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A Gradualist Approach to Criminality: Early British Socialists, Utopia and Crime

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Abstract

The attitudes of early British socialists to criminality are a thoroughly under-researched area of historical scholarship. This paper draws on the utopian ideas of Robert Owen, William Morris, H. G. Wells, Robert Blatchford, Edward Carpenter and Ramsay MacDonald as a vehicle for investigating the attitudes of mainstream *fin de siècle* British socialists to crime, punishment and penal reform. Placing these figures and their utopias along a spectrum that sees radical ‘Arcadian’ socialists on the far left, ‘technological’ socialists on the far right, and moderate socialists occupying the middle ground, it presents two principal findings. First it demonstrates how crime was predicted by most of the left to decrease to a minimum level under socialism. ‘Arcadians’, ‘technological’ and moderate socialists invoked different methods in this pursuit, but each were in essence grappling with the same broader issue of the relationship of the individual to the state under socialism. Secondly, examining the multifaceted ideological heritage of the British left in relation to their approaches to crime, it is argued that, despite the left’s gradualist philosophy, their own attitudes to criminality actually closely reflected utopian conceptions. Examination of these issues offers an important opportunity to re-evaluate the evolution of British socialist thought.

Introduction¹

In his *April Theses* (1917), the Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin called for the abolition of the police under his prescribed communist Russia.² In Britain almost thirty years before, William Morris presented his own vision of a crime-free communist society in his utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890), while almost seventy years earlier, Welshman Robert Owen set out his plans for a society that required no police apparatus. It is difficult to imagine how Morris and Owen, two of Britain’s leading early socialists, might have interpreted Lenin’s revolutionary

¹ Many thanks to Professors Matt Worley, Andrew Thorpe and David Stack for comments and suggestions on this paper.

² Vladimir I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, 2 vols (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1947), 2:17-21.

declaration had they been witness to it. For contemporary opposition in Britain, a communist Russia unbound by police was likely to result only in alternative methods of repression to those experienced under Tsarist autocracy. (History would substantiate this notion with especial alacrity, Lenin's murderous secret police established less than a year after his transient April return to Russia.³) To visionary socialists in Britain, however, a communist society free from police was far more suggestive of a society liberated also from the burdens of crime. Under a system of radically different relations to the means and modes of production there would, it was thought, be no need for a police apparatus. This logic was not unfamiliar to socialists in Britain; the notion appears frequently in post-renaissance utopian writings as far back as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Yet while Lenin attempted to eradicate crime in the world's first socialist state, discussions of criminality amongst the British left at the turn of the twentieth century appeared to be negligible.

By delving deeper into British socialist thought, a much more complex picture of the early British socialist understandings of crime is revealed. Drawing on original periodicals, as well as the fields of utopian studies and criminology, this paper demonstrates that while leftist discussion surrounding crime appears to have been relatively limited, criminality was nevertheless an issue of great importance to the *fin de siècle* British left. Many assumed that under socialism criminal activity would disappear; for those described here as 'Arcadian' socialists, crime and law would wither away of its own volition once the broader economic exigencies of socialism were established. For others, who imagined a very different construction of socialist utopia (here labeled 'technological' socialists), the application of strict and extensive criminal legislation would keep crime at bay. For a final group, seen as occupying a more moderate stance between the two prior positions, intervention in the sphere of criminality would render wholesale change in the moral condition of society, such that the criminal rationale would be extinguished. By placing these utopian approaches to crime on a simple linear spectrum, upon which the more moderate attitudes are bound at either end by competing radical outlooks, an opportunity is presented for recalibrating early twentieth-century British socialist ideology, its broad ancestry and its effect upon society. With reference to the varied heritage of the Labour Party (which came to dominate the left of British politics in the early 1900s),

³ Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police: Muscovite, Imperial Russian and Soviet Political Security Operations 1565-1970* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1970), p. 119.

its radical-republican, pro-Gladstonian liberal, Marxist and trade union roots, a study through the lens of crime is well placed to gain new insight into socialist thought.

The paper also highlights that, regarding criminality, in spite of the ‘other-worldliness’ often assigned to utopian writing, contemporary utopian works actually reflected the thoughts of much of the British left. This should not, perhaps, be all that surprising given that many were the authorial yields of socialists inherently bound up in the contemporary political milieu. Nevertheless, in a period when British revolutionary spirit was decidedly lacking, and the idea of gradualism (the process of seeking reform through parliamentary and constitutional measures, and eschewing revolution) was dominant, a utopian eradication of crime appeared more feasible in the eyes of certain socialists. As part of the broader dialogue between socialism, liberalism and the native radical tradition as to the understanding of the relationship of the individual and society under socialism, a focus on the utopians’ conception of crime suggests their ideas of penal *evolution* – not revolution – were a major influence on the gradualist socialists of mainstream British politics.

The paper proceeds in three sections. First, the attitudes of early British socialists towards crime are evinced in order to emphasize that the left understood very well the importance of the topic. The second part analyses how criminality was predicted to be dealt with under future socialism in the utopian writings of Robert Owen, William Morris, and H. G. Wells – our radical Arcadian and technological socialists – before the final section examines the more moderate ideas behind the works of Robert Blatchford, Edward Carpenter, and later Ramsay MacDonald, all at different times leading socialists. With reference throughout to criminological theory and the varied heritage of British socialism, it is demonstrated that the views espoused in utopian writings reflected much of the left’s understanding of crime and punishment within an embedded context of gradualism.

British Socialists and Crime

Despite official discussions on crime appearing negligible at the turn of the century, the issue was actually anything but an afterthought for British socialists. There are a number of reasons for this. Following the Gladstone Commission (1895), the British penal system was undergoing a vast transformation, developing according to new sociological understandings of the causes of, and remedies to, crime, and in

large part eschewing antiquated Victorian practices of corporal punishment. As emphasis shifted towards notions of reformation, deterrence, and attempts to understand the effects of social conditioning upon society, much was being done to ‘crystallise liberal penal thinking’.⁴

As Clive Emsley also notes, criminality was no longer being explained through the ‘moral weakness’ of offenders. Across Europe, the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s ‘popularised [...] notion of genetically determined, distinct criminal types’ was advancing the ideas that would inform the Eugenics movement, but in Britain theories of heredity were never considered an exclusive explanation of the causes of crime.⁵ Instead, empirical studies tended to reaffirm that the principal focus in examinations of criminality should remain social and environmental factors.⁶

Perhaps most importantly, throughout Europe the ‘classical’ school of criminology, in which criminality was understood as a natural facet of the human condition, and which invoked universal punishments that fit the crimes committed, was facing refutation. In its place emerged increasingly popular ‘neoclassical’ ideas that rejected the notion of the rational offender as being deterred by punishment, and which sought more individualised penalties.⁷ Of utmost significance in neoclassical approaches was the role of the environment (and often the economic situation) in both causing and preventing crime. In Britain, David Garland has since labeled these notions as the embryo of ‘penal welfarism’.⁸

Two points are key in understanding the nuances of British socialist approaches to crime. First, although an emphasis on social and environmental causes was for the most part favoured in Britain, in certain circles theories of degeneration – the fear that the human condition was in a state of retrogression amid modern

⁴ Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in Twentieth-Century England* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2011), p. 201.

⁵ Emsley, *Crime, Police, and Penal Policy: European Experiences 1750-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 181; John Tierney, *Criminology: Theory and Context*, 2nd edn (London: Pearson Longman, 2006), p. 51; David Garland, ‘British Criminology Before 1935’, in *A History of British Criminology*, ed. Paul Rock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 1-17 (p. 2).

⁶ Emsley, *Crime, Police, and Penal Policy*, p. 195; see also Daniel Pick on Charles Goring’s mass study, *The English Convict* (1913), in Pick, Daniel, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁷ Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 124-125.

⁸ See Garland, *Punishment and Welfare: A History of Penal Strategies* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985).

industrial living – were simultaneously being perpetuated. Daniel Pick, for example, shows how alleged refutations in Britain (most noticeably Charles Goring's *English Convict*) of Lombrosianism and genetic theories of criminality are in fact couched only in 'a different brand of hereditarian theory'. Degeneration theory increasingly called for punishments based on the notion of 'social defence', a concept derived from liberal and utilitarian ideas of protecting society, and which sought to infuse punishments with treatments determined by medical penal experts.⁹ As demonstrated below, the liberal roots of these ideas are significant, and were instrumental in the development of some socialists' approaches to criminality, both in their utopias and in practice.

Secondly, at the turn of the century Enrico Ferri, an Italian follower of Lombroso with left-leaning political sentiments, established what he called 'criminal sociology'. Drawing on criminal statistics, positivist methodologies and medical theories, as well as the writings of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer, Ferri developed the notion that the criminal was a product of both heredity and the environment.¹⁰ Biology and Darwinism had, since the socialist movement's inception, maintained a strong influence over a number of leading figures of the British left.¹¹ In particular, Ramsay MacDonald (Labour's first Prime Minister in 1924 and a personal friend of Ferri) 'self-consciously developed a "biological view" of socialism' and remained a strong advocate of Ferri's scientific criminology.¹² Interestingly, despite his emphasis on hereditarianism and his influence upon the eugenics movement, in Britain Ferri's radical authority appears to have been felt most acutely among those categorised here as having a more moderate approach to the criminal problem.

Aside from the theoretical discussions, the practical problems of crime in the early 1900s were a concern for the British left. Poverty and unemployment were endemic, and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and H. M. Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation were espousing connections between these issues and crime. Fears were increasingly being raised over the alleged existence in Britain of a

⁹ Pick, pp. 5, 176-189; Beer, p. 124; Emsley, *Crime, Police, and Penal Policy*, p. 223.

¹⁰ Emsley, *Crime, Police, and Penal Policy*, p. 189; see also Enrico Ferri, *Socialism and Positive Science (Darwin-Spencer-Marx)* (London: ILP, 1905).

¹¹ David Stack, *The First Darwinian Left: Socialism and Darwinism, 1859-1914* (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2003), pp. 30-41.

¹² Ibid., p. 54; James Ramsay MacDonald, *Socialism and Society*, 2nd edn (London: ILP, 1905), p. 33; MacDonald, 'Preface' to Enrico Ferri, *Socialism and Positive Science (Darwin-Spencer-Marx)* (London: ILP, 1905), pp. v-viii.

dangerous underclass, consisting largely of habitual criminals and perpetuating a perilous urban pathology.¹³ These were not novel issues, and British socialists at the turn of the century could call upon earlier socialist and anarchist reflections on crime. In the late eighteenth century, for example, the philosophical anarchist William Godwin contended that man's discordance and crime were a result of the 'evils that arise out of the established administration of property'.¹⁴ The view that the preservation of private property was the root cause of crime would go on to form a major part of many socialist approaches to the criminal question.¹⁵ In the second half of the nineteenth century Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels furthered this idea. For the German philosophers, crime was inherently connected with poverty and broader economic conditions, and 'must not be punished in the individual but anti-social sources of crime' – private property and capitalist competition – 'must be destroyed'.¹⁶

Marx's assessment of capital punishment was similarly abrasive, claiming that 'since Cain the world has neither been intimidated nor ameliorated by punishment'.¹⁷ As Bohm notes, Marx foresaw the disappearance of class antagonisms under communism, rendering the instruments of state power – and in particular capital punishment – redundant.¹⁸ Marx forecast that force would 'not be needed by communist governments, certainly not exterior force [...] for punishment would be "the judgement of the criminal upon himself"'.¹⁹ While one need not have been a Marxist to query the efficacy of the death penalty, the broader point surrounding the self-regulation of human behaviour was to prove key in British socialists' attitudes to crime, as seen below.

Marx's influence is easily located in socialist reflections on crime in Britain. Edward Carpenter, for instance, a leading figure in the establishment of the Fabian

¹³ *Justice: Organ of the Social Democracy*, 19 April 1884; Lydia Morris, *Dangerous Classes: The Underclass and Social Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 10; Pick, p. 5.

¹⁴ William Godwin, quoted in Leon Radzinowicz and Roger Hood, *A History of English Criminal Law*, 5 vols (London: Steven & Sons, 1986), V, The Emergence of Penal Policy, p. 35.

¹⁵ Radzinowicz and Hood, p. 34.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Despatches for the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx*, ed. James Ledbetter (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 122-123; Marx, quoted in David McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 32.

¹⁷ Marx, *Despatches*, p. 121.

¹⁸ Robert M. Bohm, 'Karl Marx and the Death Penalty', *Critical Criminology*, 16.4 (2008), 285-291 (p. 288).

¹⁹ McLellan, p. 241.

Society and the Labour Party, and Belfort Bax, theoretician of the SDF and editor of the party organ, *Justice*, both saw crime as being reducible to the question of private property.²⁰ *The Commonweal*, the organ of the Socialist League, of which William Morris was a leading member, claimed that once production methods had been socialised, crimes against both property and the person would cease. Echoing Marx, the league held that in future the ‘justest judge will be an untrammelled public conscience’.²¹

But Marxism and anarchism were not the only, nor indeed the principal, influences upon socialist thought. The diverse character of British socialism (and especially the Labour Party) had its roots in trade unionism, democratic socialism, radical republicanism, pro-Gladstonian Lib-Labism, Nonconformist Christianity, anti-modernist medievalism and ‘the quest for advanced “scientific” modernity’.²² Liberal heritage was particularly strong, with many socialist figures – MacDonald, Carpenter, Beatrice and Sidney Webb of the Fabian Society, future Labour Party leader George Lansbury, and Arthur Henderson, future Home and Foreign Secretary, to name but a few – having been at one time or another members of the Liberal Party.

Socialist analyses of crime tended to reflect this broad and often ambiguous heritage. The ILP, for instance, attributed the production of criminals not to economic, but political conditions.²³ Many saw punishing criminals as futile.²⁴ For others, however, punishment was not considered altogether untenable. Belfort Bax repudiated capital punishment in *Justice*, but elsewhere favoured summary executions where he

²⁰ Edward Carpenter, *Prisons Police and Punishment: An Inquiry into the Causes and Treatment of Crime and Criminals* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1905), pp. 47, 115-130; Ernest Belfort Bax, *The Ethics of Socialism* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1902), p. 56.

²¹ *The Commonweal: The Official Journal of the Socialist League*, 19 June 1886.

²² See Jose Harris, ‘Labour’s Political and Social Thought’, in *Labour’s First Century*, ed. Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8-45 (p. 9); Clive Behagg, *Labour and Reform: Working Class Movements 1815-1914* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), pp. 117-118.

²³ *The Socialist Review: A Monthly Review of Modern Thought*, March-August 1909 (London: Independent Labour Party, 1909), p. 71; *Labour Leader: A Weekly Journal of Socialism, Trade Unionism, and Politics*, 19 October 1906.

²⁴ *Justice*, 20 September 1884; 25 February 1899; 15 March 1884; 2 November 1901; Victor Bailey, ‘English Prisons, Penal Culture, and the Abatement of Imprisonment, 1895-1922’, *Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), 285-324 (pp. 306-308); Helen Blagg and Charlotte Wilson, The Fabian Women’s Group, *Women and Prisons*. Fabian Tract 163 (London: The Fabian Society, 1912), pp. 4-5; Hypatia B. Bonner, *The Death Penalty*. Humanitarian League, Criminal Law and Prison Reform Department (London, 1903), p. 2; Jose Harris, *Unemployment and Politics: A Study in English Social Policy, 1886-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), pp. 90-95; Radzinowicz and Hood, p. 38.

felt them necessary. Similarly, George Lansbury and Sidney Webb advocated punitive labour camps for the ‘treatment of the habitual casual and repression of the loafer’.²⁵ According to Kevin Morgan, Webb’s ‘own deep affinities with social imperialism, the politics of “national efficiency”’ and liberal elitism were slowly reaffirmed at the turn of the century, perhaps highlighting the susceptibility of socialists and left-leaning liberals to the hyberbolic headlines of the natural sciences and their utility in the contemporary theories of criminality of Lombroso and Ferri.²⁶

The broad heritage of the British left, then, played a significant role in the differing, and often inconsistent, approaches to criminality. For many, crime was the result of the preservation of private property and the economic conditions imposed by the ruling capitalist order. Punishment of criminals was seen to lack efficacy and the death penalty held as no deterrent. By ridding society of private property and by radically altering the modes of production, crime and all forbidden behaviours would cease. This analysis of criminality, however, was by no means universally accepted among the left. Webb’s insistence, for example, that in order to check the causes of crime, the eugenicist ‘must interfere, interfere, interfere’; the ILP’s susceptibility to treat the criminal ‘as a being apart’; and Bax’s justifications for executions highlight the differences in attitudes.²⁷ Classical and neoclassical ideas on criminality, as well as elements of degeneration theory, appear to have mixed incongruously, indicating eclectic, if perhaps confused, attitudes to the problem of crime.

By analysing utopian approaches to criminality in the following sections, socialist considerations can be understood more clearly. With utopian approaches ranging from radical to moderate, their conceptions of crime were far closer to the

²⁵ *Commonweal*, 19 June 1886; *Justice*, 8 March 1884; John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: At the Heart of Old Labour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 61; Fabian Society, *Memorandum on Methods of Assisting the Unemployed and the Power of Local Authorities in Respect Thereto* (London: Fabian Society, 1904); Sidney Webb, ‘The Reform of the Poor Law’, *Contemporary Review*, 58 (1890), 95-120 (p. 115); *Socialism: True and False*, Fabian Tract 51 (London: Fabian Society, 1894), p. 4.

²⁶ Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism and the British Left*, 3 vols (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006), II, The Webbs and Soviet Communism, p. 28.

²⁷ *The Crusade Against Destitution: Being the Organ of the National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution*, June 1910; Webb, ‘Breeding and National Standards’, in *The Social and Political Thought of the British Labour Party*, ed. Frank Bealey (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), pp. 71-72; Harry Snell, *The Foreigner in England: An Examination of the Problem of Alien Immigration* (ILP Literature Publication Department) (Keighley: Wadsworth & Co., 1904), p. 5.

mainstream left's own gradualist, evolutionary understandings than might be expected.

Owen, Morris and Wells: Radical Utopias and Crime

Few socialists in Britain outlined in detail their views on criminality. Of those who did, the accounts of Robert Owen, William Morris, H. G. Wells, Robert Blatchford and Edward Carpenter are particularly instructive. The writings of these figures (and the figures themselves) can be viewed along a spectrum, with the radical Arcadian and technological approaches placed at either end, and the more moderate in the middle. On the far left of the spectrum are Robert Owen and William Morris. Classed here as Arcadian socialists, both foresaw the disappearance of crime and law as the natural consequence of the socialisation of property and industry, and of a society restructured along the lines of small rural communities. Taking Owen first, the social reformer, born in 1771, is often described as a founder of the utopian socialist movement. Despite his alleged utopianism, though, Owen and his followers always stressed the pragmatism of their endeavours, and the practical applications of his vision grant to his ideas a distinct realism, his attitudes to crime included.²⁸

Owen's approach to crime can be traced to his *Report to the Committee for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor* (1817), the details of which make clear that he anticipated the disappearance of crime under socialism. Broadly, Owen proposed the development of self-sustaining agricultural communities of around 1200 people, in which every social need and education would be provided. Wherever possible, industrial machinery would be shunned and the skills of the artisan esteemed in its place.

Several of Owen's ideas are critical in examining his attitude to crime. First, Owen pledged that property be held in common for an 'effectual means permanently to remove the causes of ignorance, poverty and crime'.²⁹ Second, he sought to reaffirm the existence of a 'moral economy', under which no 'insult or oppression can take place', and where 'happy villages of unity' aid those suffering in society. Finally, these measures should not be achieved by force or revolution. If these conditions

²⁸ John F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 46-47.

²⁹ Owen, quoted in Harrison, p. 24

could be met, Owen held, a 'community may be arranged' in such a manner as 'to withdraw vice, poverty, and, in a great degree, misery, from the world'.³⁰ Consequently, it would be clear 'that all human laws must be either unnecessary [...] create disunion', or 'produce crime incessantly'.³¹ Under common ownership, in scattered, small agricultural communities, the conditions producing crime would cease to exist and crime itself would vanish.

Like Godwin, Owen retained an Enlightenment faith in the power of public opinion to police behaviour, rooted in an understanding of individual psychology that stretched back to John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* and his notion of a 'love of fame'. As Claeys notes, central to Owen's communitarian utopia was a deep faith in the tendency of small, unified groups to regulate their members' behaviour. Public opinion would act as an 'informal governing power in circumstances where most behaviour was observable by others'. Under this 'eye of the community', in a just society based on equitable distribution and universal provision, a deep-running moral economy would ensure crime disappeared from Owenite society.³²

In 1890, following the Marxist decretum that informed the late nineteenth-century rise of modern 'scientific' socialism, William Morris presented the most detailed exhibition yet of crime under future socialism.³³ In *News from Nowhere*, the parallels with Owen's Arcadian ideals are clear. Now, it should be noted that my aim is not to conflate the utopianism of Owen with the socialism espoused by Morris, nor to suggest a line of direct continuity in socialist thought from one to another. For the purposes of this paper, however, the similarities in their approaches to crime in utopia are clear enough to group them together as Arcadians. In Morris' tale, protagonist William Guest travels through communist England, discovering that since production methods and property have been socialised, there no longer exist prisons, nor civil or criminal law. Instead, with capitalist competition removed, 'there is no rich class to

³⁰ Owen, quoted in Arthur L. Morton, *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1962), pp. 59, 121, 125-127, 137; Owen, *The Book of the New Moral World, Containing the Rational System of Society, Founded on Demonstrable Facts, Developing the Constitution and Laws of Human Nature and of Society* (London: E. Wilson, 1836), p. xxii.

³¹ Owen, *Book of the New Moral World*, p. xxiv.

³² Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 109-112.

³³ Morris was famously described by E. P. Thompson as the 'pioneer of constructive thought as to the organisation of the social life within Communist society'. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 682.

breed enemies against the state', and as a result there is no criminal class.³⁴ Law has been abolished and cities whittled down to medieval proportions. The people live happily in small, simple communities, much as Owen had envisioned.

Socialised property is also responsible for the disappearance of violent crimes in Morris' utopia. This is not to say that 'hot blood' will not 'err sometimes'; still a 'man may strike another'. But punishing these acts is futile. When crimes do (very occasionally) occur, the most that is expected of the transgressor – and indeed he expects this of himself – is that he make atonement for his behaviour. Penance is similarly expected for lesser outbreaks of violence; madness or illness must be cured where possible; and in a society of equals, crime naturally dissolves into a mere 'spasmodic disease', requiring no body of criminal law to deal with it.³⁵

Morris' faith in community appears even to supersede that of Owen. Beyond the abolition of civil and criminal law, he states, there is in utopia 'no code of public opinion which takes the place of [...] courts [...] no unvarying conventional set of rules by which people are judged'.³⁶ Instead, Morris sees a communal spirit ingrained in his citizenry, and sentiments similar to a republican sense of 'civic virtue' are at play as a means of eliminating crime. Members of Owen's and Morris' utopian communities perceive themselves as having an obligation to their fellow citizens as participants in a cooperative enterprise. This is why both place such emphasis upon the small size of their communities – public opinion (in Owen) and civic virtue (in Morris) lose their moral force when diffused over larger spaces and populations, exposing society to more crime, punishment and civil disorder.³⁷

Owen and Morris' utopias, then, are retreats to simplistic, rural idylls, where an aesthetic of the artisan prevails at the expense of unnecessary machinery.³⁸ Property is owned collectively and small, dispersed communities are self-sustaining. Most importantly, conviction in the ideas of civic virtue, the judgement of the transgressor upon himself, and a voluntary communal spirit ensure that more

³⁴ William Morris, *News from Nowhere; Or an Epoch of Rest, Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*, ed. by James Redmond (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 68.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁷ See Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship and Republican Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 79; Claeys, *Citizens and Saints*, p. 113.

³⁸ For Morris on machinery see Thompson, *William Morris*, pp. 649-654. On simplicity see William Morris, 'The Society of the Future', in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols, ed. May Morris (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), II, 453-468 (p. 466).

oppressive forms of social control are unwarranted in repressing criminality. Contrary to classical theories of criminality, crime is in no way considered an intrinsic constituent of human nature.

Moving from the far left to the far right of our spectrum of utopias and crime, a markedly different approach is found in H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905). The methods employed by Wells in reducing crime differ significantly from Owen and Morris, but, as will be demonstrated, each are shown to be wrestling with the same issue of the relationship of the individual and society under socialism. The problem of crime was significant for Wells, and he asks what utopia will do

with its congenital invalids, its idiots and madmen, its drunkards [...] its cruel and furtive souls [...] the man who is 'poor' all round [...] who on earth [...] tramps the streets under the banner of the unemployed.

He answers that the 'superior' species must be engaged in eliminating them, but nature should be engineered so as to 'kill the weaker [...] to overwhelm them'.³⁹ Wells eschewed all pre-technological utopias, and, clearly engaging with modern eugenic ideas that were stimulating interest among groups like the Fabian Society, his considerations on crime across the period 1901-1905 betray his flirtations with socialism, his self-styled turn to liberalism and, importantly, his engagement with theories of degeneration. Wells understood, and was at times critical of, the capitalist dynamic and its need for the 'ceaseless development of new machinery, new products, and new markets', but his left-wing critique failed to temper his more extreme solutions to the problem of criminality.⁴⁰ In his *Anticipations* (1901), for instance, Wells recommends a particularly clinical regimen of 'good scientifically caused pain' and the deliberate killing of degenerates and criminals through the use of an opiate. In *Mankind in the Making* (1903), selected groups committing offences regarding reproduction and child maintenance are isolated in labour colonies. And in the synthesis provided by *A Modern Utopia* there are applied, for juveniles and first-time offenders, 'cautionary and remedial treatment'. In remote regions they are fenced in,

³⁹ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 95-96.

⁴⁰ Wells, *Modern Utopia*, p. 112; Francis Wheen, 'Introduction', in Wells, *Modern Utopia*, pp. xiii-xxvi, at p. xvi. On his extreme ideas see, for instance, *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). Richard Toye, 'H. G. Wells and the New Liberalism', *Twentieth Century British History*, 19 (2008), 156-185 (p. 162).

and there ‘the defective citizen’ is schooled. But there will be ‘no lethal chambers’. ‘Even for murder Utopia will not, I think, kill. I doubt there will even be jails’.⁴¹

Wells advocates a pre-emptive, or preventative, form of law enforcement in utopia, in which freedoms are narrowed and modern technologies utilised (hence his ascription as a technological socialist). Social surgery is the only solution he can muster, and state bureaucracy (his ‘Samurai’) will be the enforcer of social control.⁴² Extensive legislation – and as a result, endless prescribed acts of criminality, from murder to dressing unsatisfactorily – would keep crime at bay. In short, crime remains as it had under liberal capitalism; Wells’ influence is felt principally in his belief that the implementation of additional laws would suffocate criminal activity, and in his engagement with, and concern for, ideas surrounding degeneration and eugenics.

Although these measures appear to differ greatly from those of Owen and Morris, and while the various epithets attributed to Wells (socialist, democrat, liberal, fascist, racist, authoritarian) only compound the complex contradictions of his character, he is in fact probing the same issues as our Arcadian socialists: the relationship of the individual to the state under socialism.⁴³ In contrast to the Arcadians’ faith in the power of public opinion to temper crime, the liberalism belying Wells’ political outlook had for a long time taken issue with this idea. John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859), for instance, provides the most famous diatribe against society’s power to pressure individuals to conform, and even Godwin, in *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), casts his doubts by showing how man can be persecuted by opinion. Mill, of course, was grappling with his own Benthamite education, and it appears that a similar tension underlay socialist discussions on crime. Where Arcadians trusted public opinion or ideas of civic virtue, technological socialists placed their faith in law. Their methods differ markedly, but they appear to be two sides – and in this analysis, two extremes – of the same Benthamite coin.

⁴¹ Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought*, 3rd edn (London: Chapman & Hall, 1902), pp. 300-301; *Mankind in the Making*, 2nd edn (London: Chapman & Hall, 1903), pp. 37, 63-64, 68-72, 99-101; *Modern Utopia*, p. 100.

⁴² Wells, *Modern Utopia*, pp. 99, 103.

⁴³ See Philip Coupland, ‘H. G. Wells’s “Liberal Fascism”’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35.4 (2000), 541-558 (pp. 542, 549).

Blatchford and Carpenter: Moderate Utopias

If the Arcadians occupy one extreme on our spectrum and Wells another, who (and what) occupies the more moderate ground? A key figure is Robert Blatchford. Owner and editor of the patriotic socialist newspaper *The Clarion*, Blatchford was another socialist to pen a utopian narrative and took a particular interest in crime and punishment. Before publishing his utopia, Blatchford repudiated classical theories of criminality in *Not Guilty: A Defence of the Bottom Dog* (1906), a clear attack on the ‘barbarism’ of British penal codes and an effort to spread the message of tolerance and rehabilitation.⁴⁴ Constructed through an excessively metaphor-ridden treatise to ‘aid’ the layman reader, *Not Guilty* is at pains to argue that crime is the outcome of both hereditary and environmental factors. As a result, Blatchford contests, criminals (‘ruffians’) should never be blamed nor punished for criminal acts – how can they be when heredity and the environment are beyond their control? Reform is most urgently required in Blatchford’s view, British prisons and penal codes being both thoroughly ineffective and a stain on the nation’s conscience.⁴⁵

Elements of both Arcadian and technological approaches can be discerned in Blatchford’s conception of crime, but he is wholly reliant on neither, as demonstrated by his utopia *The Sorcery Shop: An Impossible Dream* (1907). The novel is set in a future Manchester, where once again the socialisation of production and housing has eradicated crime, poverty and violence. Though there are only minor references to crime throughout the text (the character of ‘Light’, for instance, is noted as a reformed criminal), readers are fleetingly reassured that it *is* possible to prevent all crime, poverty and loafers, and for society to flourish while prison and police administrations are expunged.⁴⁶ The influence of Morris can be seen in a number of aspects of Blatchford’s attitude to crime, infused in his utopia: that the root idea of morality is social service – an idea of civic virtue governs the moral condition of society; that once all are provided for, incentives to criminality will dissolve; and that work – a functional and necessary contribution to the community – is a pleasure and a

⁴⁴ Laurence Thompson, *Robert Blatchford: Portrait of an Englishman* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1951), p. 176.

⁴⁵ Robert Blatchford, *Not Guilty: A Defence of the Bottom Dog* (London: The Clarion Press, 1906), pp. 8-9, 20, 83-85, 209.

⁴⁶ Blatchford, *The Sorcery Shop: An Impossible Dream* (London: The Clarion Press, 1907), pp. xiv, 47, 83, 131-132, 188-189.

counterweight to crime.⁴⁷ But the force of Wells is also felt: ‘atavism’, for Blatchford, is the source of much crime, while the ‘born criminal’ has not ‘the kind of brain’ for certain acts; and rapid systems of detection are required to stop criminal activity.⁴⁸

In his biography of Blatchford, Laurence Thompson describes *The Sorcery Shop* as the ‘dying voice of William Morris in a world thrilling to the new voice of H. G. Wells [...] a dream of England small and white and clean’. Whether Blatchford favoured the approach of Morris or Wells – *The Sorcery Shop* is far more reminiscent of *News from Nowhere* in its stylistic representation – he was a prescient advocate of neoclassical ideas like reformation, rehabilitation and shorter prison sentences.⁴⁹ Where Morris lacks pragmatism in dealing with criminals, and where Wells appears excessively interventionist (both legally and biologically), Blatchford, in the centre, takes a practical approach. Society must work to change environmental circumstances – not human nature – and must adopt reformist ideas in its treatment of criminals. His utopia and approach to crime remain, as a result, far more moderate.

Edward Carpenter was another socialist drawn to utopianism as a vehicle for expressing alternative approaches to crime, and, like Blatchford, is seen as a moderate in this analysis.⁵⁰ As Tsuzuki notes, Carpenter variably advocated permutations of an anarchist-syndicalist utopia and sought not moral reform, but ‘the unity of man and the universe’ as part of his ‘larger Socialism’.⁵¹ In this respect his approach is closer to that of Morris and Owen than of Wells. Drawing on ideas on private property and its role in producing criminality, the need to ‘establish the people upon the land’ to eradicate the sources of crime, and a belief in a ‘voluntary industrial arrangement’ emanating from a communal spirit, the influence of socialist ideas are clear.⁵² Furthermore, Carpenter’s strong opposition to vivisection and animal suffering as a means for scientific progression underlines an aversion to the more industrial, interventionist ideas of Wells. For instance, in Blatchford’s *Clarion* in 1894, in a thinly-veiled attack on Wells’ technological socialists, their elitist regard for the

⁴⁷ Blatchford, *Not Guilty*, pp. 48, 224; *Sorcery Shop*, pp. 52, 61, 123.

⁴⁸ Blatchford, *Not Guilty*, pp. 30, 140, 77, 224.

⁴⁹ Thompson, *Robert Blatchford*, p. 184; Blatchford, *Not Guilty*, pp. 77, 223.

⁵⁰ Keith Nield, ‘Edward Carpenter: The Uses of Utopia’, in *Edward Carpenter and Late Victorian Radicalism*, ed. Tony Brown (London: Cass, 1990), 17-32 (p. 26).

⁵¹ See Carpenter, *Prisons*, pp. 98-105; Chushichi Tsuzuki, *Edward Carpenter, 1844-1929: Prophet of Human Fellowship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 115, 159-160, 199.

⁵² Carpenter, *Prisons*, pp. 47, 78; Tsuzuki, *Edward Carpenter*, p. 160.

working classes and their eugenic agenda, Carpenter asks, ‘Does it not look, comrades, very much as if the professors were not only experimenting on the animals, but experimenting on us?’⁵³

Yet for Carpenter, as with our other socialists, socialism was not the only influence. He at one time advanced the cause of liberal political philosophy, and his enormous range of interests, most pertinently the politics of sexual reform, exposed him to a plenitude of influences, not least the wrench of social alienation throughout his adult life.⁵⁴ In his attitude to crime, punishment and prison reform he was the most practical and direct of perhaps any British socialist. His account *Prisons, Police and Punishment* (1905) is a nuanced study of criminal conditions in England that targets a central problem: crime is merely a construction of protean norms – ‘one law-making body repeals the crimes that another creates’.⁵⁵ In trying to reconcile the unity of man and the universe, Carpenter taps into neoclassical ideas, which, when combined with his more socialistic measures concerning property, he sees as the first steps in eradicating the problem of criminality. Criminal and legal institutions, he claims, require moulding in the right direction, social conditions must be greatly improved and reclamation must replace punishment. British prisons are noted as being worse than even their Russian equivalents.⁵⁶

Most interestingly, Carpenter draws on liberal theory to inveigh against the merciless suppression of individualism inherent in the British penal system, to claim the right of society to ‘social defence’, and, well before his time, to advocate the radical use of ‘indeterminate’ sentences, whereupon prisoners are released only when they are reformed, be that in a week or a decade. Striking several percipient chords with neoclassical theories of criminality, Carpenter’s approach represents a practical and pragmatic approach to the criminal problem. Bounded by the radical approaches of Owen and Morris to the left, and Wells to the right, Blatchford and Carpenter thus take up the ‘moderate utopian’ ground. In Carpenter’s own view, reaching this utopian conception of crime would, in reality, be a gradual transformation.⁵⁷

It would usually appear curious, then, to associate the gradualist, reformist politics of the Labour Party with the direct ascertainment of utopian ideals. Yet

⁵³ Carpenter, quoted in Tsuzuki, pp. 112-113.

⁵⁴ Nield, pp. 17-18; Tsuzuki, pp. 197-198.

⁵⁵ Emsley, *Crime, Police, and Penal Policy*, p. 1; Carpenter, *Prisons*, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Carpenter, *Prisons*, pp. 5, 4, 64.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 17, 25, 105-113.

whether favouring the ideas of Owen and Morris, Wells, or Blatchford and Carpenter, British socialist attitudes to crime were clearly influenced by utopian conceptions. For instance, as Owen and Morris suggested, Arcadian societies modelled upon medieval villages were seen by the likes of Keir Hardie (the first Labour Party leader), Hyndman and even MacDonald as communities uncorrupted by the pollution of capitalist industry.⁵⁸ In seeking explanations for the fundamental shortcomings of capitalism, they sought to nurture these ideas ‘based on a socialist historiography of the English past’.⁵⁹

Others, like the Webbs and George Bernard Shaw, were more in conjunction with Wells. Their dichotomy set a pre-technological past against an industrial future, and their preferred outcome was one of industrial organisation, much like that described in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. Extensive legislation was favoured in combatting crime, penalties remained indispensable, and practical intervention and the vernacular of the eugenicist would gradually diminish criminality.⁶⁰

Others still, like Blatchford and Carpenter, took a more moderate line. The real significance, however, lies within their genuine hope that these ideas on crime could become reality. Though Morris’ belief in violent revolution remained a sticking point for a gradualist Labour Party, socialists at the beginning of the twentieth century echoed his confidence that crime could be ended under socialism. In Russia, for instance, following the October Revolution the Bolsheviks implemented wide-ranging

⁵⁸ Clare V. J. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 25, 81; Keir Hardie, *Young Men in a Hurry* (London, n.d.), p. 5; ‘From Serfdom to Socialism’, in *Society and the Victorians*, ed. Robert E. Dowse (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1974), pp. 45-51; Hardie, quoted in Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1998), p. 66; H. M. Hyndman, *England For All: The Text Book of Democracy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1973); H. M. Hyndman and William Morris, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (London, 1884), p. 13; MacDonald, *Wanderings and Excursions* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1925), p. 91.

⁵⁹ Ward, pp. 36-37.

⁶⁰ Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), pp. 173, 177-178; Wheen, p. xxiii; Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Realistic Utopias: The Ideal Imaginary Societies of the Renaissance 1516-1630* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 109; Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 188-190. Bevir notes, however, that the Webbs’ proposals for excessive state intervention are often exaggerated; Marie Louise Berneri, *Journey Through Utopia* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 293; *The Crusade*, June 1910; George Bernard Shaw, *Socialism and Superior Brains*. Fabian Socialist Series No. 8 (London: A. C. Fifield, 1910), pp. 43-44; for Shaw’s somewhat ‘Wellsian’ murderous ideas see his remarks in ‘Preface to On the Rocks’, in *The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965), p. 354.

penal reform along neoclassical lines, encouraging reduced incarceration, extensive use of conditional convictions and the replacement of prisons with educational institutions.⁶¹ Before the totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime emerged fully, the Bolshevik ‘conviction that human material could be significantly reworked through a rationalization of the environment’, and their propensity to dip in and out of pre-revolutionary liberal criminological theory, brought also progressive penal developments and ideas on rehabilitation.⁶²

To achieve the eradication of crime in a constitutional manner more in line with their own unique philosophy, British socialists could look to the gradualism inherent in each of our socialists’ approaches to crime (Morris notwithstanding). As many socialists searched for a middle ground between capitalism and revolutionary socialism, the advent of ‘non-communist “welfare” utopias’ appeared both desirable and feasible.⁶³ Further, by stressing that the utopian conditions extant in the Britain of old remained inherent in the present age, a historical hopefulness that these conditions could be re-created endured, tempering the perceived need among some for revolutionary action.⁶⁴ The fact that these ideas were realistic meant that they could be compatible with the varied heritage and gradualist sentiment of the left – evolutionary, non-violent and parliamentary.⁶⁵ Indeed, their socialism by this point was far closer to utopian socialism than the scientific variety of Marx and Engels.⁶⁶ Leading British socialists could optimistically look ahead to a utopian disappearance of crime.

Concluding Remarks: MacDonald

Within a generation of *News from Nowhere*, ‘much of the traditional content of

⁶¹ Piers Beirne and Alan Hunt, ‘Lenin, Crime, and Penal Politics, 1917-1924’, in *Revolution in Law: Contributions to the Development of Soviet Legal Theory, 1917-1938*, ed. Piers Beirne (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), pp. 100-107, 190.

⁶² See Beer, p. 169; Peter H. Solomon, Jr., ‘Soviet Penal Policy, 1917-1934: A Reinterpretation’, *Slavic Review*, 39.2 (1980), 195-217; Piers Beirne (ed.), *Revolution in Law*.

⁶³ See for example MacDonald, *Parliament and Revolution* (Manchester: National Labour Press Ltd, 1919); Eliav-Feldon, p. 101.

⁶⁴ Eliav-Feldon, p. 131; Rachel Foxley, ‘Radicalism in Early Modern England: Innovation or Reformation?’, in *The Politics of the (Im)Possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered*, ed. Barnita Bagchi (London: Sage Publications, 2012), 62-79 (p. 63).

⁶⁵ Eliav-Feldon, p. 129; Ward, p. 155.

⁶⁶ Berneri, pp. 208-209.

utopianism would branch off into [...] scientific dystopianism'.⁶⁷ (The development of Wells' fiction is a case in point.) The 'political optimism which reached a crescendo with the Bolshevik Revolution' would soon give way to totalitarian horror.⁶⁸ Yet in the calm leading up to this revolutionary paroxysm, socialists in Britain remained, on the whole, dedicated to their gradualist position. Examining attitudes to crime, though, it is clear that they also remained committed to a utopian eradication of criminal activity. To square this gradualist-utopian circle, it has been demonstrated that the left's utopias were, for the most part, based on ideas perceived as increasingly realistic amid the capabilities of the age. Despite the ambitions of Owen, Morris, Wells, Blatchford and Carpenter, a gradualist approach to utopia reigned.

Overall, there *was* a fairly distinct socialist approach to crime. It was understood that as society moved towards a socialist future, criminal activity would decrease to a minimum. The abolition of private property and capitalist competition would engender transformations in both industrial and inter-personal relations, as well as attitudes to crime, and with a surplus production of all necessary goods, motivations for crime would cease. Underlying this broader narrative, and using a simple linear spectrum, this paper has shown how Arcadian, technological and more moderate socialists differed in their approaches to crime. More broadly, it has demonstrated the importance of understanding the varied ideological heritage of the socialist movement in shaping contemporary mainstream attitudes, as well as its role in recalibrating the development of socialist thought in Britain. While the differences between the Arcadian, technological and moderate socialists were at times marked, each were in essence wrestling with the same Benthamite issue concerning the relationship of the individual to the state under socialism. Had any of these constitutionalist socialists had their political chance on crime at this point, utopia might have gradually become reality.

Instead, the left's first experience of governmental authority came only in 1924 with MacDonald's premiership. In the intervening years, the cataclysmic events of the First World War and the Russian Revolution had, for many, cast a shadow over

⁶⁷ Claeys, 'Rethinking Modern British Utopianism: Community and the Mastery of Desire', in *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, ed. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 87-111 (p. 110).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

the socialist ideal. The violence and extra-constitutionalism employed by the Bolsheviks, the abandonment of international working-class fraternity in the Great War and the failings of the Second International all reinforced the importance of the role of pragmatism for the Labour Party. The socialist reveries of the late 19th century now appeared impracticable as mainstream political power and accountability loomed. Some historians even posit Labour's 1918 constitution as a defeat, rather than a victory, for socialism.⁶⁹ MacDonald's own pragmatism by this time tapered socialist expectations. Small modifications, and certainly not grand revolutions, were for him a sign of progress. As utopian socialism receded to dormancy, so too did expectations on crime.⁷⁰ Only as the 1930s neared and the influence of socialist planning began to be felt from Soviet Russia, would a reassessment of crime under socialism, along with a recalibration of British socialism itself, next occur.

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⁶⁹ Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 25.

⁷⁰ MacDonald, *Socialism and Society*, pp. 74-75, 83, 88.

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