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ARTICLE



## From ‘flame’ to embers? Whatever happened to the English radical tradition c.1880-2020?

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### ABSTRACT

From the middle of the nineteenth-century, representatives of radical and labour agitations in Britain sought to embed themselves in an older democratic precedent. Referring back to these established narratives, Communist authors of the Popular Front period laid the foundations for the revival of an English radical tradition that proved formative for a generation of historians who saw themselves as custodians of the radical past. Outlining the radical approach to the British historical past and its emphasis on Englishness, this article considers the development of and approaches to a radical past and the traditions and personalities that were integrated into a usable radical lineage.

### KEYWORDS

Historical memory; protest;  
radical culture;  
environmental campaigning

## Introduction

This article reappraises the English radical tradition, its origins, and its rediscovery by the political radicals of the nineteen-sixties and a later generation of environmental and anti-globalisation protestors. Exploring the conscious appropriation of an English radical past by the Labour party and the British left during the formative period of the late nineteenth-century through to the inter-war years, it outlines the fundamental components of the radical tradition, establishes its centrality for reformers, and considers the later manifestations of the radical tradition outside the mainstream of party politics. Throughout, it seeks to demonstrate the ways in which this democratic history became integral to the memory and traditions of a spectrum of agitations of political protest and was still seen as relevant to the unorthodox movements deriving from the counter-culture of the nineteen-sixties. Further, this article frames recent discussion of the radical past in a historiography that has emphasised issues of continuity and the survival of styles, narratives and a rhetoric of past struggles that persisted in the culture of reform politics and platform radicalism.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on this body of work, this article revisits the radical tradition to reassess its importance, and to analyse its later incarnations. While considerable attention has been devoted to the origins of the radical tradition, far less has been written about its later manifestations, its drift to the margins, or its eventual demise. This article reconsiders the fate of the English radical tradition. Seen as less relevant to movements that privileged ideology over tradition on the farthest outposts of the dissident left and to a Labour party that from the nineteen-forties positioned itself as

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a contender for power, rather than as a movement of protest, the radical tradition was consigned to the margins, where it was reinvented as a narrative of protest and rebellion that provided the rationale for agitations that embraced the alternative life-styles and counter-cultural impulses of nineteen-sixties youth culture. Throughout, this article emphasises the centrality of the radical tradition which helped shape the values and political trajectory of protest movements during this eventful and formative period in the labour past. In its main arguments, it is attuned to the continuities in language apparent from the nineteenth-century civic tradition of reform radicalism, and the commonwealth tradition that was a feature of the work of Tawney and others.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Origins of the radical tradition***

The English radical tradition provided a significant democratic narrative with a historical lineage seen by its exponents as reaching back to the furthest origins of the national past. It constituted an attempt by the British left to recreate a national pantheon of liberty and a broad malleable tradition that were used to deal with contemporary political debates on Englishness and identity. It was an eclectic and amorphous historical tradition that was rooted in a colourful pageant of heroes and featured important political moments from England's turbulent democratic beginnings. As its custodians frequently commented, it was a deep narrative incorporating a range of radical-liberal figures from Wat Tyler and William Cobbett to the Levellers, Diggers and the Chartists.<sup>3</sup> It was a powerful tradition which became deeply ingrained as the core identity of the British labour movement. This appropriation of the radical past was not exclusive to the British left or to the Labour party. Socialism and labourism were not the only political movements to claim a democratic heritage, although the historians of the radical left played a pivotal role in the preservation and restoration of the memory of national liberties.<sup>4</sup> Never simply pure academic history, and often expressed via a 'special path' notion of political development, exponents of the radical tradition saw it as a 'lived' tradition which survived in oral lore, was expressive of the energy and vibrancy of 'the people' and their lives and lived on in the rallies, pageants and plays of the Popular Front era. Consideration of this popular history has emphasised the degree to which this narrative provided a symbolic and rhetorical, rather than narrowly ideological, appropriation of the events of the national past.<sup>5</sup> These radical traditions were firmly embedded within a cultural environment that played a significant role in the early success of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), described by G.D.H. Cole as 'the soul' of the new radical ferment, untainted by the compromise of elements of the Labour party with the National Government after the ILP's disaffiliation from Labour in 1932. Thereafter, they featured in the early Labour platform and the movement culture of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).<sup>6</sup> Exemplified by the work of a generation of radical historians, by the inter-war period an intimate link had become established between the British left and this earlier radical tradition.<sup>7</sup> This, then, is an article that in the words of Ross McKibbin, seeks out and scrutinises in detail 'the English road to socialism', and analyses its longevity, later resonances and the more recent political and cultural manifestations of this tradition in social movements and movement activism.<sup>8</sup>

The article locates its arguments in the broader debates about the direction taken by British labourism and agitations further to the left of the Labour party. It acknowledges

that many of the ideas and tropes that inspired English radicalism had a 'mythic' quality, drawing on an 'invented' set of events and individuals that laid down a usable past for British platform radicalism and its adherents, and inspired many of those who sought to further progressive goals during the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.<sup>9</sup> This article explores the place where that radical tradition stands at the juncture between parties, protest groups, radical intellectuals and 'direct action' politics. Moreover, it recognises that the radical tradition was part of the movement culture of the British left and is grounded in the work of self-appointed curators and custodians who sought to create a body of reform ideas consistent with the perceived history and traditions of England. In its energy and vigour it captured the radical imagination and provided the inspiration for the popular reform platform as a patriotic rhetoric of progress.<sup>10</sup> Here this article provides an answer to Ross McKibbin's question of 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?' – the radical tradition provided an acceptable surrogate for continental socialist ideas and a patriotic narrative for domestic reform at home.<sup>11</sup> In addition to providing a symbol of historical precedent, English radicalism offered its own unique language of powerful primal ideas resurrected in the evocative histories of R. H. Tawney in particular.<sup>12</sup> This symbolism included the potent idea of a lost Anglo-Saxon utopia from a distant past, and an antique common law commonwealth of collective rights and freedoms amounting to 'a community of co-operative socialists' which was brutally suppressed in the 'Great Pillage' following the imposition of a 'Norman Yoke'. This was a long-standing theme; George Lansbury recalled in his volume *My England* the words of a socialist anthem: 'A robber band has seized the land, and we are exiles here'.<sup>13</sup> Often impelled by religious fervour drawing on the Nonconformist tradition, labour and radical politics retained a strong moral dimension.<sup>14</sup> The vision of a politics driven by a moral crusade, and intertwined with notions of faith and religiosity that drew on histories of the English as a 'spiritual' people, allowed room for the esoteric to flourish on the margins of the tradition.<sup>15</sup> English socialism inherited this mantle of a millenarian struggle to restore the lost rights and liberties of a distant mythical age. For Clement Attlee, this accumulation of radical energies reached its apogee with an impetus towards a 'parliamentarianism' purified by reformers and the formation of the Labour party which united under one banner what was otherwise a heterodox tradition. He commented: 'The Labour Party was the inheritor of the achievements of those who fought for liberty in the past.'<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the radical tradition provided a unifying narrative that united activists of the left and of the Labour party around a common inheritance, but one that also opened up Labour and parties of the dissident left to accusations of support for anti-parliamentarianism, republicanism, and opposition to the state.<sup>17</sup>

The article, then, engages with a sweeping narrative often seen as laying the foundation for a 'people's history' that reordered the political events of the national past into a story of the travails of the 'common people' and their struggle against injustice.<sup>18</sup> Expressed initially as a narrative of progress in the work of the liberal historian J. R. Green, but emphasising the same issues of ancestral Anglo-Saxon liberties and traditional rights eroded and defiled, the people's history tradition found its fullest expression in the publication of A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* in 1938.<sup>19</sup> The defining text of the Popular Front era, reproduced in cheap, popular printed editions, and with an influence and legacy that lasted long after the Popular Front, this history came to symbolise the new inspiration and inflections of liberty derived from an

earlier radical past. Morton himself loomed large in attempts to preserve and expand the significance of this radical past for a new audience into the nineteen-sixties. An heir to the nineteenth-century 'simple life' movement with a personal past that was intertwined with the history of his native Suffolk, through Morton's eyes the English past remained essentially a struggle to preserve the integrity of peasant communities and their traditions.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Continuity and the radical past***

Throughout, this article references recent tendencies towards continuity in the study of British radicalism, notably in Biagini and Reid's edited collection, *Currents of Radicalism* and in the work of Jon Lawrence.<sup>21</sup> Rather than the abrupt rupture between liberalism and labourism detected by those who saw the emergence of socialism as signalling a divergence from movements that had gone before, this research examines the cross-currents that linked liberal and post-liberal labourist political culture. Labour's resultant debt to liberalism, and the compatibilities between the labour inheritance and the culture of the nineteenth-century Liberal party that distinguished liberalism in British from more conventional establishment-leaning liberal parties in Europe emerges strongly from this analysis.<sup>22</sup> Labourism was attuned to the legacies of this radical liberal tradition, creating an entangled narrative that carried implications for both movements.<sup>23</sup> 'George Jacob Holyoake. Charles Bradlaugh, Richard Cobden and John Bright: do you know how much you are indebted to the efforts of these famous statesmen and reformers?' ran an advertisement for Morley's biography of Gladstone in *The Labour Leader*.<sup>24</sup> This approach claimed the historical benediction of previous generations of martyrs in the cause of reform and drew on the work of radical liberal historians like J. L. and Barbara Hammond. Summarising the content of their book, *The Village Labourer*, the land reformer, Josiah Wedgwood, saw its theme 'as the story of how a race of men finally lost their independence . . . The spirit of the book is a flame and the form is a masterpiece of English'.<sup>25</sup> Most of the early publications of the ILP focus directly on this strong liberal inheritance. The ILP built its appeal in former areas of liberal strength like the West Riding on popular heroes like Cobden 'aloof all his life from party politics' who incarnated liberal, anti-imperialist sentiments in which overseas adventurism emanated from the machinations of dark aristocratic forces and a residual feudalism at work in government and society.<sup>26</sup> 'What free trade was to 1846, socialism is to 1897' wrote Jim Connell, a pioneer member of the ILP, in acknowledgement of Cobden's legacy to the organisation.<sup>27</sup>

Following Biagini and Reid, this article emphasises the role of the historians of the Popular Front period in the crafting of a narrative that seemingly located their work in the same tradition that had inspired the Chartists, Richard Cobden and, before them, the Levellers and the Diggers. This was an approach they bequeathed to a new generation of radicals in the later twentieth-century. In addition, this article takes issue with the argument that tropes like the 'Norman Yoke' ebbed away as a point of reference, diminishing to mere rhetorical adornment.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, many specific radical movements like the land reform campaign continued to channel the memories of Anglo-Saxon dispossession by the Normans and the history of peasant resistance in England. For land reform campaigners, William the Conqueror remained 'the landlords' god', and the

Norman Conquest 'the greatest curse that could befall the Saxon race' late into the nineteenth-century.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, this article traces a line of thought with its origins in the nineteenth-century that rather than losing its hold on the radical political imagination, resurfaced in the work of E. P. Thompson in the nineteen-sixties. Thompson's own debt to this tradition is made clear in his dissection of the posthumous cult surrounding the Labour pioneer Tom Maguire which appeared in a volume of essays dedicated to the memory of G.D.H. Cole in 1960.<sup>30</sup>

In rebellion against a conventional 'drums and trumpets approach to the past, this alternative history shaping the identity of the left in Britain, provided a strong narrative thread that emphasised lost rights, and a democratic tradition appropriated in the name of the people. The early labour movement, emphasising the longevity of the radical past and the brutalities of feudal landed tenure, focussed its attention on the radical figure-heads of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 as the first martyrs of socialism.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter, the radical tradition was grounded in periods like the English Civil War that witnessed profound constitutional upheaval and saw a disruption in the balance of power between monarchy and parliament. During the Popular Front period, the English Civil War provided a new pantheon of heroes for Labour and the British left, including radical figures with conflicting ideas about aims and objectives, notably Oliver Cromwell, John Lilburne and Gerrard Winstanley. By re-visiting the careers of individuals like Gerrard Winstanley, radicals counted themselves as a generation who were formative in the work of recovery and communication of a 'lost' political tradition connected with the Levellers and the Diggers.<sup>32</sup> Radical history had rather less to say about periods of stability like the eighteenth-century which was represented as a stagnant interlude, interrupted only by the emergence of a satirical and irreverent 'grub street' print culture and the purely 'emotional movement' of the agitation surrounding John Wilkes.<sup>33</sup> In its emphasis on upheaval and constitutional change, this alternative historical tradition was construed as a narrative of expanding democratic struggle. It provided a counterpart to the institutional Whig history of the period, but one that served the interests of those apparently excluded from power and position.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it acted as an antidote to the highly intellectualised and technocratic Fabian tradition invoked by the Labour party in government.<sup>35</sup> Here the radical tradition postulated more decentralised and localist solutions to national problems as in keeping with the spirit of the radical past.<sup>36</sup> In addition, Tory radicalism, espoused by some prominent Chartists, had a significant presence on the radical platform, and fed, in the later nineteenth-century, into the politics of protest, manifesting itself particularly in the outlook of Robert Blatchford and his outrage at the diminished and decrepit condition of rural society.<sup>37</sup> Tory radicalism was driven by a pre-lapsarian arcadianism in its emphasis on tradition, village culture, rural pastimes, anti-urbanism, nostalgia for lost certainties, and the elemental spirituality of proximity to the land. It was manifested through a hostility to liberalism and a critique of industrialisation and *laissez-faire*.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the reincarnation of a knightly and courtly tradition in Tory radicalism that privileged chivalric codes in civil culture added to the moral dimension of the radical platform.<sup>39</sup> In this reading, a place was established for 'one nation' Conservative politicians like Disraeli in the radical canon.<sup>40</sup>



## Englishness and radicalism

British socialism possessed its own character and identity which was firmly rooted in a much older libertarian tradition seen as quintessentially English. Nostalgic in its reference points to an imagined English past it continued Henry Hyndman's emphasis on 'the idea of socialism as no foreign import into England. Tyler, Cade, Ball, Kett, More, Bellers, Spence, Owen read to me like sound English names; not a foreigner in the whole batch.'<sup>41</sup> This was an English libertarian tradition, but was also part of a broader radical past which encompassed insurgents, radicals, reformers, mutineers and dissenters from across the British Isles. At its heart was the sense of an instinctive English zeal for liberty, as opposed to the arid and cold scientific rationalism of European socialism and attempts to import it: 'how odious it sounds, how false, how foreign'.<sup>42</sup> It was a cross-kingdoms democratic tradition which absorbed an older Celtic narrative of internal exile and exclusion. Keir Hardie had been inspired by Wat Tyler, Thomas More and Oliver Cromwell, but was equally enthused by the border ballads and Covenanting tradition of his native Scotland.<sup>43</sup> In both Wales and Scotland, the radical tradition reflected Anglophone tendencies frequently seen as more formative for the Labour movement in anglicised South Wales than the Welsh-speaking culture of North Wales.<sup>44</sup> It also mirrored the context of the Scottish Lowlands, where, as Colin Kidd has pointed out, society and culture was more often aligned with the outlook of the self-improvement and municipal reform traditions of the Protestant north of England in the later nineteenth-century than the Catholic Gaelic culture of the Highlands. This, alongside Scottish immersion in a broader imperial milieu into the later nineteenth-century, blunted appeals to an instinctively Scottish tradition of political defiance.<sup>45</sup> In Wales the blending of political traditions led to anachronisms. The ILP propagandist, David Thomas, for example, drew on the panoply of English radical history, but wrote about Wat Tyler through the medium of the Welsh language, to reaffirm the socialist message to his national/regional audience.<sup>46</sup> Overall, the radical tradition was rarely attuned to regional sensibilities; Welshness was subsumed within it, and Scottish radicalism was depicted as part of a more generalised assault on feudal land ownership, whilst the English were constructed as 'a people very difficult to govern', perspectives that continued into the Popular Front period.<sup>47</sup> Absent from this view were the migrant/immigrant identities and their attendant communities whose history constituted a significant element of the British past and a constituency of support for the politics of the radical platform. Homilies to Cromwell and the Commonwealth period alienated an Irish audience, and the emphasis on English customs failed to translate into a discourse attractive to migrant radicals who retained a strong attachment to their own literature, folk heroes and national traditions.<sup>48</sup>

The idea of an English radical tradition was re-established and became anchored in a prevailing left discourse during the period of the Popular Front in the years 1935–1940.<sup>49</sup> Popular Front history set out to reconcile contested national traditions in the service of a broader anti-Fascist crusade. Reviewing Maccoby's *English Radicalism, 1853–1886*, the *Daily Worker* asserted that 'the radical traditions of the past century are not dead' and extolled the shared democratic narrative that might bring liberals, socialists, and trade unions together around a joint platform.<sup>50</sup> This process reflects a collision of ideas taking place in the turbulent period of the later



nineteen-thirties, when a democratic past was recruited for the struggle against fascism, the National Government and Baldwin's Conservatism. Popular Front history emphasised the willingness of English radicals during this period to supersede doctrine in favour of a more entrenched national tradition of popular constitutionalism that revolved around the restoration or protection of lost and endangered liberties. In this narrative, the formation of the National Government was represented as the revival of long-standing traditions of tyranny from the 'Norman Yoke' to a 'New Whiggery' opposed to the innate democratic instincts of the peoples of the British Isles.<sup>51</sup> Drawing on colourful figures and dissident campaigners resurrected for the cause of a co-joined socialism, this history became integral to the popular rhetoric of the radical platform into the inter-war years. The émigré Australian radical poet and author, Jack Lindsay, expressed his reverence for the English radical past in his poetry, exhorting:

Call your father up,  
 Poet and poacher, treadling his sewing machine,  
 Until the whirring throbbed into a song . . .  
 Call him, and with him, Chartist true-hearts all,  
 Call all your yeoman stock from which you sprang . . .<sup>52</sup>

Lindsay's verse followed a long tradition of left-wing homage to the radicalism thrown up by periods of turbulence in English history. It included a recognition of the role of religion in the radical past, particularly the 'revolutionary' role of the Puritan Bible in the period leading up to the English civil war, seen as creating a distinctive English lineage of revolt.<sup>53</sup> In keeping with this spirit, the *Daily Worker* included a regular feature 'News of Revolt' in the style of contemporary newspaper reporting on key moments in the radical past, amongst them, the 1497 peasant rising in Cornwall, Gerrard Winstanley's occupation of St. George's Hill, the trial of John Lilburne, and the genesis of the Chartist movement in 1838–9.<sup>54</sup> By the late 1930s it could depict these episodes as promoting national traditions of defence and armed people's militias in the face of threats from abroad.<sup>55</sup> The Popular Front historian, A.L. Morton, spoke of a tone which he characterised as the 'leveller style' embraced by left historians working in this tradition.<sup>56</sup> Appropriating not only radical history, but a unique symbolism expressed in the performative elements in Popular Front pageants, it provided a common thread of powerful symbolic ideas from 1935 to the outbreak of war in 1940.<sup>57</sup>

### ***A tradition on the margins***

During the 1940s, the radical tradition was pushed to the margins, and survived on the fringes as a narrative uniting a dissident left that depicted the main currents of British history as a struggle against arbitrary power and tyranny. In much of this material, it was possible for readers to identify Germany as the new Normans, poised to conquer and enslave the British people and to take away their democratic rights, to reduce them to the status of aliens in their own land.<sup>58</sup> The spirit of libertarian socialism opposed to the statism of Labour was very apparent in this strain of politics, especially in the public

utterances of Sir Richard Acland, and the new Common Wealth party. Committed to the common ownership of property and land, referencing the innate spirituality of the English people and sometimes described as 'middle-class socialism', in Common Wealth the essence of liberal, Nonconformist moral fervour still lingered, unreconciled to Labour, but finding an outlet in the charismatic figure of Acland. It also persisted within the anarchist movement.<sup>59</sup> Both these areas of dissent continued to look to the English Revolution as an era of anti-feudalism and for an authentic stream of collectivist and communitarian radicalism. Referencing the peasant revolt tradition and Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger movement, Acland commented that 'the idea of Common Ownership is not imported from abroad, but has its roots in our own past.'<sup>60</sup> For anarchists, the war demonstrated the unjust nature of the exactions made by a corrupt state increased by the pressures of wartime demands, an argument that had a strong lineage within the radical tradition.<sup>61</sup> For the anarchist Ethel Mannin, the war recalled the potential for uncorrupted virtue that resided with the people that, if correctly harnessed, might pave the way for a decentralised utopia echoing the blueprint for society created by Winstanley, depicted as 'a socialist ahead of his age'.<sup>62</sup> Even on the periphery of labour/radicalism there was a relinquishing of the radical past. By the 1950s, although Harry Pollitt could still declare the CPGB 'the true heir to the Labour pioneers', descended from the Chartists, the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the party in 1950 was characterised by celebration of more contemporary episodes in the party's past, notably the hunger marches of the 1930s and the Battle of Cable Street.<sup>63</sup>

In the post-war years, the radical tradition lost its centrality within the Labour party and drifted to the margins. During a period when Labour sought to transcend its position as a grouping made up of the fragments of other political parties, and to occupy a position as a national body, a homogenised 'Britishness' became key to its agenda for national reconstruction and the creation of the welfare state, featuring prominently in the title of the new nationalised industries.<sup>64</sup> Effectively sidelining the older tradition of English dissent in the general elections of 1945 and 1950, Labour sought a narrative of the British nation that rather than a purely localised English story might be presented to the electorate in unifying national terms in the manner of Swedish Social Democracy.<sup>65</sup> Here Aneurin Bevan's reference to the Levellers' Putney debates in 1647 represented a backward eddy.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the move towards an 'Atlanticist' outlook in many facets of Labour's foreign policy emphasised agendas of national defence, loyalty and patriotism in the context of the Cold War and decolonisation.<sup>67</sup> Against this background the idiom of the English narrative of popular protest within labourism was diminished. Increasingly epitaphs were written for many of Morton's Popular Front perspectives relating to the notion of a monolithic and undifferentiated 'people' that obfuscated categories of 'class, gender and race'.<sup>68</sup> Clare Griffiths has emphasised that from 1945 onwards, it was the novelty of Labour that was emphasised over continuity and a radical inheritance, with socialism often represented as a force for 'modernisation'.<sup>69</sup> Increasingly during this period it was the failures of the Labour party in office over the longer narrative of struggle that shaped the institutional memory of the party.<sup>70</sup> Labour's move in the nineteen-fifties into a more instrumental and transactional relationship with the electorate governed by a perception of voters primarily as consumers, and with an eye on future prosperity rather than past gains, reduced the importance of the radical tradition during these years.<sup>71</sup> The Butskellism of the nineteen-fifties, appealing to key groups of swing voters

also served to dilute the appeal of the radical tradition as an electioneering tool on the political platform. Furthermore, the 'little Englander' mentality that emerged on the left of the Labour party in response to Britain's negotiations for entry into the EU complicated the role of English identity in Labour politics even more. Michael Foot's *Debts of Honour* written in 1980, in which he surveys a personal selection of democratic heroes from his Liberal father, Isaac Foot, to the satirist Jonathan Swift, might be seen as an attempt to revitalise the radical tradition for Labour at a time when Labour's relationship to its past was confused or in contention within the party.<sup>72</sup> In the nineteen-eighties this looser, unmoored tradition of progress and democratisation opened the way for the attempted appropriation of the radical tradition by the breakaway SDP (Social Democratic Party) which sought to establish itself as the true heir of Tawneyite labourism in opposition to the Labour platform.<sup>73</sup>

### **Radical traditions and the counter-culture**

Many traditional appeals to a radical past resurfaced in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties outside conventional party structures when they gained a new vibrancy through the expanding alternative political and youth cultures of the era that found few avenues for expression in a Labour party lacking a youth wing during a formative period for youth identity.<sup>74</sup> Appeals to an idealised tradition of peasant protest lingered and were already enshrined within the folk movement which expanded alongside movements like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and proved formative for the agitprop style apparent at CND demonstrations and a new folk audience: 'young, eager, denim-clad'.<sup>75</sup> Decolonisation struggles, the US war in Vietnam, and the emergence of national independence movements rooted in peasant resistance led to a renewed interest in an authentic strain of rural arcadianism and English defiance of authority, drawing on the strategies and tactics of anti-colonial agitations in former colonies and referencing in particular, Gandhian notions of *satyagraha* or passive resistance.<sup>76</sup> During these years Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers were re-invented as expressions of peasant protest and as proto-pacifists, with views not dissimilar to contemporary peace campaigners.<sup>77</sup> In an interview with the *New Musical Express*, E.P. Thompson sought to connect up with this youthful anti-establishment exuberance, reviving Shelley's slogan of 'for we are many, they are few' for a new radical audience.<sup>78</sup> The loose radical tradition suited the needs of a new and diverse cultural moment, which lacked ideological clarity, and instead took its cue from a mix of rock music, art and psychedelic drugs. Against the background of a Cold War retreat from the nation state, combined with the growth of a whimsical Englishness, exemplified by the Kinks, in the 'pop' culture of the nineteen-sixties, the contours of a new Englishness emerged that encouraged excavations of English sensibilities and the English radical past.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the emergence of new religious movements with non-traditional rituals standing outside or in opposition to conventional religious observance drew together new communities of devotees.<sup>80</sup> Expressed via an interest in the recondite and the esoteric, these new belief systems depicted a historical past shaped by the existence of an occult underground and secret forces that bore some similarity to the alternative belief systems embraced by many nineteenth-century radicals.<sup>81</sup> Alun Howkins noted the appeals made during this period to an older radical obsession with ownership, rights to the land and the legacy of the English as a spiritual

people. For Howkins, this was an unbroken tradition which began with the Digger movement of the English civil war and continued through to the Chartist period and beyond.<sup>82</sup> These links were often made explicit through the work of historians who used the youthful alternative counter-cultural movements of the nineteen-sixties as a frame of reference to explain moments of revolt or significant social change in the past. Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*, which had a profound influence on the counterculture of the nineteen-seventies, transposed the vision of youthful seventies protest onto the radical libertarian sects which emerged from the turmoil of the English civil war, describing them as a 'counterculture'. In this work in clear allusions to the new social movements of the decade and in a search for the origins of sixties permissiveness, Hill referenced the rejection of private property, individualism, 'the unashamed enjoyment of the good things of the flesh' and 'economic self-sufficiency' as goals that inspired the millenarian rebels of the seventeenth-century and gained a new currency in the alternative cultures of the nineteen-sixties.<sup>83</sup> In Hill's work the Levellers, Diggers and Ranters of the seventeenth-century were the hippy radicals of their day.

The protest movements and new forms of revolt emerging during the nineteen-sixties, and existing largely outside the framework of party politics, revived many of the images and allusions presented by Popular Front era historians as incarnations of the 'deep' radical past. The work of A.L. Morton was given a new lease of life against this background. The theme of lost certainties was particularly marked in Morton's work. Morton draws on the romantic idea of a lost Celtic Avalon, together with the idea of a Saxon commonwealth crushed under the Norman invasion and its imposition of a feudal order. As Morton notes of ancient hopes and aspirations which were dashed in the defeat of Monmouth's rebellion in 1685: 'When Churchill's troopers triumphed at Sedgemoor they rode down the last defenders of Cockayne, the Utopia of all jolly fellows, of the proud, independent man, neither exploiting nor exploited, eating and drinking of his own abundance. For this was one half of the Levellers' dream, and, I think, more than half of the Levellers' strength.'<sup>84</sup> Many of the new countercultural perspectives of the period coloured the reception of Morton for a new age audience. In his writings, the mystical and the political became intertwined in a novel popular literature promoted by movements of radical protest that claimed to discern the outlines of a precursor counterculture revealed through his research. Some traditional Communist contemporaries expressed misgivings about this approach and declared themselves 'uncomfortable' with Morton's emphasis on 'radical mysticism.'<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, as a founder figure, Morton profoundly influenced a new generation of post-war radicals. His *Matter of Britain*, published in 1966, and revisiting themes apparent in his *The English Utopia*, contains a vibrant series of essays which drew on topics ranging from the Arthurian Cycle of stories to the poems of T. S. Eliot. This was also a tradition which included the mystical teachings of Jacob Boehme, the ancient Jewish Kabbala and the Gnostic heresies of the early Christian era.<sup>86</sup> Morton's fanciful description of the lost world of the Anglo-Saxon poet Caedmon summoned up the image of vanished and bucolic peasant communities replaced by the hierarchies of Normanism that paved the way for later class structures. These communities were 'quite impossible to imagine after the conquest, when the divisions of classes was reinforced by the barrier of language.'<sup>87</sup> For Morton, expressing profound scepticism of the U.S.' moral integrity in the Cold War, traditional values of Englishness were under threat from a debased Americanised culture and the presence of US Cold War bases in

East Anglia that desecrated the landscape and diminished the yield of the land. He wrote of 'vast concrete runways . . . eating up thousands of rich acres which ought to be growing our food . . . Nothing is spared to give the Yanks comforts and luxuries . . . while our own people in the flood areas depend on charity'.<sup>88</sup> Morton's work helped shape E. P. Thompson's approach to the past, influencing, especially, his work on the religious and prophetic inheritance that emerged against the turmoil of the post-civil war period. Despite his self-proclaimed status as a 'Muggletonian Marxist' more associated with the New Left, than with the New Age, Thompson saw these cults and sects as key to the formation of a particular strand of semi-mystical English radicalism.<sup>89</sup> He expanded on these themes in his final work on the life of William Blake, *Witness Against the Beast*, exploring the obscure religious currents and alternative underground traditions that he believed had survived undiluted from the era of the English civil war.<sup>90</sup> In Thompson's view he had uncovered the radical ideas of a revolutionary age through the authentic survivals of a radical underworld, with affinities to the radical 'underground' of the nineteen-sixties. Following Morton, he represented these ideas as instrumental, rather than marginal, to the development of William Blake's mythology.<sup>91</sup>

This radical tradition manifested itself strongly in the platform of nineteen-sixties opponents of the established order, blending some traditional reform nostrums with the new 'DiY' culture of youthful experimentation and alternative living arrangements. Various strands allowed for the reclamation of dissident groups depicted as the precursors of a new and green, back-to-nature communalism that rejected the divisions of the Cold War. The influence of US popular culture provided the background to some of these trends, fostering a permissive environment, hedonism, sexual experimentation and an interest in Eastern mysticism expressed through the Digger movement of the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. The Haight-Ashbury anarchists embraced the name and many of the collectivist values of Gerrard Winstanley's Digger movement, transmitting them to a receptive audience of young people in neighbourhoods aligned with the new alternative cultural trends.<sup>92</sup> Like their counterparts in the U.S., the Diggers in nineteen-sixties Britain sought a return to a simpler and egalitarian way of living where people could live in harmony with nature in a green and sustainable 'New Jerusalem'. The intense spirituality and religious experimentation of the period also played a major part in the revival of archaic and imagined belief systems in the U.K., depicted as the innate faiths of the indigenous peoples of the British Isles. This was a current which had strong affinities with the mystical neopagan ideas of the Edwardian period that imagined an ancient, immutable world of village customs and unchanging traditional ways.<sup>93</sup> Against this background, druidism and pagan beliefs, which became the solvent for the counter-culture that emerged from the nineteen-sixties, experienced a revival, taking nostalgic druidism away from its Welsh and Celtic roots and giving it a curiously English inflection with an emphasis on environmentalism and conservation of prehistoric sites in England.<sup>94</sup> This evocation of druidism drew on myths of the druids as custodians of the land and tenders of the landscape, as proto-vegetarians and pacifists, and as proponents of a primitive pantheism and fraternalism.<sup>95</sup> Such counter-cultural movements blended a pan-Celtic mysticism reduced to an English style of eccentricity with a radical belief in a lost but recoverable utopia from an ancient past. Indeed, this new counter-culture was to share many themes with an older radical tradition inspired by similar utopian hopes and aspirations. A strong identification with the radicalism of the English

civil war, the discarded customs of the English people and the plunder of the land by Norman conquerors and enclosers emerged in cinema and across the arts during the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies.<sup>96</sup> The influence of this inherited past was also reflected in the illegal communes and squats of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, exemplified by Sid Rawle's Digger movement and the hippy communes springing up across London.<sup>97</sup> Dubbed 'King of the Hippies' by the British media, Sid Rawle played the part of a Fifth Monarchy Man in the 1975 film of the life of Gerrard Winstanley directed by Kevin Brownlow and based on David Caute's 1962 novel, *Comrade Jack*.<sup>98</sup> Those involved in the making of *Winstanley* saw it as more than just historical re-enactment; for some it provided a vision of the possibilities held out by the new social movements of the period. Partly financed by John Lennon to publicise the Diggers' attempt at establishing a self-sufficient community on the common land of St George's Hill, the film was intended as a homage to earlier attempts to reconnect a displaced peasantry with the land. Marina Lewycka recalls: 'In some ways the making of the film *Winstanley* mirrored the endeavour of the original Diggers. It was an enterprise held together by a shared belief that commitment was more important than money, a lack of hierarchy that occasionally bordered on the anarchic, the spirit of voluntarism, good humour, camaraderie, stoicism in the face of setbacks and willingness to submit to the rigours of English dirt and English weather in pursuit of a higher purpose'.<sup>99</sup> The landscape, environment, dirt, mud and detritus that littered the outdoor sets of Brownlow's *Winstanley* have led to comparisons with the aftermath of the festivals that came increasingly to shape the outdoor manifestations of the youth counter-culture of the nineteen-seventies.<sup>100</sup>

### **A 'New Age' radical tradition**

It is the constant refrain of lost liberties and a deferral back to older political authority and earlier democratic tradition, which continued to mark out the terrain occupied by protestors standing outside the mainstream and in opposition to developers, energy companies, nuclear power plants, local authorities and the transport industry. Activists often located themselves in a tradition that allowed them to invoke the Chartists, and Tory radicals like Richard Oastler for their laments about the separation of the people from the land.<sup>101</sup> The 'Battle of the Beanfield' in 1985 which saw punitive police action against travellers attending a 'People's Free Festival' at Stonehenge recalled incidents of heavy-handed state action against protestors in the past.<sup>102</sup> Here the radical past provided inspiration for and heavily influenced the free festival movement that exalted the idea of an uninhibited and joyous embrace of the traditions of popular carnival and people's pageants reinvigorated in festivals like Glastonbury that appealed to alternative national mythologies placed at the service of the peace movement in the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties.<sup>103</sup> These festival spaces bore some of the hallmarks of Morton's Medieval 'Land of Cockayne' which he saw as integral to the outlook of the early modern peasantry.<sup>104</sup> May day riots in Westminster and Whitehall in 2000 by anti-globalisation protestors and 'guerrilla gardeners' that led to the defacement of Winston Churchill's statue recalled the riotous revelry and carnivalesque excesses of nineteenth-century popular protest.<sup>105</sup> A revival of traditional rural customs and pastimes was very marked in movements that sought to oppose development of rural sites, obstruct motorway



expansion, or preserve green belt and parkland. Images of nineteenth-century anti-enclosure protests persisted in reports of 'old women and children helping to push down fences' erected to fence off and uproot the Wanstead Tree in George Green, East London in 1993 that was traditionally associated with customs of access to the common land of Wanstead.<sup>106</sup> In 2012 protestors opposed to the temporary construction of an operational security base linked to the Olympics at Wanstead Flats that necessitated a revision of the 1878 act preserving the land for East Londoners, revived the traditional rural pastime of 'beating of the bounds ... a traditional community event' to publicise the scale of the proposed development.<sup>107</sup> Traditional radical folk heroes were also often invoked in support of these campaigns. In 2018 Friends of the Earth set up a series of Robin Hood themed events to oppose fracking in Sherwood Forest that fused the model of the arboreal forest camps established by environmental protestors and the mythology surrounding Robin Hood's outlaw band. 'Inspired by the legend of Robin Hood and the people who stood by his side against injustice ... Take up the mantle of Robin Hood and say: 'No fracking in my 'hood!' asserted the flyer for these events.<sup>108</sup> The assumption of alter-egos, 'ritualised' names and colourful, archaic and piratical clothing styles worn by eco-protestors, embedded them in a traditional medium of protest in England that was reliant on disguise, and the protection of everyday identities.<sup>109</sup> The success of this strategy fostered improvised and carnivalesque strategies of protest, notably the Global Justice movement's 'Clown Army', highly visible in anti-globalisation protests.<sup>110</sup> The impact of some of these tendencies in re-shaping the radical tradition is apparent in the cast of assorted beggars, smugglers, pirates and various itinerants that populate Christopher Hill's final book, *Liberty against the Law*.<sup>111</sup>

The inspiration for these events remained grounded in an essentially arcadian, almost conservative ruralist perception of the past, confirming Raphael Samuel's view of Morton's historical vision that he expressed an 'almost Tory sense of lineage' and highlighting 'his treatment of the past as a living present and his fascination with real or imagined predecessors'.<sup>112</sup> John Michell, one of the key gurus of the New Age counter-culture, whose ideas were to blend Platonic idealism with the nineteenth century radicalism of William Cobbett, wrote in similar vein of an 'authentic' strain of English revolt rooted in the English past. Michell wrote profusely from the nineteen-sixties onwards on a variety of esoteric subjects that included earth mysteries, sacred geomancy, the grail legend, Jesus' visit to Britain, Manx folk-traditions, the return of a mythical Albion, the authorship of Shakespeare's plays, and belief in UFO visitations, all of which he believed had trace elements in earlier radical belief systems.<sup>113</sup> A guru to many of the rock icons of the era, including the Rolling Stones, Michell cast himself as a 'radical traditionalist'. This reflected the powerful influence of an older Tory radicalism, which sought a return to the 'Merry England' of a bygone past. With his fervent dislike of Marxism, the European Union and metric units of measurement, Michell also anticipated the more recent ideas of a traditional Conservatism. He was a key figure in the Free Festival movement which came to optimise the anti-commercialism of the new hippy ethos, helping to organise the first Glastonbury Fayre in 1971.<sup>114</sup> Acknowledging his own influences from English radicalism he evoked Oliver Goldsmith's poem 'The Deserted Village', a paean to the destruction of English village life much cited in the nineteenth-century and wrote of his hero and inspiration, William Cobbett that he proved a stern critic of 'the forces of usury ... laying waste to the land, upsetting the old order and



turning Merrie England into a sullen rural slum besmirched by industrial furnaces'.<sup>115</sup> For his followers, Michell was 'a radical of a typically English stamp'. 'He belonged with William Blake, William Cobbett, William Morris, Henry W. Massingham and those other defenders of Albion against its betrayers' wrote an admirer.<sup>116</sup> Other shamanic figures abounded during this period on the interstices between the traditional left and the counter-cultural fringe. E.P. Thompson was described as an 'intellectual guru' who appeared at the Glastonbury Festival, and was a strong influence on its organiser, Michael Eavis.<sup>117</sup> As K.O. Morgan has pointed out, Tony Benn, associated for most of his career with pioneering electioneering and communication strategies, rather than with the radical tradition, during these years, exercised a shamanic custodianship of the radical past, his tone recalling 'the puritanical excesses of the Fifth Monarchy Men'.<sup>118</sup> In these incarnations memories of the English radical past fed directly into the powerful idea of a national identity expressed through counter-cultural ideas which were rooted in a diminished democratic history.

## Conclusions

The radical tradition in English popular politics has generated a complex debate amongst historians. A primary theme of this article is the deliberate appropriation of an English radical past by key opinion formers and the explicit project to root the labour movement within a much older democratic narrative. Restoration of this tradition has a long lineage. Indeed, into the inter-war period, across a variety of movements and agitations, the English political labour left continued to locate its origins in the political authority of an older radical past. This article has set out to explore this democratic history and the process by which it was recycled by an emerging labour movement. Building on the platform rhetoric of the radical-liberal and early socialist movements of the twentieth century, this was a concern which continued into the counterculture of the nineteen-sixties and informed later environmental and anti-globalisation movements. During a period when contemporary phases of revisionism and modernisation in the Labour party were sometimes seen as inconsistent with the radical past, a new generation of activists revived an older set of ideas and the inheritance of reform debates relating to the ownership and rights to the land. Rather, however, than witnessing a dousing of the 'flame' Josiah Wedgwood represented as an embodiment of its vigour, the radical tradition has proved durable, and was never entirely reduced to embers. The theme of access to the land that animated an English radical tradition remained pertinent, and in the years after the nineteen-seventies provided a focus for new and different movements which nevertheless drew on the older ideas of a plundered land and the tradition of direct and practical action. For Alun Howkins, this was the evident continuation of much older traditions within English radical culture. This article analyses the ways in which the radical tradition became exiled to the cultural fringes as the Labour party became a contender for power, finding new life in the counter-culture of the nineteen-sixties, and rooting itself in groups like the hippy movement and squatter associations that found a message in the radical tradition's appeals for a return of the land to the people. This tradition was picked up and enthusiastically claimed by a new counterculture which sought to revive the libertarian idealism of the Levellers, Diggers and Ranters and gain

the stamp of approval of an older radical tradition. Here it sought to confer on a new counter-cultural individualism the legitimacy of English history.

## Notes

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3. See for a representative sample of traditional radical heroes, Joseph Clayton, *Leaders of the People: Studies in Democratic History* (London: Martin Secker, 1910), vii and for a review of the book, *The Labour Leader*, 6 January 1911, p. 3.
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8. Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 140–76.
9. Jon Lawrence, ‘Labour – the Myths it has Lived by’, in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour’s First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 341–66. Eric Hobsbawm noted the importance of ‘invented’ traditions in the creation of nations, movements, institutions and identities, see Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14 and Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, ‘Introduction’, in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–21. See for Hobsbawm and the Popular Front tradition, Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chs, 2–3.

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15. Kevin Gildart, 'Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters, Spiritualists, and Theosophists: Esoteric Belief and Practice in the British Parliamentary Labour Party c. 1929–1951', *Twentieth Century British History* 29, no. 3 (2018), pp. 357–387.
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25. *The Labour Leader*, 12 April 1912, p. 230. For J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760–1832* (London: Longmans, 1911), see Stewart A. Weaver, *The Hammonds: A Marriage in History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), ch. 3.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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