David Nash

Duelling with the Devil you Know. Secularism in Victorian England and its Relationship to the State

> Both heaven and England are elective monarchies [. . .]. What Parliament has done Parliament can undo. (*Secular Review*, 16 February 1884)

This chapter investigates the ambivalent relationship that nineteenth-century British secularists had with the idea and reality of the state during the course of that century. Through the scrutiny of several individual careers, and their ideological output, it considers the ways many secularists theorised the state and its role. In particular, it examines what they found problematic about the state and how this – essentially – ensured that secularism in England would almost always have its heartland defined as liberal and individualist. The people studied span the whole century (and to an extent beyond) enabling us to see important elements of similarity and difference, especially if we consider the development of an ideology as well as continuity and change.

During the early nineteenth century, the state could easily be portrayed as an evil supporting established religion at the expense of freethinkers and freedom of thought. Yet equally it was reached for as the sometime panacea and enabling mechanism of reform and as a guarantor of citizenship. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century it had this deeply ambivalent potential for secularists who wanted change but equally valued their own achievements. Indeed, the achievements of secularism and its history of piecemeal gains was how the movement measured its success. When we also consider how secularism appealed to the skilled working class, a group which intersected with a considerable autodidact culture, it is possible to see how achievement was a significant class identifier. We can approach these elements through analysis of secularism's leading figures in the UK. These were encounters with power, privilege, vested interests and, optimistically, some very slightly opened doors.

Thomas Paine

If you were Thomas Paine, the man who effectively exported many Enlightenment inspired ideas from the French Revolution to England and America, theorising the future of the state meant you had first to banish the past which lay all

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around you. Paine's often acerbic writing reached into the imagination, substantially because he frequently seemed convinced that this was the key to the state's ability to wield power over its subjects. Within a secular and freethinking perspective, Paine described the state as an entity relying upon mysticism to do its work. This mysticism ensured such government relied on awe, majesty and deep impression to govern. At no point was consent and participation sought after by what forms of authority that existed. Thus it was easy to argue that such conceptions of government, those which relied upon organicism and a natural hierarchical order were illegitimate and irrational. This statement also fused criticism of the state with criticism of christianity's claims to authority. For Paine both envisaged having a hold over the minds and imaginations of humanity with no credible justification.

Structures, whether sacred or secular, were made to feel natural and graciously dispensed by a higher and benevolent power. The aim of this was to convince individuals to simply acquiesce in the country being the perennial playground of kingcraft, priestcraft and lordcraft. Too often we think that Paine here identified a range of enemies that is a sort of class analysis before class, as generally recognised by subsequent Marxist analysis. Importantly, as J.C.D Clark has warned us, too many different schools of thought too readily equip Paine with the mental agility to be a prophet of some types of modernity, self-consciously predicting revolutions and the coming of a welfare state.[1]

Considering Paine more obviously in context, we often focus upon the first half of the words 'King', 'Priest' and 'Lord'. These nouns speak of hierarchy and class, as well as means and motives for oppression. But we need to look beyond this because we neglect the importance of the additional word 'craft', be it verb or adjective, and its ability to scrutinise issues around manner, idiom and forms of hegemony. We should remember that the notion of 'craft' implies cleverness, deceit and a hard to resist appeal predicated upon the use of mysticism. Paine indicated that the governance of his age, and thus the state, were illegitimate and held the minds of its citizens fundamentally in a form of mental slavery. He did link the critique of monarchy and the critique of religion, and specifically he saw the monarchy of his age had been inherited as a product of the judeo-christian world. This he saw as distorted and damaging something he described as offensive, idolatrous and anathema to the true religion of his deism: "[W]hen a man seriously reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of Kings, he need not wonder, that the

1 J.C.D. Clark, *Thomas Paine: Britain, America, and France in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Almighty ever jealous of his honor, should disapprove of a form of government which so obviously invades the prerogative of heaven."[2]

In *The Rights of Man* he argued: "It can only be by blinding the understanding of man, and making him believe that government is some wonderful mysterious thing, that excessive revenues are obtained. Monarchy is well calculated to ensure this end. It is the popery of government; a thing kept up to amuse the ignorant and quiet them into taxes."[3]

Paine spoke for the commercial interest seeing this as linked to the essential justice of democracy, importantly as a desperately needed panacea for the ills of the societies he witnessed. As Matteo Batistini has argued, "the nation-states could renew their political legitimation only by answering to the popular demands of liberty, equality and prosperity that would rise from their societies. In other words, the national and international policies of the nineteenth century would rest upon the interrelation between commercial expansion and democratization."[4]

This idea of searching for a panacea for the ills perpetuated by society's alliance with the state greatly motivated the subsequent freethought movement in Britain. As such, freethinkers continued a culture of criticism and searching for alternative solutions that reappears in the ideas and actions of Owen, Holyoake, Bradlaugh and Besant. Paine's interest in funding forms of welfare also indicated that the state should be indicted for its failure to deliver material prosperity. Nonetheless, it was also charged to deliver what we would now call human flourishing. This could not happen, according to Paine, since our best natures were denied by mysticism that the state promoted and endorsed.

Thomas Paine's faith in democracy was built upon reading and thinking publics – arguably a cultural outlook which made him beloved of the secularist movement's socially self-made and autodidact members. Paine may never have contemplated that modernity's communications media could eventually become complicit in the mysticism he argued should be swept away. The individuals that subscribe to monarchy now, express narratives and tropes of admiration, selfless service and lifetime devotion. Were he alive to see it Paine might argue our society has gone the way that Edmund Burke and the arch conservatives alongside him wanted it to. Laws, institutions of government and societal interests may

2 Thomas Paine, "Of the Origin and Design of Government in General with Concise Remarks on the English constitution," in *Common Sense* (Philadephia: R. Bell, 1776).

3 Thomas Paine, "Of the Old and New Systems of Government of the Present'," in *The Rights of Man, Part Two* (1792).

4 Matteo Battistini, "Living in Transition in the Atlantic World: Democratic Revolution and Commercial Society in the Political Writings of Thomas Paine," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* (June 2012), https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo.63485.

have evolved organically, but they still require forms of alluring mysticism which very evidently is a powerful and still successful method of garnering consent in the contemporary world. This mystique that surrounds monarchy and hierarchies is one element that cements a connection between secularism and the republican movement – one that transcends the simple personal connections of Paine or Bradlaugh – but more of this later.

But we must also place Paine back into an international context and note how his pronouncements on the British Constitution sit alongside both critique and admiration of constructed forms of alternative government in France and the US. Although he was aware of it, Paine may probably not have envisaged the precise nature of attitudes to English/British exceptionalism – something reinforced by musings upon the history of government and society both before and after Paine's own time. This perplexing but durable narrative provides a window onto the British people's exceptionally fuzzy – almost mystical – views of the state. One arguably aided and abetted by avoiding the seventeenth-century's religious wars (certainly evident in some outlooks). Likewise, the country also avoided the substantial upheavals many European countries experienced as a result of the French Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, and the commune of 1870. The upheavals in Russia, Germany, Italy and Austria in the immediate aftermath of the First World War were scarcely replicated in Britain. But as a result of these 'absences' Britain talked itself into an exceptionalism which meant it was scared of the violence to morals and society that it could readily imagine. Only the providential favour of the almighty had prevented such carnage – plenty of evidence for this exists in popular statements about blasphemy and letters to the Home Office.[5]

Early Century Precursors

If you were one of those who inherited the mantle of Thomas Paine – Richard Carlile, his wife, his sister and a number of compatriots in the 1820s – you would argue that the state was something that prohibited free speech, free argument and the rational access to knowledge. This was knowledge of everything from the mysteries of how the country was governed and ideas of 'legitimacy', right through to mysteries of birth control.

The state hid behind a number of private agencies, such as the vice society which it sponsored to bring prosecutions for blasphemy and sedition against Car-

5 See David Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain, 1789 to the Present* (Middlesex: Routledge, 2021).

lile and many others.[6] The state was thus cowardly and afraid of public opinion but nonetheless prepared to use the courtroom to silence individuals. It thus appeared interventionist without ever giving its reasons for doing so. Nonetheless these defendants were always successful at painting these reasons as thoroughly negative ones.

Robert Owen in the 1830s and 1840s – the individual whose utopianism was one of the inspirations behind the early nineteenth-century secularist movement – found himself confronting the state as a direct opponent of his programme. The state to Owen was the 'Old Immoral World' – something that enabled reckless capitalism to alienate individuals from the means of production (conceived of in a manner that predates Karl Marx). Owen wanted communitarianism and an economic escape from the terrors and inequities of the market. For Owen the state was also the protector of state religions and the evils they perpetrated. But, interestingly, Owen did at one point approach kings and prime ministers inviting them to see the rationality of his own utopian system, actively inviting them to dissolve themselves as institutions so that this would usher in the New Moral World.[7]

George Jacob Holyoake, a prime mover in the co-operative movement and the founder of nineteenth-century secularism, was a fellow traveller of Owen, at least for a time. After the collapse of Owenism, Holyoake's watchword was protection and this shaped his foundation of the mid-century ideology of secularism. Before this he was instrumental in founding the defensively minded Anti-Persecution Union, and its journal gives an interesting insight into one species of ambivalence about the state. The *Movement and Anti-Persecution Union Gazette* espoused religious progress as an ideal – but its pages are full of the prosecutions of its advocates in London, Scotland, Madeira in the Atlantic and elsewhere. Prompting his paper to assert: "To say that private men have nothing to do with government, is to say that private men have nothing to do with their own happiness and misery".[8]

So we can see the essence of secularist outlooks in this statement in the 1840s demonstrating the state operating as an agent of repression – but ultimately (if

6 The best single account of Carlile and his agitation is Michael Laccohee Bush, *The Friends and Following of Richard Carlile: A Study of Infidel Republicanism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Tarpon Springs: Twopenny Press, 2016).

7 For Owen, see Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints. Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Frank O'Hagan and Robert A Davis, *Robert Owen* (London: Continuum Press, 2010); John F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: Quest for the New Moral World* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

8 *The Movement* 4 (1843): 7.

we believe in progress) it can be the agent of enablement. Arguably the task facing secularists in the mid-nineteenth century was to refine, develop and articulate what that enablement might mean.

Provincial Secularism – Sydney Gimson and Leicester

If one were Sydney Gimson (president of England's most successful provincial Secular Society in the English midlands, an organisation which flourished especially in the 1880s) – a man who was also a local engineering employer in Leicester – the state was potentially malevolent. Sydney Gimson provided provincial England's most durable and successful lecturing platform from the 1880s until well into the twentieth century. As a lecture chair and audience member he listened intently to the various currents of political theory debated at the Leicester Secular Society during this period. Thus he was exposed to Fabian socialism, the cultural socialism of William Morris and the Eastern European anarchism of Stepniak.[9] But he eschewed all to become a devotee of Herbert Spencer's individualist liberalism and libertarianism, and of other individualist movements such as the Liberty and Property Defence League. This organisation saw socialism as engaged upon the annexation of property and an assault upon the freedoms which had arguably become a cornerstone of secularism's critique of state power and its misuse. As such Gimson was representative of many dragged from liberalism to its extreme edge in the shape of libertarianism. These men effectively stayed as mid-century radicals when others (such as Frederick James Gould and many who had been attracted to positivism) saw more potential in the aspirations of the labour movement.[10]

But which Charles Bradlaugh?

In looking at the British secular movement, and its progress throughout the nineteenth century, we are invariably drawn to the opinions and character of Charles Bradlaugh. He founded the National Secular Society in 1866, remaining its President (despite a one-year interlude) until 1890. This profile was augmented by his long

9 David Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom* (London: Pinter Press, 1992).
10 Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom*.

struggle to enter parliament and his quest for the legal recognition of atheists in parliament meant he acquired hero status amongst the rank and file secularists. For approximately 25 years, Charles Bradlaugh embodied for many, especially in the metropolis, the hopes of rank and file secularists around the campaigning national movement. These hopes focused upon a number of milestones of citizenship. The right to affirm, the right to access birth control literature, the freedom of the press and the right to stand for and sit in parliament were all campaigns in which Bradlaugh played the leading part. By focusing on such campaigning, the movement sought to have grievances addressed rather than offering to implement an overarching programme for a new economic or social basis of society. Given this difference the secular movement more often resembles the mainstream liberal party which held together a number of radical causes and grievances, uniting them under the umbrella of a loose progressive alliance. Indeed, in many respects we can see a number of these tendencies in Bradlaugh's reaction to the political and cultural choices that lay before him. Some of these were political events yet some of them were also formative experiences in his life that shaped his outlook and thinking. It is important to note that these come down to us from numerous autobiographical writings. Thus, Bradlaugh's thoughts and experiences quite often shaped rank and file opinion about the religious and political landscape of the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet there was also a degree of self-fashioning to create an appealing image.

The Young Cavalryman Charles Bradlaugh

Bradlaugh and subsequently his daughter, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, noted the importance of his experiences in the army as formative of his distaste for empire and imperial enterprises. As a member of a cavalry regiment Charles Bradlaugh was someone who in colonial Ireland found himself an unwitting agent of the state. Bradlaugh witnessed an eviction at Iniscarra (County Cork) in which the mother of the evicted household begged for the house to be spared, simply to allow her ailing husband to die in it. Ignoring this the local land agent instructed the soldiers to carry on with the eviction and the destruction of the dwelling. The woman was driven visibly mad by the ordeal and came to the front gates of the barracks carrying a dead child with another one visibly starving, a scene described by Bradlaugh himself in painful detail.[11] His own response was to consider that if he had been a male relative of this woman he would have been

11 Charles Bradlaugh, *Champion of Liberty* (London, Watts and Co.: 1933), 243–244.

justified in seeking revenge for such inhuman treatment. This event left a deep and lasting impression on Bradlaugh who argued it shaped his attitude to empire thereafter. He also became a spokesman for Irish Home Rule and a staunch defender of Irish interests. Such experiences enabled him to see empire as a playground for aristocratic malevolent interests that despoiled colonial societies in search of unearned and illegitimate wealth. Riches that were gained by theft, fraud and subterfuge. Typical of such arguments was the occasion when Bradlaugh indicted the investment of national capital in the Suez Canal shares. In it he saw corruption with Disraeli borrowing money from the Rothschilds at exorbitant interest. Bradlaugh exposed the poor financial condition of Egypt, the "rottenness of the Egyptian Government", its suppression of a national movement for self-determination in its midst, and the indebtedness of the Khedive.[12]

Indeed, Bradlaugh's later broader analysis of Ireland's woes went beyond individual personal encounter, and combined anti-imperialism with free market economics. He saw that the attempts of Irish agriculture and proto industry were regularly strangled out of existence by English tariffs, trade embargoes and interference.[13] Upon entering parliament, Bradlaugh would have the opportunity to expose Irish grievances to public gaze, thereby shaming the state that encouraged and permitted such actions.[14]

Bradlaugh and the First International

Bradlaugh was involved in some of the formative moments where mid-century radicalism debated its possible different directions. Sufficiently intrigued by many of its aims, Bradlaugh took part in the meeting of the First International. He withdrew from it for both ideological and personal reasons. On a personal level, Marx was anxious that IWMA not be captured for atheism and the freethought agenda. Marx was also tired of the class collaborationist tendency that

12 Annie Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1885), 109–110.

13 Bradlaugh, *Champion of Liberty*, 241–242.

14 Patrick Corbeil has argued that scrutiny of empire, and the achievements of imperial secularists were important in providing what he called "ammunition" for attacks upon home anachronisms as well as highlighting the possibilities of future progress. See Patrick Corbeil, *Empire and Progress in the Victorian Secularist Movement: Imagining a Secular World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

manifested itself in a romanticised admiration of Giuseppe Mazzini.[15] Meanwhile, Bradlaugh found himself disliking the direction of socialism and instead affirming much milder liberal individualism. This nonetheless allowed him to support many of the activities and aspirations of trade union members, and those who believed in solving the late nineteenth-century land question in England. Certainly he developed his own critique of wealth inequality.

Digging deeper it is possible to see Bradlaugh's obsessions with independence, mindful of his appeal to the skilled working classes, underpinning some of his reaction to socialism.[16] In particular he also adhered to a neo-Malthusian line which fitted in easily with his self-help ideology and its appeal to the skilled worker. This would instantly have put him in opposition to Marx, since it denied the idea of 'surplus value' and the reserve army of labour.[17] What is initially important here is that he unerringly associated socialism with versions of state control, whilst his own initiatives and spreading the neo-Malthusian message would have created what Deborah Lavin terms a "capitalist utopia".[18] Bradlaugh also believed that individual political contexts could too easily push individuals into more extreme positions than were beneficial to the whole of society. Bradlaugh attributed the growth of socialism in Germany to an unconsidered, if understandable, reaction to the apparently despotic government of Otto von Bismarck.[19] Likewise, he was content to accept that revolution may appear attractive within an oppressive despotic society without freedom of expression and 'representative institutions', this was for Europeans to decide upon for themselves:

> But in a country like our own, where the political power is gradually passing into the hands of the whole people, where, if the press is not entirely free it is in advance of almost every European country, and every shade of opinion may find its exponent, here revolution which required physical force to effect it would be a blunder as well as a crime.[20]

Advocating this in Britain was to "distort real evils, and thus do mischief to those who are seeking to effect social reforms".[21] He saw the state under socialism as an entity which would paralyse individual effort and disperse valuable energy that

15 Deborah Lavin, *Bradlaugh contra Marx: Radicalism versus Socialism in the First International* (London: Socialist History Society), Occasional Publication no. 28, 36 & 40.

16 Lavin, *Bradlaugh contra Marx: Radicalism versus Socialism in the First International*, no. 53.

17 Lavin, *Bradlaugh contra Marx: Radicalism versus Socialism in the First International*, no. 24.

18 Lavin, *Bradlaugh contra Marx: Radicalism versus Socialism in the First International*, no. 24.

19 Charles Bradlaugh, *Some Objections to Socialism* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1884), 100.

20 Bradlaugh, *Some Objections to Socialism*, 112.

21 Bradlaugh, *Some Objections to Socialism*, 105.

would otherwise profit society.[22] Moreover, his reverence for a species of English exceptionalism made him baulk at European style revolution, yet paradoxically he could support limited public order challenges to oppression.[23] Establishment of a socialist state could only occur as the result of a physical force revolution which would sweep away with it all the achievements of gradualist struggle. Such a revolution would inevitably seek to dispossess property owners which Bradlaugh considered would be practically impossible since the vast majority of the country possessed such property. This was spread, albeit scarcely evenly, amongst a great many classes. As he argued: "A property owner is not only a Rothschild, a Baring, or an Overstone, he is that person who has anything whatever beyond that which is necessary for actual existence at the moment. Thus, all savings however moderate; all household furniture, books, indeed everything but the simplest clothing are property, and the property owners belong to all classes".[24]

That this society of ownership would succumb to a confiscation of the assets of small savers and friendly societies, constituted what he termed "an attack upon the private property of the labourer."[25] But he also remained anxious to defend the achievements of the secular movement over the previous 60 years, built upon lobbying and gradualism. Secularism had chosen to lionise the concept of free speech and machinery by which opinion was circulated and discussed. Bradlaugh considered all of these achievements to be dangerously underappreciated by the socialist state, and in some instances actively threatened by it. Socialism's apparent certainty persuaded Bradlaugh that the free expression of opinion, especially dissenting opinion, could not be guaranteed. At the very best he foresaw that there would be an utter "stagnation of opinion".[26] English exceptionalism was also evident in the triumph of gradualism that had allowed political liberalism to flourish and given vent to radical tendencies that could deliver measured and legitimate change. Foreign despotisms represented their own dangerous but ultimately very different context.

Bradlaugh's antipathy to socialism was later confirmed by his handling of subsequent events. He eventually sought to create his own replacement for the IWMA which he called the International Labour Union. When its executive wanted to create a lecture circuit to promote socialist ideas Bradlaugh rapidly withdrew his support from an organisation he had largely founded.[27]

22 Bradlaugh, *Some Objections to Socialism*, 102.
23 Lavin, *Bradlaugh contra Marx*, 48–49.
24 Bradlaugh, *Some Objections to Socialism*, 104.
25 Bradlaugh, *Some Objections to Socialism*, 110.
26 Bradlaugh, *Some Objections to Socialism*, 105.
27 Lavin, *Bradlaugh contra Marx*, 70–71.

Bradlaugh Seeking to Enter Parliament

Bradlaugh had a mixture of state apparatus and procedure levelled against him in his repeated attempts to enter parliament through the early part of the 1880s. The law technically disbarred him from taking his seat and on one occasion he was confined by the Serjeant-at-Arms in the clock tower of the parliament building overnight.

Bradlaugh initially sought to affirm, something that had only been allowed to Quakers and Moravians, which had been conceded as a concession for marginal christian groups. As an atheist Bradlaugh did not qualify to take the solemn religious oath or the affirmation reserved for marginal christian groups. On being refused Bradlaugh sought again to take the religious oath. This caused consternation in both secularist and religious camps, but for our purposes it is worth looking deeper for some of the reasons he was prepared to take the oath. Putting himself forward for this rite of admission, despite his lack of qualification, was disruptive of procedures but he equally saw this iconoclastic act as essential. Bradlaugh argued that such oaths were actively of no consequence to the rule of government nor to the rule of law. His argument was that others already in the House of Commons had already in their heart flouted the importance and solemn nature of these precepts, and by following in such footsteps he was simply doing as they had done.

Seeking to go past something of only symbolic importance Bradlaugh was taking aim at the church state link by demonstrating the very translucent nature of this anachronism – an echo of Tom Paine's critique of monarchy. Yet the 'Bradlaugh case' also illuminated vested interests at work on the opposition benches. This meant the 'Bradlaugh case' demonstrated to radical England that power and corruption lay at the heart of the state and could be used easily with impunity against them. State power, which the country was convinced was benign and watchful was here made to appear partisan about who was to be included in the operation of the constitution and who was to be excluded.

Bradlaugh within Parliament

Charles Bradlaugh eventually won his fight and entered parliament in 1886. Upon doing so he pursued a sustained series of actions widely aimed at protecting different parts of society from vested interests. He was involved in enacting a number of pieces of legislation which helped small market traders and small producers. Such individuals were very much his constituency, but the disabilities they laboured

under were customary and symptoms of vested interests gathering illicit and undeserved taxation that damaged trade and prosperity.

During this time Bradlaugh also became the House of Commons' 'member for India', a radical soubriquet bequeathed upon an individual prepared actively defend the colony and its interests. In this he fulfilled his destiny as an opponent of empire, critiquing vested interests at work. These he argued had become the governing class in India representing a coterie of aristocratic robber barons and profiteers who were despoiling the country and enriching themselves at the expense of the Indian population. He uncovered and discussed in parliament a number of scandals that demonstrated this, frequently embarrassing the conservative benches opposite and a number of individuals.[28]

When with failing health he travelled to India he was feted by large crowds who saw him as the answer to their problems of government. Republicanism at home, when accompanied by godless secularism, meant he was firmly in political and ideological minority at home his message was far more viable in India. To the first generation of the Indian Congress Party a republic would spare them from British imperialism – a secular one would arguably save them from returning to the quasi-feudal stewardship of their former rulers.[29]

Bradlaugh the Republican

Charles Bradlaugh's republicanism, though fully theorised, arguably also actually (paradoxically) came out of respect for institutions and the rule of law. Essentially, he constructed a model whereby monarchy was to be judged as an institution like any other. Fundamentally, it was a reaction to monarchy's moral, financial and sexual misbehaviour and an observation upon events. Queen Victoria's sleight of hand about the precise nature of her financial situation was a sore point with many radicals. Moreover, the Mordaunt divorce affair – a situation where the heir to the throne was criticised and scrutinised for his likely affair with Lady Harriet Mordaunt, especially since she was now pregnant. Bradlaugh's own *National Reformer* ran a number of stories that investigated the implications

28 See Walter. L Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case: A study in Late Victorian Opinion and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); Daniel Argov, *Moderates and Extremists in the Indian Nationalist Movement 1833–1920* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1967), 37, 45.

29 David Nash, "Charles Bradlaugh, India and the many chameleon destinations of republicanism," in *Republicanism in Victorian Society*, edited by David Nash and Antony Taylor (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), 106–124.

of royal behaviour, in this instance, portraying the invasion of the comfortable domestic sphere of the middle classes with malevolence in mind.[30] The financial profligacy of the Prince of Wales was also a target and was made to contrast with the more obviously sober habits of the middle classes.[31] This critique of aristocracy and monarchy pointed to the top and bottom of society where enthusiasm for both appeared more developed than in middle-class circles. This was constructed to indicate a pincer movement of the masses and aristocracy which was a potential assault upon the middle classes.[32] All this served to indicate that the middle classes, arguably the only truly responsible classes, should fortify themselves and their achievements against despoliation at the hands of what *Reynolds Newspaper* termed "despotism".[33]

Bradlaugh, for example, ironically addressed the Prince of Wales as a fellow freemason arguing that no fellow freemason could possibly "write cuckold of the forehead of a dozen husbands, be a chaser after painted Donzels and likewise deeply in debt". This was an indictment of royalty but also a celebration of the institutions of fraternal civil society which were the lifeblood of a flourishing body politic.[34] Judged against these it became a potent argument to compare the monarchy's behaviour to other state institutions that would be scrutinized and dismantled if their behaviour had been so profligate.[35]

Annie Besant

We are perhaps used to analysing Annie Besant in a range of guises. These stretch from devoted christian wife, right through to committed Indian nationalist by the end of her life. But for our purposes focusing upon her transition from secularism to socialism highlights certain representative aspects of each ideology's approach to the state and their respective critiques of the other respective ideological position.

As a secularist Besant supported the critics of contemporary society's refusal to allow free speech publication of matters related to family limitation. In this she fitted in alongside those who had campaigned for free and unfettered access to knowledge. She also fitted in alongside Charles Bradlaugh as a fellow advocate of

30 *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 27 February 1870.

31 *National Reformer* XIII, 13 June 1869; *National Reformer* XXV, 25 July 1875.

32 See John Davis, "Slums and the Vote, 1867–90," *Historical Research* 64 (1991): 375–388.

33 *National Reformer* XXVII, 9 April 1876.

34 *National Reformer* XXV, 25 July 1875.

35 See G. Standring, *Court Flunkeys, their 'Work' and Wages* (London: Freethought Publications Company, 1879).

allowing access to family limitation literature – essentially the argument behind the Knowlton pamphlet trial. This involved the prosecution of Besant herself alongside Bradlaugh for publishing Charles Knowlton's Malthusian work *The Fruits of Philosophy* which eventually resulted in Besant's involvement in the Malthusian League, the formation of which was one consequence of the verdict which went against the two defendants. As a Malthusian, Besant would have accepted the explanation that resources were finite and that family limitation was the best route out of poverty and misery for the masses. She even turned to, at least for a while, blaming colonised nations for the famines that had occurred in Ireland and India.[36]

After Besant's conversion to socialism, she was faced with having to jettison this very concept. Her major focused publication on the matter, *Modern Socialism* (1886), offered an underconsumptionist analysis of society's economic and social ills. Her analysis of socialism which begins this work, revisited the history of the ideology in England paying due deference to Robert Owen, the architect of underconsumptionist arguments.[37] In this work Besant describes the failure of liberalism and non-intervention. She sketches an industrial age which had created vast riches amidst poverty. The system had also failed with gluts in the market leading to unemployment.[38] She saw capital and labour at war, describing this in the following terms: "[A]s capital can only grow by surplus value, it strives to lengthen the working day and to decrease the daily wage. Labour struggles to shorten the hours of toil, and to wring from Capital a larger share of its own product in the form of higher wage".[39] Besant refuted Bradlaugh's defence of small capital holders arguing the impact of removing the incitement to thrift was illusory, largely because the interest obtainable from such savings was simply too small to warrant objection.[40]

Evidence of her wider concerns that underline all of her thought, throughout many changes was the effect of current systems upon the nature and exercise of morality. This focus on morality also seems to have been the start of many secularist critiques of existing society. Critiquing liberal laissez faire society and economics she noted that, for example, the adulteration of goods prevalent in the existing system had encouraged a fall in morality.[41] Besant further argued that all

36 Lavin, *Bradlaugh Contra Marx*, 27.
37 Annie Besant, *Modern Socialism* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1886), 5.
38 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 4.
39 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 19.
40 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 35.
41 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 27.

industrial evils can be cured by "the substitution of co-operation for competition, of organisation for anarchy in industry."[42]

Her attraction to socialism at this point meant that her conception of the state was that significant parts of it would wither away. Certainly a devotion to small-scale co-operation and local organisation was seen as something of a substitute for centralised control which had proved wanting. Infrastructural public assets such as railroads and tramways would, under socialism, be organised by local municipalities and 'local bodies'. Such arrangement should also be constructed for both gas and water supplies.[43] The confidence Besant had in this can be demonstrated by her suggestion that systems of justice would be almost unnecessary because socialism will have rendered redundant the crimes of avarice.[44]

The state only interrupted this dash for decentralisation in the area of education. Besant saw that a national system of education would refine taste and manners: "Individuality will then at last find full expression, and none will need to trample on his brother in order to secure full scope for his own development." Nobler and more rational beings would be created by such a system. It would be "compulsory, because the State cannot afford to leave its future citizens ignorant and helpless".[45]

By the time Annie Besant had moved into her theosophical beliefs she also brought some of this thinking together in her reaction to political events. The First World War, for example, had pushed her into considering that the state should be identified with the nation as a partnership going forward into the post-war world. In citing Henry Sidgwick she closed down the traditional liberal philosophical fear of the state. Sidgwick's dictum that 'the larger the sphere of the State the smaller the liberty of the individual' had now passed. She then identified the state with the nation so that government became "the Executive carrying out the will of the nation".[46] In this same year, 1919, she elaborated further on this theme:

> Now, in the New Era the State and the Nation will be the same; the State will not be bureaucracy as it is now even here to some extent, but the administration will be the servants of the people, in departments of the National life organised for the good of the whole and not for the benefit of a part.[47]

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42 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 28.

43 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 36.

44 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 47.

45 Besant, *Modern Socialism*, 41.

46 Annie Besant, *The War and its Lessons on Liberty* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1919), 15.

47 Annie Besant, *The War and the Builders of the Commonwealth* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1919), 15.

Some of this was also wrapped up in a critique of the West. In 1921's *The Great Plan* Besant argued the East had a historical conception that the duty of the individual was to the state. In the West, christianity evolved with the idea it was to foster the growth of the individual. Thereafter society worked on the basis of social contract. However, this shortcircuited morality leaving society without strong enough systems of law to combat forgery and swindling. Besant asserted that the Great War had dealt this system its death blow.[48]

The End of the Nineteenth Century

By the end of the century the state remained an ambivalent presence in secularist ideals and rhetoric. Much of this sprang from English secularism's attachment to liberalism. Bradlaugh had quickly removed himself from the First International, thus closing down a route by which this branch of radicalism might later associate itself with the labour movement and socialism. As a result, several provincial secularists identified themselves with libertarian liberal individualism that echoed Herbert Spencer's fierce anti-statism. Such views also sprang from autodidact attitudes which distrusted compulsion in the tackling of social and moral ills.

Yet individuals like Bradlaugh saw the state's power and possibilities in an agenda of 'enabling' progress that would sweep away vested interests and privileges through gradualism. A wholesale overthrow of the state's established religion may once have been contemplated but by the end of the century Victorian secularism increasingly realised the state was an ally in the construction of progressive agendas. Such a situation had been aided by the gradual retreat of christianity in Britain, rather than wholesale breaks with its past. In part this gradual species of change explains Bradlaugh's divergence into wider domestic and imperial politics as well as his reverence for the English legal system, and his distrust of continental style breaks with the past and leaps forward into possible political darkness. Perhaps, strangely suggesting Bradlaugh as an heir to Edmund Burke as much as to Thomas Paine.

This ambivalence explains British secularism's surprising distance from forms of socialism and socialist culture which was important in other European countries by the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, those who tried to pull British secularism in that direction (such as F.J. Gould and Annie Besant in one phase of her career) found their task an ultimately unsuccessful one.

48 Annie Besant, *The Great Plan* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1921), 102–104.

Indeed it is interesting that Gould in later years found himself operating in the midst of a supra-nation state organisation in the shape of the League of Nations and this perhaps opens up a standard dilemma for humanists and secularists who must face such problems on a regular basis. How should such organisations plan and implement strategies they are working with to enact change? Do they move to working with overseas organisations and pressure groups when movement forward within their own nation state seems difficult or impossible?

The Open Society

The tension between narrow and wide goals was confirmed later in the twentieth-century post-war world when the various organisations that represented British humanism began to espouse the ideas of Karl Popper – as embodied in his concept of the 'Open Society'. This was a response to totalitarianism and its philosophies that formed the reality of the 1940s. Popper's work indicted Plato as a conserver of vested interests and for having disdain for the potential within the common individual. Marx, meanwhile, was determinist, historicist and overly obsessed with class struggle. The book was thus a defence of liberal democratic society. Arguing that such a society was thoroughly free of vested interests as any nineteenth-century liberal would have recognised.

In this instance the key word that was adopted was 'enabling'. It spoke of democracy but also of meritocracy and did at least echo the aspirations of the secular movement's long history of autodidact culture and the nineteenth-century liberal quest for middle-class representation and control of civil institutions.

Thus in the post-war world maintaining an Open Society was a species of watchfulness combined with the enduring quest to extend rights. The focus thereafter fell upon broadcast media, and this twin agenda can be seen in operation in this particular context. The desire to seek parity of access to the BBC would showcase humanist morality for the masses, but also fortify those who wanted demonstrations that humanists were being considered as fit for wider and deeper citizenship.

Yet the logic of the Open Society saw gaining access to broadcast media by the right minded was guaranteeing the maintenance of platforms of discussion and debate. It was also a guarantor against totalitarian control and the debasing of content. This was something that fitted in at least partly with Lord Reith's visions that the BBC should educate, inform and entertain. Nevertheless the BBC did still regularly censor freethought individuals and broadcasts – denying some access into the contemporary period.

The Open Society concept also had a preoccupation with what state education was for and this came dramatically onto the agenda after 1944. The Open Society had ideals of citizenship but also wanted humanism to work against the idea that children were being trained to be cogs in a modern machine. This was partly a vision of liberal arts blended with belief in the enabling power of human potential – fearing the mechanistic utilitarian end of rationalism.

Conclusion

Thus we have encountered a bewildering array of responses to the state which indicates how humanism and secularism in Britain are overwhelmingly wedded to liberal worldviews. As such they did not become substantially rolled into a progressive radicalism that might be represented by the very mildly socialist Labour Party of the twentieth century. To this day many humanists and secularists remain liberal/social democrat voters. A fundamentally important common thread running through all of these interpretations is that the state has been 'used' by those with access to it as a tool for gerrymandering and private gain. All conceptions of changing it advanced by secularists from the earliest years of the nineteenth century (even if in later ideological guises) started from this fundamental premise. Ultimately they wanted it to do various things. Bradlaugh wanted it tamed for the flourishing of individualism and an unfettered constitution; Besant wanted it, when socialist, to wither away or simply be in charge of education. When theosophist she wanted the state to be identified with the nation offering power and support to all citizens, effectively implying the state had previously regularly supported an over-privileged rump.

There was, and remains no pillarisation in the United Kingdom as happened in other countries and, as a result, no statutory incorporation of secularists into the state's thinking and legislating. The state could thus be shown to hinder and exercise malevolence, often around who controlled resources and communication, and for radicals and secularists this had to be exposed. Yet the state could also legislate favourably and accept the rights and responsibilities of its atheist citizens and itself be an enabling mechanism for the twentieth century's Open Society. But the requirement for vigilance to protect such institutions and their capabilities was always a central part of the secularist agenda.