

## **Reflection 2**

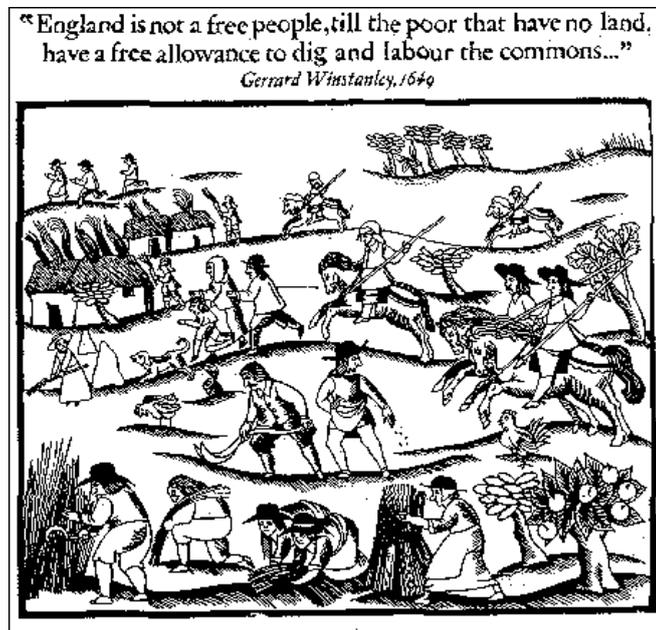
### **A Politics of Land**

**1640 – 1918**

My second reflection considers the hinterlands of the first three Mass Trespass motifs: *Land & Property*; *Common Ownership*; *Direct Action*. It is a collage of key moments, trends, people, ideas and issues and provides an overview of the pre-WW1 land-related politics from which the Mass Trespass emerged.

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### **2.1 The Diggers**



In the 'world turned upside down' of the English Revolution and the aftermath of the execution of Charles I, groups of Diggers<sup>1</sup> trespassed in 1649 on land they did not own with the aim of setting up self-sufficient, self-governing, land-based communities. They sought, through their own efforts, to usher in an era of common ownership by recreating what they took to be the natural, communal harmonies of life in the Garden of Eden before the serpent, the landlords and the ruling elites messed things up.

In his pamphlet setting out the Diggers' aims and demands, Gerrard Winstanley pre-figured the experience and commitments of those who walked from Bowden Bridge in Hayfield to the moorland of Kinder Scout 280 years later:

*In the beginning of Time, the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a Common Treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Man, the lord that was to govern this Creation; for Man had Domination given to him, over the Beasts, Birds, and Fishes; but not one word was spoken in the beginning, That one branch of mankind should rule over another. . .*

. . . And hereupon, The Earth was hedged in to In-closures by the teachers and rulers, and the others were made Servants and Slaves: And that Earth that is within this Creation made a Common Store-house for all, is bought and sold, and kept in the hands of a few, whereby the great Creator is mightily dishonoured, as if he were a respecter of persons, delighting in the comfortable Livelihoods of some, and rejoycing in the miserable povertie and straits of others. From the beginning it was not so. . .

*But when once the Earth becomes a Common Treasury again, as it must, for all the Prophetes of Scriptures and Reason are Circled here in this Community, and mankind must have the Law of Righteousness once more writ in his heart, and all must be made of one heart, and one mind.*

*Then this Enmity in all Lands will cease, for none shall dare to seek a Dominion over others, neither shall any dare to kill another, nor desire more of the Earth than another; for he that will rule over, imprison, oppresse, and kill his fellow Creatures, under what pretence soever, is a destroyer of the Creation, and an actor of the Curse, and walks contrary to the rule of righteousnesse . . . <sup>2</sup>*

Notwithstanding the republican forms of governance which were taking shape on the national stage, the owners of the lands occupied by the Diggers used legal and militia force to evict them, with the endorsement of the land-holding MPs of the Long Parliament. Of all the radical groups at that time, the Diggers were the only ones with a vision of the common ownership of land. The Levellers made the case for political equality, but never offered a critique of land ownership. As biblically-based communists, the Diggers were 'extremists' on the radical fringes of the English Revolution. Presciently, they noted that the dominant system of landownership was not just one of exclusion and enclosure. What exercised the Diggers was the fact that land – the original Common Treasury – was being managed by landlords as a commodity which could be bought and sold within a marketised, commercial economy.

The Diggers are the Ur-trespassers of the early modern era. Because of the resonance of their trespasses, it is fitting that they head up our survey of the historic hinterlands of the Mass Trespass. They had a vision of Common Ownership, sought to realise that vision through their own Direct Action and identified the problems arising from the ownership of land as private property.

I will explore the ramifications of the *Common Ownership* and *Direct Action* motifs in due course. In the first instance, I want to look at the underlying issues of *Land and Property* which confronted the Diggers.

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## **2.2 Land & Property**

In this section, I trace the emergence and enduring dominance of the modern rationale for the ownership of land as private property. It was articulated by the philosopher John Locke – the "Father of Liberalism" – and subsequently incorporated into the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism which underpinned the industrial revolution and was often referred to during the 19th century as Manchester Liberalism. Notwithstanding a range of problems and pressures for reforming or constraining the system of land ownership, the rationale provided by John Locke was resilient and deep-rooted. It was passed on to post-WW1 England largely intact.

### **a. John Locke and the labour theory of property**

Early in his career, Locke earned his keep by producing a couple of books of political philosophy in 1689 – 90, *The Two Treatises of Civil Government*. The *Treatises* were commissioned to provide a justification for the decision of a group of aristocratic magnates to exclude the Catholic James II from the throne of England in 1688 and to invite the Protestant William and Mary from The Netherlands to occupy it, without having to go through the rigmarole of civil war, trials for tyranny and execution. The protection of their estates from interference, by the state or others, was one of their central pre-occupations.

What came to be known as the *labour theory of property* was not the central focus of the *Treatises*. Locke's main concern was to provide a rationale for the 'social contract' between a ruler and the ruled. In very general terms, Locke sought to provide a different version of the 'social contract' from that provided in 1651 by Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan*.<sup>3</sup> In the midst of the political turmoil of the mid-17th century across Europe, Hobbes perceived the state of nature to be one of endless conflict - a *War of All Against All*. The only way of overcoming this and moving forward into a more ordered civil society was for the entire populace to enter into a contract to create a sovereign state authority as the sole source of legitimate political power. (I will refer to Hobbes's state in later Reflections.) For my purposes here, Locke is the key figure.

Locke started from the assumption that in a state of nature everyone was content in some sort of primitive, harmonious rural community-life. He explored the emergence in that natural order of the notion of private property and its associated individualised aspirations. For Locke, civilised society would grow from allowing those property-based aspirations to flourish and the 'social contract' for him was an agreement to set up a state whose primary responsibility was to protect the private property of individuals. His thoughts on property were added quite late in the *Second Treatise* as supplementary evidence / reasoning to support that over-arching political aim.

A few quotes from the *Second Treatise* provide a summary of Locke's labour theory of property, along with what he took to be the state's primary obligation to safeguard the institution of private property.

*. . . Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet everyman has a "property" in his own "person". This nobody has any right to but himself, The "labour" of his body and the "work" of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property . . .*

*. . . from all of which it is evident that . . . man (by being master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and the actions and labour of it) had still in himself the great foundation of property: and that which made up the great part of what he applied to the support or comfort of his being, when invention and arts had improved the conveniences of life was perfectly his own, and did not belong in common to others. . .*

*. . . The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property . . .*

*. . . Men, therefore, in society having property, they have such a right to the goods, which by the law of the community are theirs, that nobody hath a right to take them, or any part of them, from them without their own consent . . .*<sup>4</sup>

As a metaphor or anthropological hypothesis about the origins of ideas of property and ownership, Locke's labour theory of property is not wholly implausible. If the Diggers had been allowed to continue in their communities for a few generations, we might have had a fascinating case-study if / when some of their members had eventually wanted to remove the acres they worked from the common treasury, work them for their own sole use and bequeath them to

members of their families or even sell them to someone else. Would they have hit on the Lockean notion of property as a reasonable and fair way of making such a significant change to the ground-rules of their self-governing rural communities?

Locke was aware of the need for some constraints if his theory of property was to function as an acceptable rationale for some people (if not necessarily all of them) to own land as private property. No-one should take from the common treasury more land than they needed for their immediate personal use. The process of privatising ownership should not proceed unless there was sufficient good land remaining in the common treasury for everyone else to go ahead with the private ownership option if they wished. Those owning land would remain under a society-wide obligation to ensure that those remaining in the common area should not be disadvantaged.

Insofar as the *Two Treatises* provided a bundle of arguments in broad support of the relatively peaceful transfer of monarchical power from James II to William and Mary – the Glorious Revolution – Locke did a good job.<sup>5</sup> He could then settle into his more important historic role as one of the founding philosophers of Empiricism. He left it to others to pick up, as they saw fit, on the wider ramifications of the political and economic ideas strewn throughout the *Treatises*.

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What the 18th-century aristocratic and gentry landowners took from Locke's labour theory of property ownership was not his intellectually interesting metaphor / hypothesis about the social contract enabling a transition from a state of nature into a more extensive, civilised, property-owning social order. They took the labour theory of property as a rationale and justification for the distribution of property ownership as it actually existed in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. Disregarding the subtleties, constraints and provisos Locke built around his arguments, they alighted on the few headline quotes I have given above and elevated them into statements of indubitable economic principle and practice for the emerging era of commodified and marketised landownership. For them, the labour theory of property came into its own as a keystone in the ideology of the eighteenth-century. It provided a rationale for the on-going enclosure and privatisation of land, accompanied by an extinguishing of the remnants of feudal commoning rights / uses across large swathes of cultivated and uncultivated / waste land. This extension of private landownership, endorsed and supported by the state, provided the infrastructure for a far-reaching transformation of the rural landscape and agricultural practice.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the remnants of a feudal peasantry had effectively disappeared from England and been replaced by a system of landless agricultural labourers. England had a fully functioning, 'world-leading' capitalist rural economy. With what was taken to be Locke's endorsement, the distinctive English 'three-tier' system of land-tenure took its place: a small group of aristocratic and gentry rentier landowners, a slightly larger group of capitalist-oriented tenant farmers and a large landless rural proletariat. The wealth thereby generated for the older aristocratic and the newer gentry landowners, coupled with the wealth accumulated through slavery, provided the baseline securities and resources for the loans and investment which drove the changing modes of production and ownership across burgeoning industrial sectors.<sup>6</sup>

. . . And, for more than three centuries since the *Two Treatises*, the makers of *Private Property: Keep Out* signs have never been out of business. Opportunities for the landless to walk and climb in the countryside have been aggressively constrained ever since Locke penned his theories of property ownership.

## **b. Locke, liberalism and the ascendancy of industrial capitalism**

Locke's labour theory of property was shaped within a wider set of debates about the emerging market-based social order. Locke was engaged in a process of creating, not just a pragmatic

justification for the actions of landowners, but a more pervasive tenet of the ideology of a nascent liberal capitalism, which the historian and political theorist C B Macpherson referred to as "possessive individualism".

*Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. Political society becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange.<sup>7</sup>*

The theory of property and the notion of possessive individualism were both taken into the theoretical and ideological canon of classical / liberal political economy and remained there until the end of the nineteenth century. The theory of property was re-articulated in Adam Smith's 1776 *Wealth of Nations*. In theoretical terms, it does not fit comfortably alongside other key ideas penned by the Scottish Enlightenment Moral Philosopher: the labour theory of value and the processes of capital accumulation, free market economics (*laissez-faire*), the division of labour and the processes of production and so forth. In relation to land and property Smith was mainly preoccupied with the economics of rent rather than issues of ownership *per se*. Indeed Smith quite explicitly warns of the potential for class conflict if the extension of ownership (whether of land or the means of industrial production) leads to wider social imbalances and inequalities. But the notion of 'possessive individualism' was reinforced through Smith as 'competitive individualism',<sup>8</sup> which was further reinforced by the individualism inherent in the contemporaneous theories of utilitarianism generated by figures such as Jeremy Bentham and James Mill.<sup>9</sup>

### **c. 1848: Re-shaping the land & property agenda**

Historians have variously referred to the period from mid-18th to mid-19th century as The Great Transformation,<sup>10</sup> The Age of Revolutions,<sup>11</sup> The Unbound Prometheus.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of that century the UK went through one of the most far-reaching periods of social, economic, political and cultural change in world history. There is much in that transformative upheaval which feeds, in one form or another, into the issues which concern this reflection. Tracing all those linkages is, however, way beyond the scope of this essay.

For my Mass Trespass related purposes, I want to continue by reflection on the politics of land and property at the point at which a century of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation appeared to be settling down. By 1848, Chartism, one of the great radical reform movements of the early Victorian era, was waning. England escaped the revolutionary turmoil which beset the rest of Europe in that year. The 1851 census was to reveal that there was a remarkable balance between the rural and the urban population; 50% lived in the newer industrial towns and cities, 50% lived in villages and rural towns / market centres.

At that juncture, in 1848, two of the 19th century's seminal political theorists published books which, in their respective ways, addressed issues of land ownership and property as they found them at that time. Those two books effectively set up the basic agenda for the politics of land and property down to the beginning of the WW1.

The authors were the philosopher and Grand Old Man of English Liberalism, John Stuart Mill, and the philosopher, economic theorist and great progenitor / bogeyman of radical socialism / communism, Karl Marx. Both were forward-looking thinkers, comfortable with industrialisation and urbanisation. They were 'metropolitan intellectuals' who did not hanker after an idealised rural English past and clearly saw themselves as enabling, in their respective ways, a progressive improvement of the industrialising world as they found it in the mid-nineteenth century.

- *John Stuart Mill: "When private property in land is not expedient, it is unjust"*

Political reformers of all kinds over the last 150 years have read and been inspired by Mill's political classics, *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* (co-authored with his partner Harriet Taylor). Chapter 1 – *On Property* – of Book II of his *Principles of Political Economy*<sup>13</sup> has not stood the test of time as a much-read classic. But through its many reprints, it held sway as a standard textbook on the liberal approach to economics for the rest of the nineteenth century. Given his status at the heart of the nineteenth century, Mill's position on the political economy of land was pivotal.

Like Adam Smith, Mill explicitly re-affirmed Locke's labour theory of property. He built on Smith's analysis of value production, capital accumulation and free markets. But, unlike Smith and other mainstream nineteenth-century political economists, he also acknowledged Locke's provisoes. He also took account of the ideas on Thomas Malthus on the limits to growth.<sup>14</sup> He proposed that, in the interests of an over-riding 'common good', there was a case for placing some constraints on the hitherto wholly unrestricted rights and freedoms of landowners to do whatever they wished with their property.

He questioned whether uncultivated land should be private property at all. He made a case for the abolition of primogeniture and restricting rights of inheritance. He argued for the interests of the wider community to be taken into account in relation to the uses to which landowners can put their land. He cast doubts on a landowner's exclusive right to the entirety of the rent acquired without any value-creating labour at all being undertaken on the part of the landowner.

All very moderately and reasonably articulated. Not a hint of anything collectivist / socialist / communitarian / communist. Indeed Mill spends considerable effort critiqueing French and German political economists, philosophers, and social theorists.

But the opening up, in the realms of practical and pragmatic theories of political economy, of the possibility of some elements of land tenure reform on the part of an eminent Victorian is a significant moment. Not least because Mill was also a 'political activist, a sometime Liberal Party MP and a practical and engaged campaigner for a range of liberal / progressive causes during the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

- *Karl Marx: 'the idiocy of rural life' and 'the abolition of private property'*

The *Communist Manifesto* (first published in German) was something completely different. Different philosophical and political hinterland: a different – and comprehensively new – reading of the mid-nineteenth century political economy and the social problems occasioned by a rampant and confident capitalism: a radically different set of proposals of what needs to be done and who will have to do it . . . and an unfortunate translation of the German word "Idiotismus"!

Marx was a 19th-century urban modernist. He worked tirelessly for a future in which industrialisation and science would create a better world for all, once the working class – the exploited and alienated source of all value – had overthrown the accumulated wealth, power and private property of the ruling capitalist class and transformed the state, political, legal and ideological institutions through which that class perpetuated its ascendancy.

The scope and reach of Marx's writing – both the endless stream of political pamphlets such as the *Communist Manifesto* and the equally extensive range of researched books such as *Capital* on philosophy, economics, politics and culture – is such that even a succinct overview of his positions and proposals is beyond the scope of this reflection. I do no more here than offer a few pointers to aspects of Marx's *oeuvre* which are found in the *Communist Manifesto* and are directly pertinent to our concerns with the politics of land and property.

i. *"The idiocy of rural life"*

My guess is that, at some time in the early-1930s, Benny Rothman, as an eager and active member of the Young Communist League, got round to reading an English translation of *The Communist Manifesto*. It is likely, therefore, that he came across the phrase 'the idiocy of rural life' at the end of the following two sentences:

*The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.*

In the original German edition those sentences are:

*Die Bourgeoisie hat das Land der Herrschaft der Stadt unterworfen. Sie hat enorme Städte geschaffen, sie hat die Zahl der städtischen Bevölkerung gegenüber der ländlichen in hohem Grade vermehrt, und so einen bedeutenden Theil der Bevölkerung dem Idiotismus des Landlebens entrissen.*

'... the idiocy of rural life' is an unfortunate translation of '... der Idiotismus des Landlebens'. The English expression conveys something very different from what Marx and Engels were alluding to, namely the distinctive mindset / ideology of those living in pre-industrial rural environments. They were not necessarily suggesting that the European countryside was populated by village idiots needing to be rescued from their idiocy by a sophisticated urban bourgeoisie and a progressive and potentially revolutionary urban / industrial proletariat.

In English and German, these two sentences do, nevertheless, point to the fact that the complex and ever-changing relationship between urban and rural society during the era of the UK's industrial / capitalist / imperial ascendancy was, for Marx, a pivotal dimension of the historic hinterlands of the revolution he advocated.

ii. *"The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property".*

Marx was not unduly exercised by the specifics of the Lockean position on property rights and land ownership and possible options for modest reforms. Private property in all its forms was a central pillar of the economic-cum-ideological apparatus of exploitation and oppression under capitalism and simply needed abolishing *tout court*.

iii. Marx was not setting out a programme of reform for others to implement through legislation or similar institutional means. The revolution he argued for was *Direct Action* politics on a grand scale. The only group capable of progressing a revolutionary Communist programme of such magnitude was the working class / proletariat acting by and for itself.

iv. Marx's base-line model of capitalism (developed after 1848) was essentially that of Adam Smith – i.e. the underpinning of capitalism was the process of production and value creation through physical and mental labour. He did not foresee (and nor did Adam Smith) the burgeoning of the sorts of financial and rentier capitalism which emerged during the twentieth century. Bourgeois industrial capitalism had made great strides and, for both Mill and Marx, set the stage for an ever more glorious industrial – and civilised – future.

v. As an example of the scope of the political programme proposed by Marx, the demands listed in the Communist Manifesto are given below. The public ownership of land heads the list. In the first instance, the ownership of land would formally pass to the state as a precursor to the creation of more equitable forms of collective rural life and an overall re-ordering of the relationships between the rural and urban dimensions of social life.

1. *Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.*
2. *A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.*
3. *Abolition of all rights of inheritance.*
4. *Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.*
5. *Centralization of credit in the hands of the State, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.*
6. *Centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State.*
7. *Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State: the bringing into cultivation of waste lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.*
8. *Equal obligation of all to labour. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.*
9. *Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries: gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of the population over the country.*
10. *Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, &c., &c.*

#### **d. The politics of land, property and liberalism, 1848 – 1918**

I will consider the post-1848 socialist approaches to the politics of land and property in section 2.3 on *Common Ownership*. What I offer here are a few thoughts on what happened within the Lockean, liberal tradition of land politics following Mill's 1848 intervention. As a bit of background here is a quick rain-check on the shape and structure of landownership in the late-19th century.

Just as the first signs of the long Agricultural Depression (1875 – 1895) were appearing, the *Return of Owners of Land* was published in 1875.<sup>15</sup> To the intense annoyance of the landowners, this 'Second Domesday Book' showed that a mere 4000 families owned more than half the entire country. 95% of the population owned absolutely no land at all and the holdings of a majority of the rest were less than a single acre. In other words, the structure of ownership in England was not very different from that in post-famine Ireland, where only 3% of farmers owned the land they farmed. This was rightly perceived as a major potential crisis in Ireland, not least because of the political influence of the Irish National Land League; a series of Irish Land Acts 1870 – 1909 resulted in a steady increase in owner-occupied small-holdings such that by 1914 97% of Irish farmers owned the land they farmed.

No such changes took place in England. The Agricultural Depression entailed considerable upheaval for many tenant farmers and landless labourers. Some smaller gentry land-owners were forced to sell their holdings (to larger landowners or a growing cohort of urban investors in land) but for the most part the dominant structure of landownership remained unchanged. Similarly, throughout this extensive social upheaval and its reshaping of rural England,<sup>16</sup> the Lockean settlement proved remarkably resilient. The major landowners of the late-19th century were rentier capitalists. They retained a public aura of an ancient farming / rural / land-based squirearchy for ideological reasons, occasionally opening fetes and distributing a bit of charity. But most of them

had extensive investment portfolios, held land around the globe and, in England, were making plenty of money from the rental income on their growing urban landholdings. Given their continued dominance of land ownership, there was no incentive to exercise the sorts of constraints on the rights of property ownership proposed by J S Mill. It was only during the years of the 1906 Liberal Government that a plausible legislative threat of land tenure reform made a brief appearance on the national political agenda.

- *Popular land reform*

One of the things that did happen in the later 19th century was the emergence a popular discourse of land reform across a newly extended male franchise. The economist J A Hobson was a tutor with the university extension movement of the 1880s and 1890s. Reflecting on that experience he observed:

*In my lectures upon Political Economy about the country, I have found in almost every centre a certain little knot of men of the lower-middle or upper-working class, men of grit and character, largely self-educated, keen citizens, mostly nonconformists in religion, to whom Land Nationalisation, taxation of unearned increment, or other radical reforms of land tenure, are doctrines resting upon a plain moral sanction. These free-trading Radical dissenters regard common ownership and equal access to the land as a "natural right", essential to individual freedom.<sup>17</sup>*

The issues of land reform to which Hobson referred gained popular support from the work of such groups / campaigns as the following.

*Land Tenure Reform Association* Founded in 1868, by J S Mill, this was an advocacy group for the practical reforms implied by his analysis of the problems of the Lockean system – ending primogeniture and restricting certain entails within a more equitably balanced political economy, a stable state and a reduction of economic growth. The LTRA brought together many at the radical end of Liberalism; it shared an approach to the use of common and waste land with the Commons Preservation Society<sup>18</sup> which had been founded by Mill and others in 1865. It was endorsed by Joseph Arch, the staunchly liberal and somewhat autocratic founder of the first agricultural workers union. When Mill died in 1873, Alfred Russell Wallace briefly held the reins, but the LTRA wound itself up in 1876.

*Land Nationalisation Society* The LNS was set up in 1881 by Wallace, the naturalist who worked on the theory of evolution through natural selection at the same time as Darwin; he had undertaken a similar programme of global research on species differentiation. Wallace took from his own and Darwin's theories the notion of species surviving and evolving through the process of adaptation to the natural environment(s) which they inhabited. Evolution for Wallace was a social / collective process, driven primarily by co-creation rather than inter-personal or inter-species struggle and conflict. He has been seen subsequently as an early ecologist. Wallace did not define himself as a socialist and the LNS did not affiliate to any of the early socialist parties. Like many late-19th century radicals, Wallace looked to the more interventionist end of liberalism. Pragmatically, liberalism was perceived as the 'best bet' for securing some form of reform, even for something as far-reaching as land nationalisation. Wallace's book on land nationalisation is the most systematic exposition of the subject at that time and the LNS remained active in publicising and building support for the notion of land nationalisation through to WW1.

*English Land Reform League* Founded in 1883, the ELRL, was a breakaway from the LNS. What came to be central to the ELRL were the ideas of the American social theorist and land reformer, Henry George. George's 1879 book – best known by its short title *Progress and Poverty*<sup>19</sup> – provided a critique not just of landlordism, but of

the exploitative dimensions of industrial development more widely. George's critique did not emerge from the Locke - Smith - Mill - Marx tradition of political economy. His formulation of the shortcomings of capitalism drew on the experience of American economic development – in which the rights of individual property ownership retained a real purchase as the basis for a radical renewal programme. George unequivocally retained the liberal principle of the right to own, exchange and use land as personal property. His radical departure lay in his proposals for the ways in which land (all land, rural and urban) and property was valued and the system of universal taxation which he built out of the land valuation procedure.

'Georgeism' was hugely popular in the USA and support grew across the UK as a result of speaking tours by George in the 1880s. His system of land valuation taxation – as it came to be called – was difficult to pin down in pragmatic detail. Georgeism offered the same social benefits as those offered by Wallace and the LNS through the mechanism of a system of a single universal tax on land valuations. By eschewing nationalisation or other forms of common / public ownership, the ELRL retained the ideological appeal / aspiration of private ownership and free market exchange. As its reach grew in the UK the ELRL renamed itself in 1902 as the *English League for the Taxation of Land Values* (not the most snappy bit of re-branding). Indeed, Georgeism continues to exercise influence to this day within the liberal tradition of debates about land ownership, use and taxation through The Henry George Foundation.<sup>20</sup>

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With their respective orientations, the various proposals for land reform of the two organisations set the broad framework for the popular political discourse for the land reform initiatives of the late-Victorian and Edwardian years. Both organisations campaigned publicly for their respective causes. The 'red vans' of the ELRL and the 'yellow vans' of the the LNS were often seen at country fairs and political gatherings handing out leaflets, providing speeches and vying with one another for support.<sup>21</sup> It was a pre-figuring of the land-related debates between economic liberals and socialists in the 20th century.

- *The urban land question*

In his overview of landownership in Britain from 1870 to 1979,<sup>22</sup> Brett Christophers contends that 'the urbanization of the land question' was the main 'new element' emerging from 1870 onwards in the arena of land and property. Given that over 75% of the population was urbanised by 1901, it was inevitable that land politics became urbanised. By then, the Liberal (and early Socialist) parties gave greater attention to the social problems caused by urban landlords, and developed land-focussed solutions to deal with problems of urban slums, ill-health, unemployment. 'Landlords [were] held responsible for many of these ills of urban society, just as they were for the difficulties of rural England'.<sup>23</sup> The political rhetoric and imagination continued to equate landowners with large rural estates but the driving reform issues were essentially urban ones.<sup>24</sup>

Initiatives such as the purchase of land for parks and recreational space by town / city councils in the late-Victorian period were the start of a process of the "municipalisation" of land ownership. An inevitable growth of infrastructural public utilities, gasworks, water boards, schools, playing fields, hospitals and so forth extended the scope of the municipalisation of land. The notion of 'land colonies' arose as a way of tackling the problems of urban unemployment by means of local authorities purchasing land in rural areas where unemployed workers and their families could be rehoused and enabled to lead healthy, productive lives on their small-holdings. From one perspective, land colonies were seen as a revival of the sorts of community / co-operative enterprises envisaged by such earlier figures as Thomas Spence and Robert Owen.<sup>25</sup> From another perspective, some poor law boards viewed land colonies more along the lines of punitive work-houses / boot camps where the poor could be taught how to behave like decent citizens.<sup>26</sup>

Also at local level, Georgeist notions of using the land tax in an urban context were devised and promoted as a means of both cutting through the complexities of rent and rate issues associated with housing and land, in favour of a single tax which, it was claimed, would by its operation promote more and better urban housebuilding.

- *Tory attitudes to land reform and neo-classical economics*

It would be a mis-reading of this period to assume that nothing was changing in the Tory world of land economy. The initial Tory reaction to land reform proposals was to re-assert their classic positions on land – i.e. the undiluted assertion of Lockean rights of property ownership. Indeed, they even went so far as to found their own land league.

#### *Liberty and Property Defence League*

The LPDL, set up in 1882 by Lord Elcho, supported laissez-faire economics, private property rights and possessive individualism generally. It sought to counter the growing popular interest in

Georgeism, trade unionism, socialism, land nationalisation. . . Worth noting that its main theorist was Herbert Spencer, an evolutionary theorist along with Darwin and Wallace. Spencer's take on evolution gave pride of place to the notion of the survival of the fittest. This accorded well with Spencer's wider view, as a social theorist, of competitive individualism in a market economy.

Aware perhaps that the LPDL was a tad out of touch with the lived experience of the wider male electorate, the Tories also set up the *Primrose League* in 1883 with the aim, *inter alia*, of fighting the corner for free enterprise. It was less explicitly *parti pris* on land, and was a not insignificant body in enabling a crucial change of tack on property issues across the Tory Party before WW1:

*. . . in ideological and policy terms the Conservatives underwent a tectonic shift in these years, transforming themselves from the party of landed property to the party of property in general. What Lord Salisbury once called 'pure squire Conservatism' was replaced by a more democratic variant, one that acknowledged the effects of mass enfranchisement on the character of the political nation. The party's response to the land question was central to this ideological realignment. Influenced by patriotic considerations, this response shifted from a late Victorian championing of the old rural order, seen by its defenders as distinctively English, to an Edwardian advocacy of land reform as a means of bolstering the social stability, health and moral fibre of a nation menaced by the twin perils of socialism and rural decay.<sup>27</sup>*

The Tory shift towards being "the party of property in general" was to be absolutely crucial in the politics of land from the 1920s onward.

In a similar vein, behind the scenes in the groves of academe, a reframing of the theoretical legacy of Adam Smith was taking place. Mill's mid-century re-articulation of that legacy came to be perceived as unsound and potentially too radical. The realities of a globalising capitalism were such that a new over-arching theoretical framework was called for. Which was what economists like Alfred Marshall in Cambridge were up to, leading to the creation of the ostensibly more scientific and mathematically-informed Neo-Classical Economics<sup>28</sup> in which the labour theories of value and property / land were reframed. Locke, land and even Adam Smith were being moved sideways from their historic centrality in capitalist theory. This did not translate directly or immediately into practical politics or schemes for national economic management. It was more a way of setting an intellectual climate within which economically astute capitalists could move beyond simply opposing everything coming out of the reform initiatives. The upshot was that by the new century, the Tory party was making its own proposals for the valuable contribution small-holdings and allotments could make to the rural and urban economies.

- *The 1906 Liberal Government*

As noted earlier, it was the debate about urban conditions which brought the issue of land ownership to a head at the time of Lloyd George's 1910 "People's Budget". Remembered primarily for its foreshadowing of some form of welfare state as a way of tackling the intractable problems of urban poverty, destitution and a general lack of any coherent basic health and social welfare support, the budget opted to pillory rentier landowners as the source of the problems of the urban poor. In his Limehouse Speech defending his budget proposals, Lloyd George observed:

*The landlord is a gentleman – I have not a word to say about him in his personal capacity – the landlord is a gentleman who does not earn his wealth. He does not even trouble to receive his wealth. He has a host of agents and clerks to receive it for him. He does not even take the trouble to spend his wealth. He has a host of people around him to do the actual spending for him. He never sees it until he comes to enjoy it. His sole function, his chief pride is the stately consumption of wealth produced by others.<sup>29</sup>*

His colleague, the President of the Board of Trade and the youngest cabinet minister since the early-19th century, was even more outspoken:

*Roads are made, streets are made, services are improved, electric light turns night into day, water is brought from reservoirs a hundred miles off in the mountains — all the while the landlord sits still. Every one of those improvements is affected by the labor and cost of other people and the taxpayers. To not one of these improvements does the land monopolist contribute, and yet, by every one of them the value of his land is enhanced. He renders no service to the community, he contributes nothing to the general welfare, he contributes nothing to the process from which his own enrichment is derived...The unearned increment on the land is reaped by the land monopolist in exact proportion, not to the service, but to the disservice done.<sup>30</sup>*

As it happens, neither the 1910 budget nor subsequent legislation before WW1, made good on these threats to rein in the power of landowners. The Lockean exclusionary system was not breached from within the liberal tradition. It remained intact and continued to shape the terrain on which issues of land and property were fought during the inter-war years.

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### **2.3 Common Ownership**

I now return to the Diggers and explore what transpired between 1649 and 1918 in relation to *Common Ownership*, the motif which was central to their identity, their politics, and their engagement with the land. I leave the commanding heights of the politics of land within the ambit of the ideologically dominant Lockean / liberal tradition. My gaze turns to those who, in one way or another, sought to develop a politics of land which was not rooted in the assumptions of possessive individualism and the 'naturalness' of aspirations to own property privately and exclusively. What did things look like if one started from the notion that we are essentially social beings and can best approach issues of land ownership on the basis of values of mutuality and collective endeavour? How brightly was the flame of The Diggers' Common Treasury burning by 1918?

### **a. Thomas Spence – carrying the flame forward**

In 1775, a year before Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, another Enlightenment rationalist succinctly exposed the flaws in Locke's theory of property. Thomas Spence, a radical auto-didact – not a Professor of Moral Philosophy – has not been granted the same historical stature as his contemporaries and fellow radicals and polemicists, Tom Paine and William Godwin. Born in Newcastle, Spence spent much of his largely impoverished life in London, where he found himself jailed, every now and then, on sedition and treason charges. Spence claimed (not unreasonably) that he was the first to use the phrase "Rights of Man" and he had a critical correspondence with both Paine and Godwin. He also had *A Plan*, which, in summary, was clear and straightforward:

1. *the end of aristocracy and landlords;*
2. *all land should be publicly owned by 'democratic parishes', which should be largely self-governing;*
3. *rents of land in parishes to be shared equally amongst parishioners;*
4. *universal suffrage (including female suffrage) at both parish level and through a system of deputies elected by parishes to a national senate;*
5. *a 'social guarantee' extended to provide income for those unable to work;*
6. *the 'rights of infants' to be free from abuse and poverty.<sup>31</sup>*

Spence's *Plan* did not enter into the sorts of philosophical arguments with Burke conducted by Paine. Spence was not a global revolutionary theorist, moving between the newly independent States in America, and Republican and Napoleonic France. Nor did Spence's *Plan* require him to formulate the principles, language and practice of a wholly new 'moral economy' along the lines attempted by the anarchist Godwin.<sup>32</sup> Spence's *Plan* sprang directly from the practical experience of English rural life in the late-eighteenth century, coupled with a clear-sighted recognition of the basic flaws in the Lockean theory of property ownership.

Spence provided one of the least complicated statements of an alternative, collectivist / communitarian approach to land ownership and management:

*Hence it is plain that the land or earth, in any country or neighbourhood, with everything in or on the same, or pertaining thereto, belongs at all times to the living inhabitants of the said country or neighbourhood in an equal manner. For, as I said before, there is no living but on land and its productions, consequently, what we cannot live without we have the same property in as our lives. . . .*

*. . . Let it be supposed, then, that the whole people in some country, after much reasoning and deliberation, should conclude that every man has an equal property in the land in the neighbourhood where he resides. They therefore resolve that if they live in society together, it shall only be with a view that everyone may reap all the benefits from their natural rights and privileges possible.*

*Therefore a day shall appointed on which the inhabitants of each parish meet, in their respective parishes, to take their long-lost rights into possession, and to form themselves into corporations. So then each parish becomes a corporation, and all men who are inhabitants become members or burghers. The land, with all that appertains to it, is in every parish made the property of the corporation or parish, with as ample power to let, repair, or alter all or any part thereof as a lord of the manor enjoys over his lands, houses, etc.; but the power of alienating the least morsel, in any manner, from the parish either at this or any time hereafter is denied. For it is solemnly agreed to, by the whole nation, that a parish that shall either sell or give away any part of its landed property, shall be looked upon with as much horror and detestation, and used by them as if they had sold all their children to be slaves, or massacred them with their own hands. Thus are there no more nor other lands in*

*the whole country than the parishes; and each of them is sovereign lord of its own territories.*<sup>33</sup>

Spence's 'parochial communism' deftly blocked off the problems of inheritance, exchange, rent and so forth and presents an argument rooted in the institutional and agricultural arrangements of the late-eighteenth century, familiar to the people to whom his pamphlets and lectures were addressed.

Spence was, of course, simply one voice speaking into a huge chorus of radical ideas, schemes and proposals during the early industrial era. There was no Spencean land movement; what he put forward had to jostle along with all the other ideas which shaped the thinking of the emerging working class, both rural and urban. What Spence did was to put down a marker that it was possible to envisage different ways of owning and managing land and different ways of overseeing that ownership.

Echoes of Spence's system of parochial land ownership can be heard in the thinking and practice of such figures as Robert Owen. Owen gravitated toward forms of co-operative enterprise and, by the 1830s, he defined himself as a socialist – one of the earliest to do so in the UK. Through his writings, he prompted a few others in the UK to set up 'Utopian Communities'<sup>34</sup> such as Manea Fen in the 1830s. Most were shortlived; what did emerge and survive from this period to keep the flame of co-operation alive, was the consumer co-operative movement set by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844.

Similarly, Chartism had a land reform strand in the form of the Chartist Co-operative Land Company. Given the increasing turbulence in the rural / agricultural sector of the economy during and after the repeal of the Corn Laws, there was a sense that 'something needed to be done' to support rural landless workers and poorer tenant farmers. The Chartists surfaced a range of cogent critiques of the system of English land tenure. The contours of their agenda for land reform had elements of Spence's system; they advanced the cause of small-holdings but not the Spencean over-arching framework of parochial common ownership. Nothing of sustained substance transpired in practice.

### **b. Visions of Socialism 1870 – 1918**

My next port of call in tracing the progress of *Common Ownership* is the clamour of voices, visions, groups, parties, movements, schemes and so forth which shaped the broadly-defined pre-WW1 politics of socialism and communism. This is a rich terrain full of sound and fury and deeply riven by contradictory notions of what a socialist / communist society would look like and how it would come about. I draw on the writings of eight key socialist 'influencers' of that period: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, John Ruskin, Edward Carpenter, William Morris, Robert Blatchford, Beatrice and Sidney Webb.<sup>35</sup> Between them, they generated a rich array of ideas on issues relating to land, property and common ownership which were to shape the politics of the inter-war years. The early socialists fell into two broad camps: the urban-cum-industrial socialists and the ruralist socialists.

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I'll look first at the urban-cum-industrial socialists – i.e. those who perceived socialism to be primarily created from within the urban and industrial environment of the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Pre-eminent amongst these were, of course, Marx and Engels, who were notoriously unwilling to provide any clear vision of a socialist / communist society. In their opposition to all forms of 'utopianism' they only offered somewhat abstract generalisations:

*In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor,*

*has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!*<sup>36</sup>

*As soon as there is no longer any social class to be held in subjection; as soon as class rule, and the individual struggle for existence based upon our present anarchy in production, with the collisions and excesses arising from these, are removed, nothing more remains to be repressed, and a special repressive force, a state, is no longer necessary. The first act by virtue of which the state really constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society — the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society — this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies out of itself; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not "abolished". It dies out.*<sup>37</sup>

The Social Democratic Federation [SDF] set itself up in 1881 as the guardian and standard-bearer of the Marxist agenda. They single-mindedly carried forward what they took to be the orthodox, class-based insurrectionary / direct action schema set out in 1848 Communist Manifesto. They proudly put the state nationalisation of all property at the top of their agenda and their manifestoes, but had little or no interest in anything else to do with land or the countryside. Their vision was for a socialist future which was predominantly urban and industrial and arose from the class struggle in those areas. Like Marx and Engels, the SDF was reluctant to engage in offering utopian visions of a socialist England.

A similar urban-cum-industrial approach to socialism also informed the endeavours of The Fabian Society. They diverged hugely from the SDF in matters of political strategies; the Fabians were by definition in the gradualist, reforming, long-term change camp. They envisaged socialism as being created through legislation and public administration. They paid attention to the affairs of local authorities – and hence became dubbed the 'gas and water' socialists. They also eschewed grand visions and had little to say about rural matters, agriculture or the countryside generally. The Webbs may have enjoyed walks on Box Hill, but they were quintessentially urban-oriented modernists, not ruralists.

But . . . and it is a hugely important and hugely paradoxical "but" . . . it was Sidney Webb who eventually drew up the first constitution for the Labour Party, when it finally got round to sorting itself out for the possibility of government in the post-WW1 world. Sidney Webb penned the (in)famous "Clause 4" which was adopted in 1918 and which formally set out the aims of the Labour Party as a socialist Party for the best part of the 20th century, before Tony Blair re-wrote it to take out the common ownership element.

*To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.*

The notion of *common ownership* finally made it into the public domain of a significant political party. Webb's 'means of production, distribution and exchange' and the sort of legislative programme undertaken by the 1945 Labour government were all to do with industries, public utilities, and co-operative retailing. . . Still, in one form or another, the notion of the common ownership and the nationalisation of land found their way into every subsequent Labour Party General Election Manifesto from 1923 to 1945.

. . . Whether this is what the Diggers had in mind is debatable. . .

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What of the 'ruralist socialists'? Their visions of socialism – which were widely held in the decades before 1914 – were deeply imbued by a far-reaching rejection of the industrial and urban order as it had become by the late-Victorian years.<sup>38</sup>

Their pervasive visions of socialism centred around the notion of socialism as an essentially rural social order, entailing in some instances quite extensive (revolutionary even) de-industrialisation and de-urbanisation. Starting from the premise that capitalism was the source of the manifest inequities, degradations and dehumanisation of late-nineteenth century urban and industrial environment, there were two broad approaches to the creation of a rural socialist society. The first, prompted by a Rousseauesque renunciation of 'capitalist civilisation' generally, sought a utopian or ethical route to building a new social order based on more nature-based approaches organising personal and social life. The second sought to recover / return to a lost rural golden age, a more harmonious and mutual social order prefigured in earlier periods of English history.

The troubled Victorian sage John Ruskin can be taken as a forerunner of a distinctively English approach to rural socialism. Ruskin presented an intensely ethical vision of what he defined as an "Old Communist" society. Work / labour were at the heart of social life, organised around a simple, wholesome private / personal life, a strong ethic of caring and giving (definitely not possessive individualism), and informed by the nurturing of an aesthetically and culturally rich shared public domain. Issues of ownership, inequality, class difference *et al* were subsumed within a framework of private and personal asceticism, an ethic of giving and an aesthetic of public splendour.

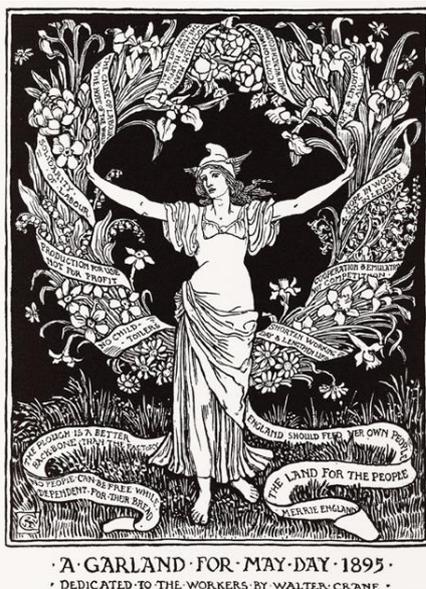
Edward Carpenter was one of the pre-eminent English ethical / utopian socialists of the pre-WW1 decades. A poet and open advocate of gay rights and other progressive causes, Carpenter and his partner lived for many years on the south-eastern edge of the Dark Peak. Like Rousseau, he saw the then existing 'civilisation' as irredeemably flawed and inhumane. He was not, however, entirely anti-industrial, and he acknowledged that railways, the telegraph and technologies generally would be part of the utopian socialist future he sought. But in the first instance, the underpinning social order would have to be rebuilt on a new ethical foundation. He was particularly concerned that social mores should be oriented much more towards sandal-wearing outdoor life rather than indoor modes of living, along with more healthy, vegetarian diets. A new socialist common weal was to be built on the basis of local communities, networks and associations taking collective responsibility for the entirety of their social, economic and cultural life together. Insofar as he was a party man, Carpenter's tendencies were more towards the Independent Labour Party's [ILP] broad church socialism, than the programmatic rigours of the SDF's urban-industrial class struggle or the administrative analyses of the Fabians.

Pre-raphaelite artist, arts and crafts movement instigator and indefatigable left political activist, William Morris turns up in all sorts of places across the late-19th century socialist firmament. He defined himself as a Marxist and was a close friend and ally of Marx's daughter, Eleanor – herself a major left activist. He was an early member of the SDF, but left it to found his own socialist grouping.<sup>39</sup> He came to be strongly identified with the notion of socialism as the recovery of an earlier rural social order, characterised not just by a more humane moral code but, for Morris, a more satisfying aesthetic. In his futuristic novel *News from Nowhere* he offered an elaborate vision of a future communist society to which socialists should aspire. It was post-industrialist; such industry as was necessary was underaken along craft / guild lines. It was a money- property- and politics-less society, appearing in the guise of a strangely late-medievalist aestheticism and informed by a wholly new moral order. Interestingly Morris was familiar with the Marxist programme for revolutionary transformation. Much of the middle section of *News from Nowhere* is a detailed account of how his socialist utopia emerged from the various stages of the revolutionary process set out by Marx and the SDF, including the transition from capitalism to socialism and then on to communism. It was not, for Morris, an entirely peaceful or consensual process; it involved class struggle and violent contestation at times.

Arguably the most directly influential of the English ruralist socialists was Robert Blatchford. A sometime military man, Blatchford was the publisher of the weekly newspaper, *The Clarion*, first issued from Manchester in 1891. It was widely read and many leaning to the left politically during the pre- WW1 years attributed their introduction to socialism to *The Clarion*.<sup>40</sup>

Whereas there was a coherence to Morris's and Carpenter's vision of socialism, Blatchford's was more idiosyncratic and eclectic. His regular articles in the *Clarion*<sup>41</sup> were a hodge podge of socialist economic theory, observations on the inequities of urban and industrial life, comparisons between the ugliness of Oldham and the pleasantness of Dorking as places to live, anecdotes about social mores, and a fair sprinkling of his support for the civilising role of the British Empire and his virulent opposition of all things Germanic. . . . But his columns were accessible and popular. Those who followed them closely also discovered that Blatchford was in favour of the rapid de-industrialisation of England and a return to English agricultural self-sufficiency. He entered and left most of the socialist parties over the years and, unlike Morris or Carpenter, never really offered any guidance on how his vision of socialism could be brought about – other than 'growing more socialists'.

Alongside the writings of Carpenter, Morris et al, the pervasive iconography of the artist Walter Crane for the early socialist movement tended to reinforce the vision of a socialist society as a withdrawal from urbanisation and industrialisation and a return to an essentially rural social life with, in Crane's and Morris's case, the recovery of what they imagined to be the lost commons, rural harmony, attire and aesthetic of the late-medieval era in England.<sup>42</sup>



The 'rural socialists' were obviously pre-occupied with issues of land, nature and the countryside. But with the exception of William Morris, they did not concern themselves unduly with the politics or even the practice of common ownership. One doesn't find much in their writing about issues of enclosure or, indeed, how the countryside would be 'unenclosed'. Would it be parcelled out along the lines of the owner-occupier system promoted by Wallace, or the parochial corporations of Spence a century earlier? Or would it be state ownership? Would it even be a sort of radical Georgism?

The notions of *common ownership* found in pre-WW1 socialist thinking, reflected the wider tensions and contradictions of urban and rural relationships and identities at that time. What was absent from both the urban and the rural visions of socialist common ownership was an informed grounding of their various scenarios in the lived realities of rural communities in the wake of the agricultural depression.<sup>43</sup> The Fabians and the SDF knew little of the problems of rural community

life and agricultural practice. The various ethical and utopian rural socialists presented their visions through a prism of idealisations of country life and/or notions of a lost golden age / rural idyll. When it came to thinking about the economics of agriculture and the politics of countryside more generally, most active members of the various socialist parties tended to draw on the dominant culturally constructed notions of the countryside of the pre-WW1 decades. So, when the Labour Party eventually began to build a political presence in rural England in the inter-war years, it was hardly surprising that it faced a huge challenge to be accepted as anything other than an urban-only political party with little substantial knowledge of the challenges and aspirations of those who actually lived and worked in the countryside.<sup>44</sup>

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## **2.4 Direct Action**

I now turn to the historic hinterlands of *Direct Action*, the third of the motifs of the Mass Trespass which was foreshadowed by the Diggers in 1649. To set this part of the reflection in motion I offer Rob Sparrow's definition of *Direct Action*.

*Direct Action aims to achieve our goals through our own activity rather than through the actions of others. It is about people taking power for themselves. In this, it is distinguished from most other forms of political action such as voting, lobbying, attempting to exert political pressure through industrial action or through the media. All of these activities... concede our power to existing institutions which work to prevent us from acting ourselves to change the status quo. Direct Action repudiates such acceptance of the existing order and suggests that we have both the right and the power to change the world. It demonstrates this by doing it.*<sup>45</sup>

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The Diggers' actions certainly met Sparrow's criteria. They sought to change the *status quo* and they did so through taking action directly, by and for themselves. They did not lobby Cromwell's New Model Army or the MPs of the Long Parliament to set aside some land for them or to legislate on communal forms of land tenure and make the buying and selling of land illegal. They took matters into their own hands and simply occupied the land; they demonstrated how one ought to live and work within the Common Treasury by doing it.

It is, however, a moot point whether the Diggers set in train a 'thin red line' of land-related *Direct Action* stretching all the way to the Mass Trespass in 1932. Protest movements, even those which are large and/or sustained, are not necessarily instances of direct action politics. How, for example, is one to determine whether the machine-breaking Luddites were engaged in direct action or making a dramatic protest in favour of retaining / returning to the status quo of cottage-industry? Although Chartism had a 'Physical Force' dimension, its primary focus was creating pressure for parliamentary and electoral reform. Chartists did not aim to set up their own, alternative forms of direct democracy. In a similar vein, were the dramatic and occasionally violent and disruptive actions of the militant suffragettes of the WSPU forms of direct action? Or were they simply dramatic acts of protest aiming (often at the cost of real personal and group harm) to build support for their cause?

Another complication arose because the politics of *Direct Action* became embroiled throughout the 19th century in the ferocious arguments between Communists and Socialists on the one hand and the broadly-defined Anarchists on the other about the role of the State in the transition to their respective visions of a future, social order.<sup>46</sup> For Communists and Socialists direct action involved an initial and necessary seizure of the state (either through elections or insurrection); the institutions of the state were then to be used to usher in the economic, political, social and

ideological transitions necessary to the building of a socialist society. For Anarchists, direct action quite deliberately by-passed state institutions and set about building a new and more equitable social order 'directly' from the bottom up. In relation to the politics of land and the ending of property relationships, that pervasive division was reflected in the arguments between Marx and Proudhon over the origin of property. For Marx property was an expression of the class interests of the bourgeoisie; for Proudhon (famously) "Property is Theft". Interestingly, if one reads the whole of Winstanley's *The True Levellers* . . . the Diggers appear to have held both positions!

At this juncture, I do no more than note the debate between socialism and anarchism. For the most part, the Socialist traditions of direct action were predominant throughout much of the 20th century. By the end of the 20th century, however, there was a re-emergence of dimensions of the Anarchist traditions of Direct Action in relation to the politics of land and the countryside. I will explore this more fully in Reflection 6.

To my mind, there has always been something unpredictable about *Direct Action*. The potential for *Direct Action* is inherent in all sorts of campaigns and movements. But, by virtue of its characteristic self-activity, different groups will read a situation and "seize the moment" in different ways. It is a highly 'context-specific' form of political engagement. *Direct Actions* are unexpected and unsettling eruptions on to the ostensibly more stable terrain of what constitutes 'normal politics' at any given time. From that pragmatic perspective, it is worth noting three forms of late-19th and early-20th century Direct Action which had a bearing on the politics of the Mass Trespass in the inter-war years.

In the first place, there were some precursor acts of collective / mass trespass in the cause of recreational access to the countryside. In 1871, thousands protested against enclosures in Epping Forest. In 1887, 2000 members and supporters of the newly formed Keswick and District Footpaths Preservation Association broke down barriers and blockages in order to walk along a path up to the summit of Latrigg. A local guide-book writer gave a summit speech in which he observed, with that slightly grandiose rhetoric which is often the hallmark of direct action:

*To-day you are showing to the world a spirit which will kindle such a fire as will light up the British Isles. (Cheers.) 'Latrigg' must be the watchword, and the question of access to our mountain tops having been disputed we must not rest satisfied until the ancient rights have been conceded, or the question is discussed and settled on the broadest principles. (Cheers.) If we have no right of access to the summit of Latrigg, then we have no right to ascend other similar mountains in Great Britain.*<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, in 1896 members of the SDF in Bolton set in motion the trespasses on to the summit of Winter Hill, the stretch of open moorland which dominates the town. As they walked from the town centre up towards Winter Hill they were joined by several thousand members of the local community. Having broken the gates barring their way on to the moorland, they trespassed on to Winter Hill in a spirit of community resistance to the blocking of the long-standing right of way across Winter Hill. And just to prove their point, they did it all again in festive mood on a couple of weekends afterwards.<sup>48</sup>

Secondly, the years of the extension of the male franchise were also the years of New Unionism<sup>49</sup> and a significant growth of collective industrial action. Within the union movement, Direct Action came to be associated with particular forms of trade union activity. Consider Ben Tillet's reflections on the 1911 London Dock Strike:

*It just grew out of despair, the very madness of despair: almost hysterically the human cry of protest broke out. We smothered it for a month, we "leaders," we "dictators," for we had not realised the hot resentment and stubborn determination of the men.*

*The employers scoffed at our exasperation. We simply told the men what the employers thought of them The men grew restive, then angry, and then the thought came to them like an*

*inspiration: they would no longer labour. Sulkily, by scores of thousands, they left their work. The work stopped – dead. Milk, ice, eggs, meat, vegetables, fruit, all manner of foods and necessaries lay there, out of public reach. The stream of London's food supplies stopped . . .*

*Twenty thousand dockers, six hundred stevedores, six thousand lightermen, six thousand coalies, six thousand wharf-workers, four thousand granary men, forty thousand carmen, and ten thousand others joined; there was no work for tens of thousands of others. Transport was choked, the life circulation of trade was clodged, and the impotent kings of Capital raved drivell about soldiers and prisons and gallows and guns.*

*It was Direct Action with a vengeance. Only the hunger of the poor made a settlement possible. But the public were frightened into hysterics over the possibility of a famine – frightened in a week – and denounced the men and the people, half of whom are famine stricken fifty-two weeks in the year.*

*What a lesson in economics! It ought to be made patent what this all means. Employers for the first time offered advances to the men without solicitation. Strange, but true. The fear of democracy was in their hearts – a dread greater than the fear of God.<sup>50</sup>*

As Ben Tillett later observed in this article, such forms of collective / direct action have invariably been accompanied by an almost ritualised clamour of press / media condemnation:

*"Mob Law in London! Police helpless! Government impotent! Demagogues as dictators! Wolf at our doors! Men compelled to leave their honest toil! Sufferings of the poor! Reign of terror! Where are the respectable leaders of Labour? Where is the Cabinet? Where are the troops?" Heaven in its mercy leaves us always the Press in all our afflictions.*

Strikes were at the heart of many of the arguments about *Direct Action*. Insofar as a strike is a protest against current wages and working conditions and a request / demand that an employer does something towards improving those wages and conditions, then it is arguably not 'direct action'.

On the other hand, a strike which is part of a wider process by which the strikers are seeking to extend their control over the organisation could be seen as direct action. That was certainly the case for the Syndicalist movement which flourished across some areas of the trade union movement during the early years of the 20th century. For the syndicalists, industrial relations and trade union collective actions were not simply a process of forceful negotiation over the terms and conditions of the employment contract; they were an active dimension of the wider class struggle and the process whereby an organised working class extended its control over the means of production – what subsequently became the movement for workers' control. As Tom Mann put it at the 1910 meeting in Manchester to set up *The Industrial Syndicalist Education League*:

*. . . [e]conomic emancipation of the working class can only be secured by the working class asserting its power in workshops, factories, warehouses, mills and mines, on ships and boats and engines, and wherever work is performed, ever extending their control over the tools of production until, by the power of the organised proletariat, capitalist production shall entirely cease and the industrial socialist republic shall be ushered in, and this the Socialist Revolution realised.<sup>51</sup>*

The industrial relations dimension of *Direct Action* was particularly prominent during the 1920s and 1930s.

Thirdly, and by way of a contrast, once the First World War loomed another significant form of non-violent Direct Action emerged in the shape of the pacifist and conscientious objector movement. In certain respects, this was to have a direct resonance in the conduct of the access movement in the inter-war years. Tom Stephenson, one of the leading access campaigners during those years, sometime member of the ILP and the Labour Party and a major player in the

formation and early decades of the Ramblers' Association, was jailed from 1917 to 1919 as a result of his refusal to be conscripted and his active opposition to the war. Individually and collectively, those who objected to military service reflected a dimension of the politics of Direct Action which was to become prominent throughout the twentieth century. This was Direct Action aligned with campaigns of civil disobedience.

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In one form or another, the notion of *Direct Action* established itself as a feasible way of doing politics and campaigning by the inter-war years. It became a political option for both personal and collective action and gave a distinct edge to many of the political crises of the inter-war years. As I suggested earlier, Direct Action is inherently unpredictable, in the sense that it depends on individuals and groups seizing the moment. What is much more predictable about Direct Action is that it is met by the sorts of responses experienced by Ben Tillett in 1911. Because Direct Action enacts an alternative and a challenge to the status quo, it is a rapidly polarising form of political engagement; it touches raw nerves and often prompts quite repressive reactions. The mixture of audacity and vulnerability which is found in much Direct Action leads it to be dubbed both dangerously extremist and pointless by those whose nerves have been touched. Direct Action evokes a strong sense of the drama of politics; it blends together the storytale immediacy of the often simple actions undertaken with the mythic interplay of major competing forces. Direct Action is arguably the most visceral way, across the entire terrain of politics, of expressing one's political agency, individually and collectively.

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> The Diggers have been memorialised in Leon Rosselson's *The Diggers Song*

<sup>2</sup> Winstanley (1649) I acknowledge, by the way, that the Diggers' notion that *Man had Domination given to him, over the Beasts, Birds, and Fishes* will not find favour in many parts of the 21st-century environmental movement.

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes (1651)

<sup>4</sup> Locke (1690) *Second Treatise* Caps 5 and 9.

<sup>5</sup> One of the seven signatories to the border-line treasonous letter inviting William of Orange to come to England with this army in 1688 was the Duke of Devonshire; those signatories were the men who commissioned Locke's *Two Treatises*. As it happens, Kinder Scout (along with a lot of other land) was part of the Duke of Devonshire's Derbyshire estate until the late-twentieth century. The Duke of Devonshire was the Lockean presence lurking behind the gamekeepers in 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Locke also exercised considerable influence in America during the 18th and 19th centuries. It underpins the land arrangements of settler colonies as they established themselves and the wider thinking underpinning the US constitutional settlement. Also, if one wilfully disregarded the presence of the indigenous population owning property by virtue of occupying and working the land, and forcibly ejected them from their land, then the basis on which to establish property rights and ownership during the westward expansion across the continent was a rough and ready application of Lockeanism. More recently, Locke's standing in the politics of liberalism led to the use of his notions of an original social contract by the American political philosopher John Rawls in his defining work on Justice.

<sup>7</sup> Macpherson (1964) p.3

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<sup>8</sup> Gilbert (2014) chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Reflection 2 Resources for more about Adam Smith and early theories of capitalism

<sup>10</sup> Polanyi K (1944)

<sup>11</sup> Hobsbawm E (1962)

<sup>12</sup> Landes D (1969)

<sup>13</sup> See *Mill and Land Reform* on Reflection 2 Resources page. A few extracts and fuller discussion of this important text. I do recommend that you look through it, as Mill's approach to land reform set the dominant context for the access campaigns of walkers and rambles through to 1918.

<sup>14</sup> See Reflection 2 Resources for notes on Malthus

<sup>15</sup> See Shrubsole (2019) cap 2 *passim*. Bateman (1883) is the fourth edition of John Bateman's transcription of key parts of the Return under the title: *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland*.

<sup>16</sup> See Howkins (1991)

<sup>17</sup> Winch (2002) p 1. Hobson wrote extensively on the economics of empire - his ideas on imperialism were even taken up by Lenin and informed the Labour Party's thinking after the First World War.

<sup>18</sup> See Reflection 3 for more discussion of the Commons Preservation Society

<sup>19</sup> George (1879)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.henrygeorgefoundation.org/>

<sup>21</sup> Grant (1958)

<sup>22</sup> Christophers (2018) See pp 85 - 117 generally and pp 85 - 96 in particular for this section

<sup>23</sup> Christophers (2018) p.93

<sup>24</sup> See Ian Packer: *Unemployment, Taxation and Housing: The Urban Land Question in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Britain* in Cragoe and Readman (2010) pp 201–218

<sup>25</sup> See section 2.3 on Common Ownership motif.

<sup>26</sup> Another spur towards new thinking about the need to reform the rural economy arose from the shock of the Boer War. It was made manifestly clear that the farmers in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were not just more healthy but also considerably more competent in combat in open landscapes than the members of the British state's armed forces. Hence the only way those forces could win that war was not in battle, but by drawing on the resources available to the British imperial state to implement a scorched earth policy involving the use of mass internment and concentration camps.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Readman: *The Edwardian Land Question* in Cragoe & Readman (2010) pp. 182 – 183

<sup>28</sup> See Winch (2002) and the article by Taylor in Cragoe M and Readman (2010) pp 146 – 166.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Howkins (2003) p.13

<sup>30</sup> Google the reference and maybe surprise yourself.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.thomas-spence-society.co.uk/>

<sup>32</sup> See Reflections 2 Resources page for comments on anarchism

<sup>33</sup> Spence (1775)

<sup>34</sup> See Harrison J F C (1969 and 1979) *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America : The Quest for the New Moral World*. Charles Scribner's Sons. and *The Second Coming : popular millenarianism, 1780–1850*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

<sup>35</sup> See Reflection 2 Resources page for more information on Visions of Socialism and Organisations of Socialism

<sup>36</sup> Marx (1875)

<sup>37</sup> Engels (1877)

<sup>38</sup> There is a good survey of English rural socialism in the article by Stephen Yeo – Socialism, the state and some oppositional Englishness – in Collis and Dodd (2014) pp 331 – 388

<sup>39</sup> Morris was challenged at an SDF meeting to give an account of Marx's Theory of Value; his reply is reported as being: *To speak frankly, I do not know what Marx's Theory of Value is, and I'm damned if I want to know. Truth to say, my friends, I have tried to understand Marx's theory, but political economy is not my line, and much of it appears to me to be dreary rubbish. But I am, I hope, a Socialist none the less. It is enough political economy for me to know that the idle rich class is rich and the working class is poor, and that the rich are rich because they rob the poor.* [Quoted in Pelling H (1965) *The Origins of the Labour Party*, 2nd edn. Oxford University Press. pp 31–32.]

<sup>40</sup> It was from the paper that the more widespread Clarion Movement emerged during the late-Victorian and Edwardian years. It was a broadly cultural form of socialism, involving choirs, drama groups, writing groups, meetings, and a major strand of 'outdoor socialism' particularly through the Clarion Cycling Clubs, but also the Clarion Rambling groups. I will discuss this more fully in Reflection 3.

<sup>41</sup> They were written using the pseudonym Nunquam - "never"

<sup>42</sup> Even the Fabians had a hint of Crane's medievalism in their printed images, along with that strange stained glass window originally designed in 1910 by G B Shaw showing the intellectual leaders of Fabianism toiling away whilst the faithful worshipped at a pile of weighty tomes written by the Webbs.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fabian\\_Window](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fabian_Window)

<sup>43</sup> See Reflection 3 for more on the Great Agricultural Depression

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<sup>44</sup> Griffiths (2007).

<sup>45</sup> Sparrow (1997) See also: See Graeber (2009) A copy Chapter 5: Direct Action, Anarchism, Direct Democracy can be found at

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ad0d247af209613040b9ceb/t/5d461724f352bf000125d26b/1564874533448/Chapter+5+Direct+action%2C+Anarchism%2C+Direct+Democracy.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> See Goodway (2012) and Graeber (2009). Graeber (2014) is good introduction to anarchist politics in the late-20th and early 21st centuries.

<sup>47</sup> Readman (2018) p. 122 and Bainbridge (2020) pp 47 – 54

<sup>48</sup> Salveson (1982) The Winter Hill Trespass did, of course, give the bragging rights to the guardians of the flame of the Winter Hill trespass over the guardians of the flame of the Kinder trespass when it comes to arguments about the numbers of trespassers they could respectively mobilise in 1896 and 1932!

<sup>49</sup> See Reflection 2 Resources page for note on New Unionism

<sup>50</sup> Ben Tillett writing about the 1911 *Dock Strike* in *The Clarion*, 18 August 1911, in Frow et al (1971) pp.137 – 141.

<sup>51</sup> Tom Mann: *A Twofold Warning*. *The Industrial Syndicalist* April 1911 p.1 from *The Industrial Syndicalist: Documents in Socialist History* No 3. Intro and edited by Geoff Brown. Spokesman Books 1974.