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Review: Towards A Libertarian Socialism

Anarcho

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There are many schools of libertarian socialist thought. The various schools of anarchism (mutualist, collectivist, communist, syndicalist and individualist) are the most famous but there are others, some better remembered than others. Council communism, for example, still has its adherents but others, such as the Guild Socialism of this excellent collection, do not. In this case, this is a distinct shame as the ideas of G.D.H. Cole (1889–1959) should be better known for they address issues still relevant to activists today and, unlike council communism, Guild Socialism is not encumbered by Marxist prejudices nor jargon and was all the better for this.

Beginning in 1906 when Arthur Pentty published *Restoration of the Gild System*, the movement reached its peak influence during “the Great Unrest”, the massive wave of industrial action between 1910 and 1914 during which syndicalists – not least, Tom Mann – played a significant role. Its most famous supporter was Bertrand Russell and his much-reprinted 1918 work *Proposed Roads to Freedom* discussed Marxism, Anarchism and Syndicalism before suggesting that Guild Socialism combined the best of all of these.

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Reflections on the British Labour Party and European
Working-Class Movements* by G.D.H. Cole. AK Press, 2021

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While primarily a British phenomenon, Guild Socialist ideas did win converts elsewhere – most notably the Hungarian Karl Polanyi (author of *The Great Transformation*).

The initial idea of Guild Socialism was that the State would own the means of production but that their actual running would rest in the hands of the workers themselves, organising into democratically run national bodies called “guilds” (after the Medieval organisations of artisans although the Guild Socialists stressed they had no desire to reproduce guilds as they were or rejected an industrial economy). They considered it as half-way between the State Socialism (or “Collectivism”) of the Fabians (which saw industry as being run by the State as the embodiment of consumers) and Syndicalism (which saw industry as being run by the workers themselves). The role given to the State in this set-up was to ensure that industry was run to benefit the wider public rather than the narrow interests of the workers within it, a danger which Syndicalists themselves recognised with their joint federations of industrial unions and trade councils, the latter seeking to protect wider interests by grouping all unions within a given locality together.

As Cole notes, it aimed to achieve its goals “primarily by economic rather than parliamentary action” (116) and was “a halfway house between old-style trade unionism, with its limited objectives, and the full-bloodied revolutionism of Tom Mann and the Industrial Unionists.” (94) Like anarchism and syndicalism, its goal was the abolition of wage-labour by means of workers’ control for freedom “could not be real unless it rested on the free organisation of the economic life of society, through self-government at every level, from the workshop upwards... a free society could not co-exist with an autocratic system of industrial control”. (117–8) Cole repeatedly stressed the importance of ending wage-labour, for example in his 1917 book *Self-Government in Industry*:

What, I want to ask, is the fundamental evil in our modern Society which we should set out to abolish?

There are two possible answers to that question, and I am sure that very many well-meaning people would make the wrong one. They would answer POVERTY, when they ought to answer SLAVERY. Face to face every day with the shameful contrasts of riches and destitution, high dividends and low wages, and painfully conscious of the futility of trying to adjust the balance by means of charity, private or public, they would answer unhesitatingly that they stand for the ABOLITION OF POVERTY.

Well and good! On that issue every Socialist is with them. But their answer to my question is none the less wrong.

Poverty is the symptom: slavery the disease. The extremes of riches and destitution follow inevitably upon the extremes of license and bondage. The many are not enslaved because they are poor, they are poor because they are enslaved. Yet Socialists have all too often fixed their eyes upon the material misery of the poor without realizing that it rests upon the spiritual degradation of the slave.

Cole's solution was to "take all the big industries out of capitalist hands in order, not to transfer them to bureaucratic control but to put them under a decentralised form of management in which the workers on the spot – and not merely their distant full-time officials – will have an effective say." (153) Thus Guild Socialism, like anarchism and syndicalism, recognised the necessity of real workers' control over production to truly destroy wage-labour.

However, like British Syndicalism, Guild Socialism did not survive long after the First World War with many of its supporters embracing Bolshevism ("Guild Communists") in spite of the lack of worker' control in Russia under Lenin's dictatorship. Cole, to

his credit, was never tempted by the Bolshevik Myth although – as the essays in this book show – he did call it Socialism rather than the State Capitalism it actually was in spite (correctly) stating that “Industrial democracy is therefore an indispensable part of social democracy – that is, of Socialism.” (222) Others moved to a more orthodox social-democratic position and supported the Labour Party and its reformist agenda. Cole was part of the latter faction. The 1930s seems to have seen him embrace a more “orthodox” socialism with an increased stress on economic planning, presumably reflecting the impact of the apparent “success” of Stalin’s Five Year Plans on the wider left. However, as these essays show this was not a deep conversion and he was well aware it was “of the very nature of democratic planning to be much less tidy and complete than centralized planning from above can be made to appear, at any rate on paper.” (272) His Guild Socialism remained and came back to the fore even if these views did not gain traction in either the Labour Party or the Fabian Society (little wonder David Goodway’s excellent introduction is entitled “G.D.H. Cole: A Libertarian Trapped in the Labour Party”).

There has been little written by anarchists on Guild Socialism. Hebert Read published his first political article (the two part “The World and the Guild Idea”) in the journal of the National Guilds League (*The Guildman*, edited by Cole) in 1917 but did not refer to the doctrine after he embraced anarchism in the 1930s (although in the early 1940s he did mention that the “self-government of the guilds” was one of the essential features of “a natural society” in *The Politics of the Unpolitical*). In the preface to the 1919 Russian edition of *The Conquest of Bread* (published under the title *Bread and Freedom* in Russia), Peter Kropotkin hoped that the “idolatry” of German Social Democracy “will weaken in Russia” and “a desire will arise to become acquainted with what is being done in England in the direction of municipal and ‘guild’ socialism” as well as Pouget’s *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution* which outlined “how many syndicalists understand social revolution from the view

Guild Socialism, it is clearly the latter which are of note if we are to avoid the failures of the former.

Finally, some may be surprised and disappointed to discover that the book contained no extracts from Cole's *Guild Socialism Restated* (1920), *Self-Government in Industry* (1917, 1920) or *Guild Socialism: A plan for Economic Democracy* (1921). However, this lack is explained by Goodway towards the end of his excellent introduction, namely that shortly before his death Cole was working with an Italian anarchist on a collection of his articles to be published in Italy. This failed to materialise, but Goodway has used the proposed volume as the basis of this collection. Hopefully this collection will provoke some demand for the reprinting of Cole's Guild Socialist books. David Goodway should be congratulated in producing this collection as it will hopefully introduce a sadly forgotten thinker to a new generations of radicals.

point of the trade unions." A British syndicalist (whom Goodway rightly quotes, in part, in his introduction) was less than impressed with it:

Middle-class of the middle-class, with all the shortcomings (we had almost said "stupidities") of the middle-classes writ large across it, "Guild Socialism" stands forth as the latest lucubration of the middle-class mind. It is a "cool steal" of the leading ideas of Syndicalism and a deliberate perversion of them.

We do not so much object to the term "guild" as applied to the various autonomous industries linked together for the service of the common weal, such as is advocated by Syndicalism. But we do protest against the "State" idea which is associated with it in Guild Socialism.

Middle-class people, even when they become Socialists, cannot get rid of the idea that the working-class is their "inferior"; that the workers need to be "educated," drilled, disciplined, and generally nursed for a very long time before they will be able to walk by themselves. The very reverse is actually the truth. The average middle-class person, even if sentimentally a Socialist, knows no more about the real lives and thoughts and aspirations of the workers than of some obscure African tribe. It has been thrown against some of the Syndicalists that they are "middle-class" men. Well, by birth and early education, may be. But circumstances have "declassed" us, so that we are now wage-workers; we are proletarians of the proletariat, and, realising this fact, we are class-conscious. Only one who has passed through the school of economic adversity is completed educated; only he can come en rapport, as

it were, with the “soul” of the wage-workers, of whom he is now one himself.

It is just the plain truth when we say that the ordinary wage-worker, of average intelligence, is better capable of taking care of himself than the half-educated middle-class man who wants to advise him. He knows how to make the wheels of the world go round. (“Trite and Tripe: A Collection of Fakes and Mugwumps on the Make”, *The Syndicalist*, February 1914)

This somewhat sectarian account, while not without its truths, was written before Cole became a leading Guild Socialist thinker and, as elitist Fabian intellectual Beatrice Webb pondered, “[w]hy he remains so genuinely attached to the working class, so determined to help forward their organization, puzzles me. The desire to *raise the underdog and abuse the boss* is a religion with him, a deep-rooted emotion more than a conviction” (15) That Webb considered these traits as negative ones shows well the damage she and her husband inflicted upon British ideas of socialism. Cole, moreover, introduced to Guild Socialism a more pluralistic and non-Statist perspective:

The State was to own the means of production: the organised workers were to administer them on the public’s behalf. Later, the Guild Socialists fell out among themselves about the structure of the coming society – some holding that the State would continue to exist as the democratic organ of the whole people, while others looked forward to its replacement by some sort of federal structure representing the functional organisations of producers and consumers, and also the civic and cultural bodies standing for noneconomic values. (116)

is a slave or rebel in his daily working life will be also, in enough cases to affect the working of society, a slave, a rebel, or a tyrant in his conduct as a citizen and a man. Democracy... cannot exist in one aspect of life if it is persistently denied in another.” (270)

Yet, as these essays make clear, Cole was well aware “democracy” was used to describe a wide range of systems – from voting every 4 or 5 years to elect a government which can do pretty much what it likes between elections to self-governing associations of equals. The former (bourgeois democracy) “is inconsistent with real democracy because masses so large and amorphous are incapable of acting together except under a top leadership which is bound to substitute its own control for the control of the mass it is supposed to lead. In other words, so-called ‘mass democracy’ inevitably leads to bureaucracy and bureaucratic control in which the individual is unable to make his voice heard in shaping policy.” (282) The latter reflects anarchist values and Cole was completely correct in his support for it. To ensure individuals have as much self-government as possible the associations they form must also be self-governing just as the federations these form must also be self-governing.

Goodway’s volume reminds us how Leninism narrowed the socialist vision for decades. Cole’s Guild Socialist books, for example, were only reprinted in the 1970s with the rise of interest in workers’ control in the 1960s, a development many Leninists then shamefully paid lip-service to in spite of all their forefathers did to destroy it Russia and as a goal of socialism elsewhere. This shows that radicals must be wary of embracing what appears to be “successful” as all too many did after 1917. Likewise, just because a movement did not “succeed” does not mean that it is without merit – just as apparent “success” does not mean much if you compare the reality of the “successful” regime or movement with the goals it was initially advocating and meant to introduce. Given the reality of Bolshevik Russia or the British Labour Party to the ideals of

Cole's disappointment with Labour in office undoubtedly flowed, like his Guild Socialism, from the influence of libertarian communist William Morris on his thought (Goodway rightly includes a speech on Morris by Cole). Indeed, he became a socialist after reading Morris's *News from Nowhere* and initially his Socialism "had very little to do with parliamentary politics, my instinctive aversion from which has never left me – and never will." (90) The "Labour Unrest" of 1910–14 also influenced him greatly and he was "attracted above all in [the strikes] by anything that involved an assertion of the worker's claim to equality of human rights with his 'betters'. Strikes against tyrannical employers or foremen, strikes for the right to a share in determining industrial policy, strikes for the right of workmen to do as they pleased in their hours of freedom from labour, strikes for trade union 'recognition', sympathetic strikes in which workers asserted their right to refuse to handle 'tainted goods' – all these possessed a human appeal which seemed to us, in comparison with the familiar processes of collective bargaining about wages and hours, to involve an assertion of higher status – a revolt against the 'undemocracy' of capitalist enterprise and of the bureaucratic State." (93–4)

These values are expressed in his Guild Socialism, recognising that a "worker spends so large a part of his working life in the place of employment that whatever occurs during the hours of work is bound to react powerfully on his general outlook" and so shape them "to be worse citizens, worse husbands or parents, and more wary and mistrustful in their everyday personal intercourse". (268, 269) Life cannot be compartmentalised into work and non-work for the social relations we experience in one area will impact in all the others. Thus "who rejects the principle of democracy as inapplicable to workers in his work, even if he calls himself a Socialist, is no democrat in any real sense of the word. As long as industry is run by a hierarchy from above", it "would be foolish to look for a society permeated in all its activities by the democratic spirit. He who

Cole was a leading light of this grouping. So while the early Guild Socialists envisioned a role the State (suitably reformed), Cole moved beyond this and in *Guild Socialism Restated* (1920) argued for a federation of Communes to complement the Industrial Guilds. This development was logical enough for if wage-labour was to be rejected as freedom-destroying then how can the State be considered as any different?

With this new perspective, Guild Socialism came closest to anarchism with Cole advocating a system very reminiscent of Proudhon's mutualism (perhaps unsurprising as both were influenced by Rousseau). Many anarchists viewed the syndicalist position of just unions for all social functions as too narrow and, for example, Anarchist-communists had postulated the need for three interwoven federations – one based on unions for the economy, another on communes for the community and another of social groupings for cultural interests (see Kropotkin's *Modern Science and Anarchy*).

Cole, perhaps unsurprisingly given his position in the Fabians and the general contempt anarchism was and is treated in certain circles, denied he was an anarchist but as these articles show he was clearly sympathetic to our ideas. In his "Reflections on Democratic Centralism", for example, are very reminiscent of Malatesta's analysis of democracy and how it becomes, at best, the rule of the minority of those elected by the majority. In another article, he recounted how the Webbs said that everyone involved in politics was either an A (Anarchist) or a B (Bureaucrat) and while they proudly proclaimed themselves the latter, he was the former and he was happy to be labelled an A. (232) Unsurprisingly, then, Cole's 1920 work – with its rejection of the State in favour of federated communes based on federated functional groups – is the closest the doctrine came to anarchism.

This is also reflected in Cole's socialism – like anarchism – being far wider than just a concern over poverty as he "want[ed] each individual man and woman to count, and to have a chance of living a satisfactory life of their own. Valuing individuality, I necessarily

value difference, in which it finds expression.” (62) The aim was to ensure that “the mass of mankind shall come to enjoy both greater leisure and more interesting employment, which they will be more and more able to regard, not as unavoidable drudgery, but as an opportunity for creative self-expression.” (289) In this, anarchism and Guild Socialism agreed and raised demands which could not be granted within capitalism (unlike, say, a legal minimum wage or welfare benefits).

However, while in general his grasp of anarchism was usually good, he let himself down when he wrote that “[c]o-operation always involves sacrifices as well as gains” and that “the anarchist view [is] that the sacrifices necessarily outweigh the gains”. (54) It would be hard to find an anarchist who made such a claim rather than base their ideas on the benefits of voluntary and free association to those currently subject to the hierarchies of capitalism and statism. Likewise, while he often – and rightly – included anarchists within the libertarian (federalist) tradition of socialism he also suggested that those “who have stood out against the acceptance of this [centralising] trend have not been Socialists, but Anarchists such as Kropotkin”. (278) However, these are minor points and do not detract from the importance of the ideas Cole was advocating Guild Socialism and its aim “to achieve its large ambitions for the creation of a libertarian Socialist society by building up, rather than uprooting”. (139)

Which highlights a key issue with Guild Socialism, namely its gradualism and reformism (which Cole at times rightly bemoans). A social transformation along libertarian lines – rather than certain discrete even if important reforms won by social struggle – cannot be achieved slowly or incrementally but needs a revolution. This can be seen from the British Labour Party and its gradualism, which was reversed quite easily by various Tory governments. Unsurprisingly, a distinct feeling of disappointment permeates his accounts of the British Labour Government of 1945–1951, understandably given the limited nature of its reforms and because Cole

had a firm idea of what genuine socialism actually meant. So while it may have alleviated the worse of the poverty experienced by the working class, it did not get to the heart of the issue and transform the relations within production – it addressed the *symptoms* rather than the *disease* as Cole had warned in 1917.

The reality of the British Labour government confirmed that Guild Socialist position that “a truly democratic Socialist society should rest on the widest diffusion of power and responsibility among working people, and that parliamentary Socialism would in practice result in a bureaucratic system which would leave the workers, even under public ownership, still ‘wage-slaves’ rather than free men.” (117) Moreover, as Cole notes, by the 1930s, the Labour Party adopted “the model” of “the Public Corporation, taken over from the Conservatives who had used it for the Central Electricity Board as well as for the BBC” while its leaders were “strongly hostile” to the idea of workers’ control. (99) Unsurprisingly, “the Board system of administration... has led to highly centralised control and to a feeling among many workers that there is no great difference between employment by a public body and employment by a big capitalist employer.” (193) Labour’s reforms were tolerated by the ruling class because they reflected capitalist ideas rather than socialist ones.

These articles should help those who look back on that period as something to repeat see the errors of their nostalgia. It should also be noted that the articles included on the socialist and labour movements reflect his momentous multi-volume *History of Socialist Thought* (1953–1961) and are very perceptive. Thus, for example, he notes how the “German [Social Democratic] party, though it rejected Revisionism in theory, came more and more to accept it in practice, and to concentrate its efforts on the demand for social reforms” (109) although he does not, sadly, mention how this confirmed Bakunin’s prediction of 1867 that electioneering would change these taking part in it rather than society.