, the organ of the extremer section of the working class in 1831 and 1832. 'The Bill,' we are told, 'will only increase the influence of landholders, merchants, manufacturers, and tradesmen.' 'I therefore conjure you to prepare your coffins if you have the means. You will be starved to death by thousands if this Bill pass, and thrown on to the dunghill, or to the ground, naked like dogs.' The 'National Union of the Working Classes' declares that both Reform Bills were 'mere expedients and mere gulls to deceive the people, and no ways calculated to better the condition of the working people.'—*Add. MS.* 27791, f. 332.

[2] See Place's account of the formation of the 'National Political Union.'—*Add. MS.* 27791.

increase, and it was plain, as it might have been plain from the first, that no panacea was to be expected from the new parliament.[1] At the same time the opinion continued to prevail that misgovernment, and misgovernment alone, was the cause of the evil.[2] The currency, the national debt, the pensions, the civil list, the standing army, the taxes, were still the familiar objects of attack;[3] and to crown all came the grievance of the new poor law.[4] All these abuses, it was clear, might be

[1] 'The Reform Bill was not calculated materially to improve the general composition of the legislature. . . . Any good which is contrary to the selfish interest of the dominant class is still only to be effected by a long and arduous struggle.'—Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions*, vol. i., p. 449, ed. 1859. Hume said in Parliament that the Bill 'did not lead to all that he and others who were anxious on the subject had been sanguine enough to expect, apt as they were, perhaps hastily, to imagine that society would be immediately moulded by their own opinions.'—Hansard, vol. cv., p. 1156. In an address issued by the 'Birmingham Political Union' in 1837, the following passage occurs:—'The motive and end of all legislation is the happiness of the universal people. Let us try the Reform Bill by that test. . . . What do we find? Merchants bankrupt, workmen unemployed and starving, workhouses crowded, factories deserted, distress and dissatisfaction everywhere prevalent. . . . Were the people fully and fairly represented in Parliament, would such things be?'

[2] 'They sincerely believed that nearly all the evils of which they complained were caused by bad government.'—Place, writing in 1833. *Add. MS.* 27797, f. 252.

[3] See, e.g., *Add. MS.* 27797, f. 12. In 1833 the 'National Political Union' 'solemnly protests against the further existence and recognition of the national debt, and against its payment, principal or interest, by means of taxes levied on the productive and labouring classes.'—*Ibid.* 27796, f. 266.

[4] 'What has made Englishmen turn assassins? The new poor law. Their resources have been dried up by indirect taxes for the debt, and the poor law throws them on a phantom which it calls their resources: robbery follows, and a robber soon becomes a murderer.' So writes Charles James Napier, who was in command of the northern

reformed or abolished by acts of the legislature, and to secure the control of the legislature was therefore the immediate object to be attained.

For this purpose a new and formidable agitation was set on foot. In 1836 was established the 'London Working Men's Association'; in 1837 the 'Birmingham Political Union' was revived; and about these focussed the Chartist movement. The 'Charter' was first adopted in the summer of 1837 by a committee of six members of parliament and six members of the 'London Working Men's Association.' It embodied the familiar 'six points'—universal suffrage, the ballot, annual parliaments, payment of members, abolition of the property qualification, and equal electoral districts—and upon these it united the hitherto sporadic and disorganised forces of reform.[1]

Meantime, side by side with the agitation for a further reform of Parliament grew up and developed the remarkable movement directed by Robert Owen. This movement was definitely socialistic, and the economic theory on which it was based, that labour is the only factor in the production of wealth, and that to labour, therefore,

district in 1839 for the purpose of suppressing Chartist riots. See his *Life*, vol. ii., p. 9.

[1] Before the publication of the Charter the reformers were split into numerous sections. Some were 'anti-poor-law,' others 'anti-factory system.' Some were advocating a 'Short Time Bill,' others a tax on machinery. Some were for household suffrage, some for the repeal of the ratepaying clauses of the Reform Bill—and so on.—*Add. MS.* 27820, f. 101.

in justice, all wealth belongs, had begun to be popularised among the working class early in the century. It is the basis of a little book published in 1805 by Charles Hall, and entitled 'The Effects of Civilisation on the People in European States.' After laying it down that liberty and property are incompatible, and that all that is owned by the rich was produced by the hands of the poor, the author postulates as conditions of a satisfactory economic state—first, that each man should labour so much only as is necessary for the support of his family; secondly, that he should enjoy the whole fruits of his labour.[1] This work, however, interesting as it is from an historical point of view, does not appear to have had any traceable effect upon the political agitation of the period. The reforms which it advocates are either inefficient or impracticable,[2] and its appeal is addressed to the governing class, not to the populace. More important from our present standpoint are the writings of Thomas Hodgskin, which, as we are informed by Place,[3] were 'very widely circulated' among the working class, from 1825 onwards, and which served to popularise the idea in

[1] *Op. cit.* p. 207.

[2] 'The principal are—(1) abolition of the law of primogeniture, (2) prohibition by law of all manufactures except those of absolute necessaries, or the subjecting them to such heavy taxes as would much lessen the production of them.'—*Ibid.* pp. 173, 174.

[3] *Add. MS.* 27791, f. 263. The works referred to are:—'Labour defended against the Claims of Capital,' 1825; 'Popular Political Economy,' 1827; 'The Natural and Artificial Rights of Property contrasted,' 1832.

question, that labour is the sole creator and the sole legitimate owner of wealth; while about the same time the theory was thrown into a more elaborate and systematic form by the friend and disciple of Owen, William Thompson.[1]

But it was Owen himself who gathered to a head and discharged in a torrent of enthusiasm the various streams of socialistic aspiration. It was he who first differentiated clearly political and economic facts, and insisted upon the latter as the true cause of the miseries of the working class. While Cobbett was declaiming against the debt, the taxes, and the expense of the administrative establishment, Owen was pointing out the inevitable effects of the industrial revolution. The distress which the Radical politicians attributed to unjust laws was traced by him to the control of the means of production by competing capitalists, and the remedy he proposed was to transfer this control to co-operative associations of labourers, who should divide among themselves the whole produce of their labour. The accomplishment of this reform, he imagined, would be a matter not of years, but of weeks and days; and he derived from this belief a prophetic fervour which swept the

[1] *An Inquiry into the Principles of Wealth most Conducive to Human Happiness, applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth*, by William Thompson, 1824. 'Wealth is produced by labour; no other ingredient but labour makes any object of desire an object of wealth' (p. 4). This position is afterwards modified, but very confusedly.

country like a fire. 'We proclaim to you,' he cries, to the governments of Europe and America, 'that a new era has commenced . . . and this era we do not hesitate to pronounce the commencement of that period which, under the term millennium, the human race has been so long taught to expect.'[1] And again: 'The Rubicon between the old immoral and the new moral worlds is finally passed, and truth, knowledge, union, industry, and moral good now take the field, and openly advance against the united powers of falsehood, ignorance, division, and moral evil. . . . The time is arrived when the foretold millennium is about to commence, when the slave and the prisoner, the bondman and the bondwoman, and the child and the servant, shall be set free for ever, and oppression of body and mind shall be known no more.'[2]

The machinery of this millennium, as has been already observed, was to be the substitution of co-operative and public for individual and private ownership of capital. Owen and his followers are thus thoroughgoing socialists; but on the other hand, they have no direct connection with the movement for parliamentary reform. On the contrary, they are avowedly opposed to it. Owen himself, as a successful director of a cotton fac-

[1] *The Crisis*, vol. ii., p. 146, May 18, 1833. 'Manifesto of the Productive Classes of Great Britain and Ireland to the Governments and Peoples of the Continents of Europe and of North and South America.'

[2] *The New Moral World*, no. 1, November 1, 1834.

tory, had learnt from experience the value of trained skill in the conduct of affairs. He did not believe that the people were fit to direct, or even to appoint the directors of the State. They needed, he thought, a preliminary training, and this he proposed that they should receive by taking a share each man in the conduct of his own trade. 'Experience of government is better acquired by commencing with the management of a single business in which we are skilled by practical experience, than in launching into an ocean of business, without a chart to guide or a gale of wind to lend us an impulse.'[1] The idea was to be put into effect by the co-ordination of the various trades into a single representative system coextensive with the nation. In every town each trade would have its own internal government; the towns would be grouped into districts under elected district councils, and delegates from the districts would form the annual parliament of the trades. On the face of it, the system proposed has nothing to do with the Government; it is merely a private organisation within the state. But it is clear that if ever an organisation were established which should really control the whole industry of the country, such an organisation would be, in fact, if not in name, the Government. And this was Owen's idea. His co-operative

[1] *The Pioneer*, p. 377. This paper was started and inspired by Owen in the years 1833–34.

trades union was intended to secure, by the mere force of events, first industrial, and then, by virtue of that, political supremacy; and the existing machinery of government was to be supplanted not by a direct attack, but by a gentle though irresistible process of substitution. As the new organ developed, the old one would become rudimentary and drop away. 'An empire within an empire is now growing,' cries Owen in his wonted fervour of enthusiasm, 'and the old legislature will, no doubt, soon retire from business. . . . At present, the Parliament are useful as a check, and an executive power; but every year will increase their worthlessness, till they dissolve at last in everlasting disorganisation, giving way to a parliament of industry, which shall consult the welfare of the mass in preference to the advantage of the few.'[1]

The distinction, then, is clear enough between the position of Owen and that of the advocates of parliamentary reform. The one aimed directly at economic organisation, and secondarily only at political power; the others directly at political power, and secondarily at economic organisation. But, as has been already pointed out, the movement for parliamentary reform, though it was not supported by Owen and the Socialists, was always, so

[1] *The Crisis*, vol. iii., p. 214, February, 1834. Cf. *The Pioneer*, *loc. cit.* According to the theory there set forth the place of the House of Commons will be taken by the 'House of Trades,' while the Upper House will still be left to the aristocracy, whose experience, learning, and taste, it is conceded, are essential to the State.

far as it touched the working class at all, directed, however vaguely, to economic ends. Artisans demanded a vote, primarily, because they were in distress, and what they expected from the use of the vote was, primarily, a remedy for distress. Thus, though the Socialists, as a body, were indifferent for the moment to parliamentary reform, the Chartist Reformers were not indifferent to Socialism. On the contrary, it was only as a means to an economic transformation that they were aiming at the control of Parliament; and, accordingly, we find the 'Poor Man's Guardian,' the principal organ of the Radical artisans, while censuring on the one hand the followers of Owen for their abstention from politics, advocating, on the other, universal suffrage not merely as an abstract right, but as the only means by which trades unions or socialists could attain their ends. Political supremacy, it declares, is the key to the whole position; that once secured, it would be open to the labouring class to reconstruct the whole fabric of society. 'They might abolish or remodel every institution in Church and State; they might change the whole system of commerce; they might substitute the labour note for the present vicious currency, and thus render usury impossible; they might agree to work in common, and to enjoy in common; or they might arrange to exchange their produce on equitable terms, through salaried agents, without the inter-

vention of base middlemen who are the bane of society. By these and the like means they might silently, but effectually, regenerate the world.' [1]

While, however, the Chartists were agreed as to their general aim—somehow or other to put an end to poverty—they did not appear to accept, as a body, the Owenite conception of the economic causes or possible remedies of their distress. Politically, they succeeded in formulating a definite programme, and making it the centre of vigorous agitation; but, economically, their ideas grew more and more conflicting and obscure. Chartism, as a political movement, was precise enough, with its six uncompromising points; but, though it was inspired and supported by the misery of the poor, and though it was in order to ease that misery that it aimed at the control of parliament, yet it is impossible to detect beneath its flow of muddy rhetoric, anything but the blurred outlines of inconsistent and inadequate economic ideas. In the earlier stages of the agitation, it is the new Poor Law that is denounced. 'The law,' it is said, 'is an invention of the capitalist to secure labour at the minimum price, by making it intolerable for the labourer to face the horrors of the union bastilles;' [2] its object is 'to divest poverty

[1] *Poor Man's Guardian*, March 1, 1834.

[2] *Northern Star*, February 24 and March 3, 1838. Cf. Bronterre's (O'Brien's) *National Reformer*,' 1837, p. 26—where it is stated that the object of the new Poor Law is 'to bring down the whole of the labouring population, agricultural and manufacturing, to the lowest rate of remuneration at which existence can be maintained.'

of hope, and to eliminate the surplus population;' it is the 'starvation law,' a law which is no law; and the commission appointed to carry it out is the 'three-headed devil-king.' Presently, however, as the movement proceeds, this agitation against the Poor Law takes a secondary place, and the prominent economic idea, from the year 1843 on, is O'Connor's scheme for settling the Chartists on the land. Meantime, there was from the beginning a Birmingham party, under the leadership of Thomas Attwood, which attributed all the economic distress to the resumpton of cash payments by the bank, and advocated as the sole and efficient cure an extension of paper currency. Lastly, in the heat of the conflict, and primarily, as a means of coercing the government, an alliance is formed between Chartism and trades-unionism. The proposition of a 'sacred month,' that is to say, a month's cessation from work, was laid before innumerable meetings, during the June of 1839, and in July the convention of Chartist delegates actually fixed the date of its commencement. This resolution, it is true, they afterwards withdrew, having realised that it would not be possible to enforce it; but the abortive strike attempted in the month of August, 1842, was approved, though it was not originated, by the conference of Chartists then sitting, and the majority of the delegates of the trades on strike declared in favour of the Charter, and of converting

their battle for wages into a battle for political supremacy.[1]

From this brief statement it will be sufficiently clear that while there was no precise and definite economic idea underlying the Chartist propaganda; yet on the other hand the movement, though primarily and ostensibly political, was, at bottom, unlike the agitation that carried the Reform Bill of 1832, a revolt of the poor against the rich, prompted by economic distress, and directed, however imperfectly, to economic ends. Vaguely but effectively felt as the basis of Chartism was the notion that somehow or other, by the control of the political machinery, an alteration favourable to the working class might be produced in the distribution of property. This idea, as we have seen, was the inspiration from the first of the working class movement for reform; and though, generally speaking, its expression, whether in words or in action, was incoherent and confused, yet it shapes itself every now and again into an abrupt and startling precision. The 'Poor Man's Guardian,' for example, contains, as early as 1834,

[1] 'While the Chartist body did not originate the present cessation from labour, this conference of delegates from various parts of England express their deep sympathy with their constituents, the working men now on strike; and we strongly approve the extension and continuance of their present struggle till the People's Charter becomes a legislative enactment, and decide forthwith to issue an address to that effect; and pledge ourselves on our return to our respective localities, to give a proper direction to the people's efforts.'—*Northern Star*, August 20, 1842.

an account of the effects of the modern methods of industry upon the labourer, which anticipates the later exposition of Marx:—'As long as the labourer's existence depends upon the capital of others, and that there are more labourers in the country than the capitalists want to use, so long must he continue a pauper slave. "Redundancy of labour" will cause the labourers to compete for employment. This competition must necessarily drive down wages; for should one labourer refuse the master's terms another will take them in preference to starving. And so the game will go on till wages find what the economists call "their natural level"—that is to say, the level of starvation. This has ever been the "order of the world," and will continue to be so as long as the cannibal system endures. . . . There is but one remedy. It is to upset the whole system. There is no reforming it by parts.'[1]

The analysis of the effects on the labourer of the working of private capital does not appear to have led the 'Poor Man's Guardian,' as it afterwards led Marx, to the formula of nationalisation of all the means of production. It led, however, to a definition of property as 'the right of A to seize upon the produce of B's labour in the name of the law, that law being exclusively of A's own making'; and to an appeal to the working

[1] *Poor Man's Guardian*, February 22, 1834.

class in the name of 'their most sacred duty' to combine against the institution so defined.[1]

An exposition equally clear is to be found in the writings of Bronterre O'Brien, who was one of the most prominent of the Chartist leaders. By him, too, universal suffrage is definitely and precisely conceived as merely a means to the redistribution of wealth. 'Knaves will tell you,' he says, 'that it is because you have no property you are unrepresented. I tell you, on the contrary, it is because you are unrepresented that you have no property.'[2] By him, too, the misery of the working class is attributed to the private ownership of the means of production. 'Land,' he says, 'being the free gift of the Creator to all his creatures, and not the produce of human labour, like money, food, or any other perishable commodity, it can never be a legitimate subject of property. . . . If there had never been individual property in land we should have escaped ninety-nine hundredths of all the woes and crimes that have hitherto made a pandemonium of the world.'[3] And though, so far, his argument leads him only to the nationalisation of land, he looks forward, he tells us, to the time when those who at present form the class of capitalists will be converted into paid officials in the service of the productive labourers.[4]

[1] *Poor Man's Guardian*, December 21, 1833.
[2] Bronterre's *National Reformer*, 1837, p. 11.
[3] *The Operative*, vol. i., no. 4, p. 1, 1838. [4] *Ibid.*

It appears, then, as the total result of this examination, that the political agitation of the working class was inspired from the first by the keen sense of distress, and directed with more or less deliberation against the existing organisation of property; that between the years 1830 and 1840 they were strongly stirred by the socialistic propaganda of Owen; and that, though the immediate disciples of that movement dissociated themselves from the agitation for parliamentary reform, yet underlying and permeating the Chartist movement was a dissatisfaction with the whole social structure, and a determination, somehow or other, by means of the parliamentary machinery, to shape it again into a more tolerable form.

But the Owenite and Chartist agitation passed away without achieving any tangible result, and to the succeeding generation the whole movement might well have appeared to be an exceptional and transient phenomenon due to specially acute distress. For the next thirty or forty years the energies of the working class, so far as they came to the surface in social and political agitation, were confined to the organisation and the establishment of the legal status of trade unions; and the leaders in this work, so far from being inspired by a socialistic conception of the State, frankly accept the fact of the private ownership of capital, and look for the remedy of their troubles to a limitation

of the numbers competing in the labour market.[1] Even the ideal of a supremacy of labour influence in the legislature disappears. 'As a class,' says the manifesto of the Labour Representation League in 1874, 'you desire no predominance in the councils of the nation, but as honest men and self-respecting citizens you do desire to put an end to that most unjust class exclusion from which the great labour class of the country alone suffer.'[2] The points pressed upon candidates by the newly enfranchised artisans in the election of 1874 have reference to the reform of the law relating to trade unions, and to the better protection of the life and health of factory hands; they include nothing which touches even remotely the fundamental organisation of industry.[3] So far, indeed, had the opinion of the leaders of the working class diverged from socialist lines that we find it stated in the 'Beehive,' at this time their best accredited organ, that 'not the wealthiest and most nervously timid millionaire in the country is more opposed to breaking down the sacred principles which uphold the rights of private property than the great majority of the busy workers in our hive.'[4] It is true that during the whole of this period the more thoughtful among the working class are constantly occupied

[1] See Webb's *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 183.

[2] See the *Beehive*, January 31, 1874. The 'Labour Representation League' was formed in 1869, for the purpose denoted by its name. See *Ibid.* November 6, 1869.

[3] *Ibid.* January 3, 1874.

[4] *Ibid.* December 10, 1870.

with the question of the tenure of land, and that at least an influential section of them favoured the solution of land nationalisation,[1] but on the whole their attitude must be described as predominantly individualistic. This tendency was doubtless assisted by the Malthusian propaganda of the 'National Reformer' (founded in 1860), which taught that the root of social evil was to be sought not in the method of the distribution of wealth, but in the multitude of the persons among whom it had to be divided, and diverted attention from the question of profits and rent to that of over-population. We find, accordingly, that the policy of the trade unions is constantly directed towards relieving the pressure of numbers in the labour market,[2] and that it is to this, not to any collective control over the instruments of production, that they look for the gradual improvement of their condition.

Concurrent with this change of economic ideas is a change of political tone. Aristocratic govern-

[1] See e.g. *Beehive*, September 11, 1869, account of a meeting to support the 'Land Tenure Reform Association.' This association did not go further than to claim for the State the 'unearned increment' that shall accrue *in the future*. But J. S. Mill remarks, in his preliminary statement of its aims, that 'an active and influential portion of the working classes have adopted the opinion that private property in land is a mistake, and that the land ought to be resumed and managed on account of the State, compensation being made to the proprietors.'—See prospectus in Brit. Mus. 8206, cc. 30. But the more common and accepted policy appears to have been that of facilitating the creation of a peasant proprietorship.—See Webb's *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 354.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 183.

ment, it is true, is still denounced; the constitution of the House of Lords continues to 'outrage our moral sense;'[1] equality of political and social rights is claimed as vigorously as ever. But the various measures of reform which had been passed since the crisis of the Chartist movement[2]—the Repeal of the Corn Laws, and the introduction of Free Trade, the development of the Factory Acts, the extension of the franchise to artisans, and the legal security given to trade unions—such a series of measures as this could not fail to produce their effect on opinion. And we find, accordingly, as has been already observed, that the political ambition of the working class is no longer to monopolise the machinery of government. They claim only their fair share of influence in the State, and at times can even regard with a certain benevolence the classes which their predecessors in the thirties had conceived to be their natural and inveterate foes. 'Upon a review of the last ten years of our history in England,' says the 'Beehive' in 1871, 'we working men are able to find reasons why we should not despair either of ourselves or of our country. If we have not obtained all we want or ought to have, a large instalment has been yielded to us, and the result of past efforts assures us that, if we do not secure the remainder, the blame will belong as much to ourselves—if not more—than to anybody else. It

[1] *Beehive*, July 29, 1871. [2] The crisis I take to be the year 1839.

is true that among the great ones of the earth some have but hindered under the guise of helping; but on the whole we should be ungrateful did we not frankly acknowledge the effectual assistance which we have received from public men and eminent statesmen, who have shown that they have hearts as well as heads. Such co-operation with us and for us ought to fortify the dislike to all class legislation and to animate us with a reciprocal spirit of brotherly kindness.'[1]

For some years, then, before and after the Reform Bill of 1867 it appeared that the leaders of the working class were prepared to accept the existing social organisation, and to make the best of their position within the limits thus laid down; that Mr. Bright was right when he asserted that the artisans were attached to private property, and Mr. Lowe wrong when he predicted a social revolution.

All the more striking has been the actual course of events. Not only has there been a revival of socialistic agitation, but it has been incomparably more clear in conception and more efficient in working out than the earlier movement of the period of the first Reform Bill. Then, as we saw, the formula of the nationalisation of all the means of production was enunciated only imperfectly and by isolated thinkers; it was never adopted clearly as the ultimate end of the movement for political

[1] The *Beehive*, January 7, 1871, p. 8.

reform. Discontent with the social order was the basis of Chartism, but upon it there never supervened a clear and consistent view of the possible direction of economic change. It is otherwise with the socialist movement of our own epoch. For the first time the rigorous and uncompromising logic of Marx has been popularised in this country,[1] and the meaning of the nationalisation of land and capital pushed pertinaciously home. Not only, as in the earlier period, is the object avowedly pursued of securing for the working class the monopoly of political power, but the end to which that power is to be directed is distinctly and dogmatically defined. The new movement is not merely, like Chartism, a desperate rush for power, with a vague underlying belief that power may be used to put an end to poverty; it is a growing determination to take over the administration of central and local affairs and to direct it towards the realisation of a definite economic scheme.

Such, it may be fairly said, is the general character of the new socialism, whatever differences, and however important, may exist within the ranks of its supporters. On the political side

[1] It is true that leaders of the English trade unions were connected with the 'International Society' (founded in 1864), which was largely under the influence of Marx. But they do not appear to have imbibed its socialist principles. And, indeed, it was not till 1879, when the English working men had ceased to have any connection with it, that the Society adopted the full programme of nationalisation of all means of production. Cf. a note in Webb's *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 217.

all are agreed in urging the complete democratisation of all our institutions. Adult suffrage (including women and paupers),[1] payment of members and of election expenses, short parliaments, and the abolition of the House of Lords are included in the programme of the Fabian Society, no less than in that of the Social Democratic Federation; and in both cases these proposals are only the means to the establishment of a socialistic state. Such measures, as we read in 'Justice,' the organ of the Social Democratic Federation, 'are useful only in so far as they may help to put an end to the present daily confiscation of labour. For this object only shall we urge such political reforms.'[2] And the Fabian Society is even more explicit: 'Until the electorate consists of the whole adult population, and perfect freedom of choice of members, combined with the fullest control over their legislative action, has been secured through payment of members and their election expenses, and the second ballot, the people will be seriously handicapped in the promotion or enactment of those measures of social reform which will ultimately result in the socialisation of industry, and

[1] 'The paupers must vote because, since if the laws were just there need be no paupers, the paupers have the first right to a voice in altering the unjust laws by which they are the greatest sufferers.'—*Fabian Tracts*, no. 11, p. 6. It might, perhaps, be plausibly maintained that if the laws were just there would be no criminals and lunatics. Would it follow that criminals and lunatics should have a vote?

[2] *Justice*, no. 1, p. 4, January 19, 1884.

the establishment of the commonwealth on a co-operative basis, for which end alone political reform is of any value.' [1]

Here, then, is a precise exposition both of the general economic aim of the socialists and of the political means by which they propose to bring it about. And from the political point of view the programme is all the more significant because there is a tolerable chance that it may be realised. Since the time of the Chartist agitation a silent revolution has taken place. By successive extensions of the franchise and redistribution of seats the principle of adult (or at least of manhood) suffrage has come to be so far recognised in fact that a further extension of it is generally felt to be merely the logical corollary of what has been already done; [2] the payment of members and of election expenses has long been formally accepted as the policy of the Liberal party, and they have now declared for the abolition of the veto of the House of Lords. It is not impossible that, unless an unexpected reaction should set in, the political programme of the socialists will be realised, and they will be enabled to try the experiment of bringing to bear on the middle class the mass of unskilled and pauper labourers who are at present excluded from the franchise.

[1] *Fabian Tracts*, no. 14, Introduction.

[2] According to the calculation of the Fabian Society, over two and a half millions of adult males are still excluded from the suffrage. —Tract 14, p. 4.

The possibility of success in such an attempt appears to be more than doubtful, but it may be remarked that it would be facilitated by that development of local institutions which has been briefly described in a previous chapter. The popular councils, which have taken the place of the former aristocratic or middle class oligarchies, would be ready instruments in the hands of a Radical legislature; and it is, in fact, upon them, as we shall see, that the socialists rely for the carrying out in detail of their ideas.

If now we turn from the political to the economic propaganda of the modern socialists, we are struck not only by the precision with which they have formulated their general end—the nationalisation of all the means of production—but by their elaboration in detail of the particular measures by which, as they conceive, it may be gradually brought about. The programme of the Fabian Society, the most practical, and therefore the most influential, representatives of the school, includes (1891) a progressive tax upon all 'unearned incomes' (rising to twenty shillings in the pound), the taxation of ground values, the nationalisation of mining royalties and of railways and canals, the abolition of the duties on tea, cocoa, and coffee, and a constantly progressive increase of the death duties. The wealth thus transferred from individuals to the State is to be devoted to the municipalisation of the land and of local industries. 'We want the

Town and County Councils elected by adult suffrage, and backed with the capital derived from the taxation of unearned incomes, and with compulsory powers of acquiring the necessary land upon payment of a reasonable consideration to the present holders, to be empowered to engage in all branches of industry in the fullest competition with private industrial enterprise. . . . We want to restore the land and industrial capital of the country to the workers of the country, and so realise the dream of the socialist on sound economic principles by gradual, peaceful, and constitutional means.' [1]

Not only, then, has the general formula of socialism been clearly enunciated, and its realisation defined as the end and aim of democratic institutions, but the steps in the process of transition have been planned and described. By an extension of the existing activities of the central and local authorities, by a gradual substitution which will eliminate the class without bearing intolerably on the individual, the community at large is to expropriate the capitalist and the landlord, and to take their property and their functions upon itself. The transition is conceived no longer as a leap in the dark, but as a progressive march. Socialism has been transformed from a revolutionary idea to a scheme of practical politics.

For it must be remembered that this new

[1] *Fabian Tracts*, no. 11.

movement is not merely an academic propaganda, which has not had, and is not likely to have, any effects on the actual course of events. On the contrary, it appears to have permeated and transformed the whole mass of the labouring population. Politically, as always, they urge the complete democratisation of the House of Commons; especially the payment of members, the reform of the registration laws, and the abolition of the veto of the House of Lords.[1] Economically, if the resolutions of the Trades Union Congress are any indication of working class opinion, they have completely abandoned the individualistic standpoint which they adopted between 1850 and 1880. The nationalisation of land, indeed, as we saw, has never ceased to find support among them; and in 1882 it was formally adopted by the Congress.

[1] See the *Reports of the Trades Union Congress*, from 1885 on. At the Congress of 1894 the following resolutions were passed:—(1) 'That this Congress tenders its thanks to those members of Parliament who have supported the principle of paying members of Parliament for their services, and hereby instructs the Parliamentary Committee of the Congress to do their utmost to get the question again introduced into Parliament with a view to its being legalised; coupled with the payment of returning officers' charges from the local rates.' The significance of this resolution was well brought out by the remark of one of the speakers, that 'one of the first things they had to fight for was the capture of the parliamentary machine.' (2) 'That this Congress strongly condemns the action of the House of Lords in mutilating that portion of the Bill determining employers' direct liability, and urges upon the workmen of the country to insist on the abolition of the unconstitutional veto power now vested in that irresponsible body of legislators.' See the *Report*, pp. 43 and 63. The Congress of 1895 also passed unanimously a motion for the abolition of the legislative power of the House of Lords.

The further extension of the principle to all the means of production was rejected in 1890 and 1892;[1] but in 1894 the Congress passed, by a majority of 219 to 61, the following resolution:—'That, in the opinion of this Congress, it is essential to the maintenance of British industries to nationalise the land and the whole of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and that the Parliamentary Committee be instructed to promote and support legislation with the above object.'[2] Whatever the ultimate effect of this resolution may prove to be, its meaning, on the face of it, is clear enough; the organised labour of the country stands committed to an uncompromisingly collectivist policy. To carry this out in detail they have only to 'capture the parliamentary machine'; and we find them, accordingly, advocates of the payment of members and of the abolition of the veto of the House of Lords. The policy laid down by the socialists has thus been definitely adopted by the only body in the country which is competent to speak in the name of labour—that is to say, in the name of the vast majority of the nation. The significance of this fact it would be idle to deny, whether it be regarded with favour or the reverse. It is unreasonable to dismiss it as a temporary and abnormal phenomenon, to be attributed to some

[1] *Reports*, 1890, p. 36, and 1892, p. 46.

[2] *Report of* 1894. Since the above was written the Congress of 1895 has declined to confirm this resolution.

unaccountable aberration from sobriety in the minds of the working class. On the contrary, if we take into account the whole course of the labour movement, not only in England, but on the Continent, we shall rather be inclined to judge that the exceptional phenomenon is the individualist position known as the 'old unionism.' For, as we have already observed in detail, in the earlier years of the century there appeared, as an immediate result of the industrial revolution, an agitation essentially akin to that of our own time, though far less effective and intelligent, whose object was to secure for the working class the control of political power as the preliminary means to a social transformation. Extinguished for a time in England by the collapse of Chartism, the movement blazes out into conspicuous life upon the Continent. It was the soul of the French revolution of 1848. Shot down at the barricades in the days of June, stifled into silence under the empire, almost exterminated in the massacres that accompanied the fall of the Paris Commune, it is asserting itself at this moment in France through the most consistent and pertinacious of her ever-fluctuating factions. In Germany, whence it received its most complete and definite formula, it is increasing in power and numbers every year. In Belgium it has almost extinguished the Liberal party. And the English working class, in adopting it again, after the interval of a generation, with

wider knowledge and with clearer aims, are merely bringing themselves into line with the normal development of the century. In so doing they are giving their reply, in no uncertain terms, to the question, What is the meaning of democracy? The governing classes, as we saw, for the last seventy years, have been deliberately abdicating their position, without ever forming any clear conception of the movement in which they have allowed themselves to be involved. But the mass of the people into whose hands, in the course of devolution, the government will fall, are daily becoming more and more aware of what they mean to do with their power. The working class is ranging itself against the owners of land and capital. The nation is dividing into two antagonistic sections, and it is to one of these sections, that which is numerically the larger, that must fall, according to the democratic theory of government, the absolute monopoly of power. It is in this situation that resides the political problem of the English democracy, a problem which it will be the object of the following chapter to examine more nearly.