

THE RADICAL SPIRIT

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THE main object of the Chartist movement of the 1830's and 1840's was to obtain "universal" suffrage as the means by which the working class might abolish the injustices they regarded as the cause of their ills. The movement comprised various groups with different aims; those of some of the leaders, notably Feargus O'Connor, were dubious and their perception of the nature of monopoly was vague. Nevertheless the Parliamentary debates of 1842 show they were generally agreed on such measures as the drastic reduction of taxation and debt, an honest currency, removal of hindrances to wider discussion and abolition of monopolies including that of land, although, the prime importance of this was not appreciated. Thus, whatever their errors, they were radicals; they did not ask for expedients to allay effects but for justice to remove causes.

A more enlightened group among them was the London Working Man's Association founded in 1836 by William Lovett, a cabinet maker and very critical of O'Connor. In 1839 Lovett was sentenced on the flimsiest evidence to a year's imprisonment for provoking a riot. In Warwick gaol he wrote, in conjunction with another Chartist, John Collins, *Chartism, a New Organisation of the People*.^{*} This has now been reprinted and it makes an interesting and valuable contribution to the history of political thought.

Apart from the electoral question, the whole tone of the book is that the "useful classes" must depend upon themselves and above all think for themselves. Like Henry George, Lovett recognised that without correct thought, political arrangements are vain: and the section on education is striking and profound. "There is so much evil to be apprehended from

placing the education of our children in the hands of any government, that it becomes one of the most important duties of the working and middle classes to take the subject into their own hands, lest the power of educating their own children be taken away from them."

Practical advice on organising and paying for independent schools is given but the emphasis is laid upon the true meaning of education as "all those varied circumstances that exercise their influence on human beings from the cradle to the grave." Without moral education, merely intellectual attainments are likely to lead to evil not good. Love of truth is a moral quality. "The man who honestly investigates the opinions he holds, discharges a great *moral duty* to society; while he who receives without examination and believes without enquiry is guilty of a *moral offence*." To use one's influence to instil such unexamined opinions into others is a greater offence. The writer might have been considering how the planned economy was conceived, put over and accepted.

This book, smuggled out of prison, shows no trace of bitterness and the honest clarity of the self-taught author's writing is in sharp contrast with the manner in which some products of state education try to express themselves today. The spirit of the book is in sharper contrast to that of those who now call themselves radicals and who support all those collectivist expedients which, under a more universal franchise than Lovett contemplated, have magnified just those evils which the Chartists hoped to abolish. The appeal to self reliance, if raised today, is more likely to come from sources called reactionary than from those called radical.

One hopes that some modern radicals will read this remarkable book and ask themselves if they have truly interpreted the title they use.

^{*}Leicester University Press and Humanities Press, Inc. \$5.00