

Radical Ideas in Britain

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By

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**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-7975-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7975-0

Either we all live in a decent world, or nobody does.
—George Orwell

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PREFACE

This book is a study of British society. It is an attempt to outline the struggle for social change in Britain today – specifically the struggle for Socialism. This book is a study of the ideas and struggles which shape British society. British society, today, is heavily shaped by a number of political and social ideas – such as Liberalism, Conservatism, Neo-Liberalism, Democracy, Socialism, etc. This book is an attempt to analyse those ideas from a Left and Socialist perspective. It is an attempt to understand Britain, to help inform the struggle for Socialism in Britain.

Britain, today, is a modern society. Like all modern societies it is a society which has social struggles. Ideas are important in any social struggle. Ideas are important in British politics, British history, and British society. This book is about the ideas which have informed British society. Britain, as a society, has produced a number of ideas in its long history. Ideas like Liberalism, Conservatism, Democracy, and Socialism have been crucial to the social struggles in British society. These ideas shaped British society. These ideas continue to shape British society. Ideas are important in both history and politics. Ideas both shape history and politics, and influence history and politics. In the case of Britain, it is important to understand some of the ideas which have informed the way in which Britain thinks about its past, its present, and its future. Ideas have been vital in shaping British society itself. If Britain is to have a better future, a Socialist future, it will be vital to understand the importance of ideas to social struggles in British society. Hopefully, better ideas, today, can help inform the struggle for a better Britain.

This book is a Socialist Humanist study of British society in the tradition of Democratic Socialism. This book is a Marxist study of British society.

British society, today, has many problems. These problems range from the crisis of Capitalism to the crisis of Brexit. These problems show that there is a need for new ideas in Britain – a need for Socialist ideas. Britain needs new ideas. Britain needs Socialism.

Most of the essays in this book have developed from thinking about the British Left in the current decade and the current century. These essays are about trying to understand Britain, so that a better Left might emerge in Britain – a Left capable of fighting for Socialism in Britain.

R.G. Williams

(2022)

CHAPTER I

BRITISH REALITIES

This short essay is a study of British society. British society is the product of British history and British politics. It is also the product of British social struggles. British society, today, needs to change – due to the crisis of British Capitalism. In order to understand British society, we must understand the reality of British society. If a better, Socialist, Britain is ever to emerge in Britain then it is vital to understand the reality of British society.

British society is a Capitalist society today. Britain has developed, as it has, because of the reality of the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (1450-1850) in British society. Britain is a Capitalist society and remains a Capitalist society. Britain has the potential to become a Socialist society.¹

British Capitalism has reached a point of crisis. This crisis has been emerging in Britain since the origins of British Capitalism itself — due to the limitations of the British system and the fact that British Capitalism itself has been in social decline and economic decline since the 19th century.² The rise and failure of Neo-Liberalism, since the 1980s and the 2000s, shows how British Capitalism has failed to overcome its problems and its crises. The reality of British Capitalism, since the 1980s, has been one of decline and crisis. It presents Britain with a solid choice — either Socialism or Barbarism.³

Britain's crisis, today, is the result of history. The history of the crisis of Capitalism in Britain shows the results of a society stuck inside a cycle of Capitalist crisis and social crisis. The history of British Capitalism since 1950, since 1979, and since the beginning of the 21st century, is the ultimate political and economic result of Capitalist crisis. The crisis of Britain, today, shows the necessity for Socialism in Britain today. In historical and political terms, Britain's history and Britain's politics shows the need for Socialism in Britain.

Britain, today, needs Socialism. It needs to become a society based on the free development of each and the free development of all. Only Socialism, a society based on working-class power and working-class democracy, can overcome the problems of Britain today.

British society has been defined by its social struggles. British politics has been defined by its political struggles. British history, in one way or another, has been defined by the great political struggles which established British society and the British state after the decline of Feudalism, the rise of Capitalism, and the formation of the United Kingdom. In the early years of British history, from 1600 to 1832, the major struggle in British society and British politics was between Feudalism and Capitalism: between the feudal lords and the capitalist class. In British history and British politics today, since 1832, the major struggle has been between Capitalism and Socialism: between the capitalist class and the working class. British history, in itself, shows that history is very much the history of class struggle. The political developments of Britain, in the long run, have been defined by these economic struggles and by these political struggles — from Feudalism to Capitalism, from Capitalism to Socialism. The struggle between Feudalism and Capitalism led to the collapse of Feudalism in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. This struggle resulted in the replacement of Feudalism with Capitalism after the 1400s, the 1600s, the 1700s, and the 1800s. The struggle between the feudal lords and the capitalist class resulted in the English Revolution of 1640, the Civil War of 1642-1651, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the Industrial Revolution, the Union of Britain in 1707, the establishment of bourgeois democracy in 1832, and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy during the 1800s. The rise of the British Empire, and British Imperialism, also shaped the development of British society. These developments and these struggles resulted in the emergence of the United Kingdom. This history resulted in modern Britain. This history created Britain, and British society, as a Capitalist state and as a Capitalist society — shaped by both exploitation and oppression. These developments also led to the emergence of the working class in Britain and the emergence of the idea of Socialism in Britain. The rise of the modern working class in Britain, in the 1700s and the 1800s, culminated with the emergence of a modern labour movement in Britain and a modern Socialist movement in Britain. This led to the struggle for Socialism in Britain — a struggle which continues today. The struggle for Socialism, which has defined Britain since 1832, has been marked by many struggles and many developments — from Chartism to suffrage, from the struggle of the labour movement to the struggle of the trade unions, from the establishment of the Labour Party to the struggle for Social Democracy, from the struggle for the welfare state to

the struggle for the National Health Service (NHS), from the struggle against Imperialism to the struggle for peace, from the struggle of the working class to the struggle for Socialism. Today the major social struggle in Britain is effectively the struggle for Socialism. While British Capitalism remains relatively secure today, thanks to Neo-Liberalism, it still remains defined by the struggle between Capitalism and Socialism. The fact that Capitalism remains secure in Britain today does not mean that in the near future Capitalism will always be secure in Britain. Socialism might emerge again in British politics and in British society. The struggle for Socialism continues today — in the struggle of the labour movement and the struggle of the British working class. In British politics, today, the overall struggle remains the struggle between Capitalism and Socialism.⁴

The politics of Britain, today, demand political solutions. The major political struggle in Britain, today, is between the Left and the Right. The side which can develop the best solutions will be the side which will win in British politics. The struggle of British politics is the struggle between the Left and the Right. The Left needs to develop better solutions than the Right. The Left needs to develop Socialist solutions and Socialist politics for the politics of Britain.⁵

Britain needs social change today. The existing Capitalist system can no longer solve the problems of British society. It is clear that Britain needs serious social change — beyond reform or reformism. Britain clearly needs revolution — the revolutionary transformation of society. Only revolution, the ‘forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions’, can revolutionise British society.⁶

Britain needs Socialism. Developing Socialist ideas and Socialist politics in Britain is not easy. This is especially the case in British politics — as the Right has dominated British politics since 1979. The reality of Conservative politics is evident in all of British politics and in all of British society. The legacy of decades of Conservative politics has made the struggle for Socialism, and the struggle for an alternative, difficult in Britain today. Yet this struggle must be made. Britain cannot be left to simply the politics of today. Britain cannot be left to simply the politics of the Right. The Left needs to engage with the politics of Britain — and engage with them on every level. The Left needs to find a way to struggle for a better politics in Britain. The Left needs to fight for Socialism. This type of politics is the only way in which the Left can recover today — and recover from the legacy of Thatcher and Blair. In the reality of British politics, today, since 2008, since 2016, the reality of Britain is beginning to change. Britain cannot be

allowed to simply carry on with the failed politics of the Right and the failed politics of Conservatism. If Britain continues to develop like this, given the legacy of the past and the reality of the past, then there is probably no hope for a better society in Britain. The reality of Neo-Liberalism has not created a better Britain — or a better politics in Britain. The solution can only come from the Left and from the politics of the Left. The solution can only come from Socialism. A better Britain is possible. A better Britain is a Socialist Britain.

The history of British politics shows the history of Britain. In recent times it has been a sad history — one made up of Neo-Liberal crisis and Neo-Liberal politics. These politics have not solved the problems facing British politics. Instead, these politics have led Britain into a worse situation than Britain found itself in during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The history of British politics also has a Left politics and a Left history. It is time to recover those politics and that history — to develop both to face the struggles of today and the struggles of the future. This will be crucial if a Left politics, and a Socialist politics, is to emerge in Britain.

The paradox of British history and British politics is that it has created a developed society — but also an undeveloped society. Britain is being held back by its Conservative politics and by its Liberal politics. These politics are preventing Britain from achieving its full potential — as a society. The only way to unleash the potential of Britain is to develop a Socialist politics and to develop a Socialist society. This is the only real future for Britain. This is the only good future for Britain.

The nature of politics in Great Britain shows a great deal about the nature of Great Britain. The politics of Britain show that Britain is a Capitalist society. It is a society with all the Capitalist crises which are universal to Capitalist societies. In order to solve these political problems and economic problems, a political solution and an economic solution must be developed. That solution is Socialism. Socialism (a society based on the free development of each and the free development of all) is the best way to solve the problems of British politics.

Britain requires Socialism and Socialist politics. It is up to the British working class to fight for such politics — politics which are in the interest of British workers and British society. The nature of British politics, with its Conservative politics and its Conservative roots, makes this struggle difficult — but it will be up to the working class to make such a struggle to achieve a better society in Britain. British history is full of examples, from

the 19th century and the 20th century, where the British working class fought for Socialism and fought for better politics. The British working class can still fight for those politics. They can still fight for a better world.

Britain needs serious social change if it is to solve its social problems. The current system needs to go. The current Capitalist system needs to go. More importantly, the nature of politics in Britain needs to be changed. They need to shift to the Left and towards Socialism. It is the working class which can achieve this. Important battles and important struggles lay ahead. It is time for a Socialist politics in Great Britain.⁷ We cannot go on living in this way — from crisis to crisis. Instead, we must find a way to change both Britain and the world. It is time to think about a different future for Britain and a different future for the world. It is time to think about new politics in Britain — politics which might create a better society in Britain. It is time to think about Socialism — and how we might create a Socialist Britain and a Socialist world.

Notes

1. P. Anderson, *Origins of the Present Crisis*, (1964)
2. P. Anderson, *Origins of the Present Crisis*, (1964)
3. P. Anderson, *The Figures of Descent*, (1987)
4. E.P. Thompson, *Socialist Humanism*, (1957)
5. E.P. Thompson, *Socialist Humanism*, (1957)
6. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (1848)
7. P. Anderson, *Origins of the Present Crisis*, (1964)

(2015)

CHAPTER II

BRITISH IDEAS

This short essay is a study of the ideas of British society. British society has a number of ideas about itself. Britain thinks of itself as a modern society, a democratic society, a liberal society, a conservative society, and a social democratic society. Britain, today, is a Capitalist society. It is a society which needs to become a Socialist society. It is a society which is being undermined by the crisis of Capitalism. It is a society which needs to change. The development of Britain, since the 1800s and since the 1900s, shows that Britain's ideas about itself are vital to understand if we are to understand the development of Britain and British society. Many of the crises which are affecting Britain today can perhaps be understood if we understand the political development and the social development of Britain since the 1800s and since the 1900s. Britain is a modern society, but it is also a very conservative and old-fashioned society. The development of British Capitalism, after the Revolution of 1640 and the Industrial Revolution, confirms the idea that Britain is a modern society — but it is also a very backward society in many areas. In terms of understanding Britain and British society we need to understand the basic ideas which are driving British society and British development. Britain, today, in its many crises, can only be understood by understanding the limits of Capitalism and Capitalist ideas. This essay is an essay on the ideas which shape British society.

British society is based on struggle. The main ideas which are part of Britain and British society are the ideas which shape most of British politics and British society. These main ideas are Liberalism, Conservatism, Social Democracy, and Socialism. We need to understand these ideas if we are to understand Britain.¹

British society is based on social struggle. Ever since the beginning of British society, British society has always been based on social struggle. This social struggle includes the struggle of ideas. British history is based on social struggle. In Britain, today, the social struggle is the struggle for Socialism.²

British society is based on class struggle. In Britain today the main social struggle is the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class. The capitalist class struggles to maintain Capitalism in Britain. The working class struggles to achieve Socialism in Britain.

British society came into existence due to the great revolutions of the 17th century and the 19th century. These great revolutions were the English Revolution of 1640, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. These revolutions made up the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism in British society— and effectively created British society. These Revolutions also created the basic ideas of modern society. All of the main ideas in British society and British history, since 1840, have been developed either to support these revolutions, in reaction to these revolutions, or to go further than these revolutions. These ideas are Liberalism, Conservatism, Social Democracy, and Socialism. Indeed, the great ideas of British society and British history are Liberalism, Conservatism, Social Democracy, and Socialism. These ideas also represent the major social classes which exist in British society— and their social struggles. Liberalism and Conservatism represent the ideas of the capitalist class in Britain. Social Democracy and Socialism represent the ideas of the working class in Britain. Ever since the emergence of modern British society the major conflicts of British society and British politics have been between these ideas— and the ideas which they represent.³

Britain is a Capitalist society, today. Capitalism is the dominant political structure and ideological structure in Britain today. Specifically, Capitalism is the hegemonic power of British politics and British society. Specifically, Capitalism has dominated British society since the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, the English Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. It is impossible to write about British society, British politics, or Britain itself, without reference to the economic reality and the political reality that Britain is a Capitalist state and a Capitalist society. This political structure and economic structure, of British Capitalism, dominates the politics of Britain. Capitalism, through the existence of wage-labour, exploitation, and accumulation, is the defining reality of British economics and British politics. In the political field the organisation of British politics comes down to the power of British Capitalism — which influences both British politics and the British Capitalist state. Since 1640, 1649, 1688, 1707, 1801, and the 1840s, British politics has been dominated by Capitalism and by Capitalist politics — in a process beginning with the English Revolution of 1640 and ending with the victory of the First Reform Act in 1832. After the defeat of the Stuarts in the English Civil War, British politics began the long

transition from Feudalism to Capitalism in terms of British politics. This gradual and revolutionary shift eventually formed the political basis of British politics — especially after the 17th century. After the triumph of the Industrial Revolution, in the 18th century and the 19th century, British politics came to be dominated by Capitalism and to be structured by Capitalism. This eventually led to the formation of Britain as a Constitutional Monarchy, a Capitalist State, and the political domination of Britain by liberal politics and conservative politics. All of the political developments of the British state in the 19th century, and in the 20th century, were structured around the political reality of British Capitalism — making Britain a Capitalist State both in structure and in reality. This political reality of Britain as a Capitalist State has survived through to the present day — in the form of the current United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

British Capitalism, and the British capitalist class, is a product of history and of politics. The British capitalist class took a long period of time to emerge as a social class, and certainly took a great deal of time to emerge as an industrial class. The first English Capitalists began to emerge in the later medieval period — with the crisis of the 14th century, with the medieval enclosures, with the rise of the English wool trade, with the rise of the English coal trade, with the emergence of enclosure in the Tudor and Stuart period, and with the slow process of Capital Accumulation and Primitive Accumulation in England itself.⁴ The slow emergence of British Imperialism and the British Empire, after 1600, also played a key role — resulting in the British Empire of the 19th century. England became a Capitalist state and Capitalist society — both via social revolution and economic revolution, and by the slow rise of Capitalism itself. In the 17th century, the English Revolution of 1640, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, saw the English capitalist class conquer political and economic power for itself. In the 19th century, leading up to 1840, the British capitalist class began to emerge as an industrial class and bourgeois class — alongside the Industrial Revolution. Just as the British working class emerged across the century from 1780 to 1840, the British capitalist class emerged from the Industrial Revolution and the English Revolution.⁵ The British capitalist class was once a revolutionary class. Even if it seeks to forget it today, the British capitalist class fought a long and bitter revolutionary struggle, in the 1600s, to achieve its political power in Britain. This revolutionary struggle was the English Revolution of 1640, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and the English Civil War of 1642-1651.⁶ This revolutionary struggle was followed by the economic struggle of the Industrial Revolution — which finally completed the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism in British

history and British politics. While the British capitalist class is determined, today, to ignore and repress its own revolutionary beginnings, it did lead a revolutionary struggle in England and in Britain — forming the United Kingdom of Great Britain from the petty feudal kingdoms which preceded it. The revolutionary struggle for Socialism today, the revolutionary struggle of the British working class since the 1800s, continues on from this revolutionary development in modern British society. The British capitalist class was instrumental and vital in the creation of both Britain and British society. British Capitalism has been crucial to the overall development of Capitalism.⁷

British Capitalism has always been connected to the politics of British Capitalism. This base of British Capitalism has ensured the economic power and political power of the British capitalist class. This power was important to the establishment of British Capitalism— because without it, and because England was a Feudal country prior to 1640, the capitalist class could never have managed to rise to effective power and effective control in England or Britain. The effective power of the Feudal lords of Britain, both in the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Scotland, meant that Britain's capitalists required the economic and political power of Capitalism to overcome the old order in Britain. This resulted in the social disorder and social crises of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries— which led to the rise of agrarian Capitalism in England. This resulted in the political crisis and political revolution of the 17th century (the English Revolution of 1640) — which established the power of Parliament and the English capitalist class, making England into a Capitalist country. This resulted in the economic reality of the 19th century and the 19th century Industrial Revolution. The economic and political result of these long centuries of social conflict and social struggle was that the British capitalist class became the dominant class in Britain— and eventually overcame the old Feudal order which had dominated the British Isles since the 5th century. From the 17th century and the 19th century the capitalist class has been the dominant class in Britain— because of its economic power and its political power. The economic power of Capitalism allowed this capitalist class to overcome the economic power of the old Feudal class and the old Feudal lords. The social reality of British Capitalism has always relied on this economic power— because economic power eventually becomes political power and social power. The economic base of British Capitalism is the political base of British Capitalism.

British Capitalism has always been connected to the political base of British Capitalism. The political base of British Capitalism, of course, is the British

state. The British state, since 1640 and 1707, has been the political basis of British Capitalism. Without the support of the British state, British Capitalism would have been impossible. Even in the age of Neo-Liberalism, British Capitalism relies on the British state.⁸

British Capitalism has always been connected to the main political parties of British Capitalism. The political parties of British Capitalism are the Whigs and the Tories, the Liberals and the Conservatives. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the parties of British Capitalism were the Whigs and Tories, the Liberals and Tories, the Liberals and the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. In political terms the British capitalist class has always favoured these two wings of Capitalist politics in Britain — between Liberalism and Conservatism. Today this tradition remains — as British Capitalism and British Capitalists continue to support the Conservative Party as the ‘natural party of government’ in Britain. In political terms the Liberal and Conservative factions of British politics, the Conservative Party in particular, have been vital to maintaining the Capitalist system in Britain — and for maintaining the politics of the British capitalist class.⁹

British Capitalism has always been connected to British Imperialism. Imperialism is a key part of modern British Capitalism. The reality of the British Empire and British Imperialism also provided a particular basis to the development of the British Capitalist system and the British capitalist class — both economically and politically.¹⁰ British Imperialism, since the end of the British Empire, might have declined but it remains a key part of the global structure of Capitalism and Imperialism. Thanks to the support of the United States, the British capitalist class remains part of Imperialism and part of the Imperialist system. This is perhaps why the British capitalist class, since the disaster of the Suez Crisis in 1956, has tended to support every major American Imperialist war— with the exception of the Vietnam War. Since 1956, the only successful example of British imperialism, by itself, was the Falklands War of 1982. From the Korean War to the Iraq War, Great Britain has tended to follow US Imperialism— often to the disaster of Britain itself, alongside the tyranny of Imperialism itself.

In the current century, the 21st century, the British capitalist class believes that it is secure. Despite this it faces key problems today. Britain is in crisis. The British working class is becoming organised again. British Capitalism, since the 1980s, since 2007/2008, since 2010, since 2015, has failed to solve its problems. Indeed, while the British capitalist class is secure today this might be an illusion — it might well awake one day in the near future to

find itself surrounded by the rise of the Left, and by the resurgence of the Left. British Capitalism could still, perhaps, be replaced by Socialism.

Notes

1. R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, (1969)
2. P. Anderson, *The Figures of Descent*, (1987)
3. P. Anderson, *The Figures of Descent*, (1987)
4. K. Marx, *Capital*, (1867)
5. K. Marx, *Capital*, (1867)
6. K. Marx, *England's Seventeenth Century Revolution*, (1850)
7. K. Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, (1867)
8. R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, (1969)
9. R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, (1969)
10. V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, (1916)

(2015)

CHAPTER III

BRITISH POLITICS

This short essay is a study of British politics. Britain's politics are in crisis. The crisis in Britain's politics is a deep crisis. British politics and British society are both political realities of British society. British society has often determined British politics. British politics has often shaped British society. Today there is a need to think about British politics — in order to develop a better Left politics in Britain. Britain is faced with a simple choice today: Capitalism or Socialism, Barbarism or Socialism. British politics need to lead to a better Britain — towards a Socialist Britain.

British society is in crisis today. The reality of this crisis can be seen in British society today — in the reality of the crisis of Capitalism, the crisis of Austerity, the crisis of British society, the crisis of British politics, and the crisis of Europe. All British politics, today, are being shaped by the reality of the crisis of Britain. If a better Britain is ever to emerge it must be based on confronting the crisis and based on overcoming the crisis. Britain needs a new politics and a new society. Britain needs Socialism.¹

British society is a political society.² British society has always been a political society. British society has always debated its politics, its political origins, and its historical origins — ever since the revolutions of the 17th century and the emergence of the United Kingdom itself in 1707 and 1801.³ These politics have resulted in the political struggles of British society.

British politics is divided into two types of politics — Capitalist politics and Socialist politics. All of British politics, since the Industrial Revolution, can be divided between the Right and the Left — between Capitalism and Socialism. British politics since the Industrial Revolution has been determined by the struggle between these types of politics. The struggle between the capitalist class and the working class has been shaped by these politics. The struggle in British politics is between these politics — between the Right and the Left. The politics of Britain, like politics everywhere else in the world, is the struggle between Capitalism and Socialism.

The crisis in British politics and in British society shows that British Capitalism is incapable of solving its problems. The problems of Britain can only be solved by Socialism.⁴

The crisis of British politics has been a long crisis. The origins of this crisis go back to the 1980s and the 1990s — to the triumph of Neo-Liberalism, Thatcherism, and Blairism. These politics have created the crisis in Britain. These politics need to be overthrown — and replaced by Socialism.

What direction British politics takes is a political question. The writing and discussion of British politics, today, will also be dependent on political struggles and political events. In the end politics determines politics — and economics determines politics. For the British Left and the British Right, politics has always been a battleground for such debates and such political debates.

What direction British politics takes is a political struggle. Britain could go to the Right. Britain could go to the Left. It is likely, given Brexit and the crisis over Europe that British politics will go to the Right. It is the duty of the British Left to struggle to make Britain go to the Left. The only way to solve Britain's crises and Britain's problems is a shift to the Left — a shift to the politics of Socialism.

Britain is divided by its politics. Britain will always be divided by its politics. The struggle between such politics has always depended on the Left politics or Right politics present in Britain at certain points in British history and the political strength of political forces. For example, the Whig vision of British politics reached its height in the 19th century — at the height of the Liberal phase of British Capitalism. The Conservative vision of British politics often dominated in the 1930s and 1980s — periods when the Conservative Party was dominant in British politics. The strength of Left politics, in British politics and British society, has usually depended on the relative strength of the Left itself in British society — such as in the 1940s and 1960s. For any Socialist the power of the Socialist understanding of British politics and British society has always depended on the strength of Socialist politics and Left politics in Britain in general. The current debates about British politics, then, are not simply debates — they contain a powerful and vital political element to changing British society. Today British politics has been reduced to a few parties and a few types of politics — from the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, and the Labour Party. For the British Left, today, all politics are political struggles to change British politics. For the British Left, today, all politics are political struggles for a

new Socialist politics and a new Left politics in British politics.

Britain is in crisis today. The future looks very bleak for Britain. E.P. Thompson, writing in the 1980s, warned us that Britain's future will always look bleak as long as Britain is a Capitalist society.⁵ His solution was to struggle for Socialism. Britain needs to become Socialist. Britain needs to struggle for Socialism. British politics has its own visions of the past, present, and future of British politics. Where will British politics go in the future? In a way we cannot really know. The future of British politics will be determined by the past and present of British politics. It might be that Britain is forever destined to remain a Capitalist country and a Capitalist society. It might be that Britain is destined to collapse under its own contradictions and its own historical limits — into various small nations and nation states, such as England, Scotland, Wales, etc., or into something much worse. It might be that Britain is destined for something else, such as a collapse of its civilisation entirely with the threat of nuclear war and the threat of ecological collapse.⁶ Yet there is still hope that something better might emerge in Britain and in British politics — Socialism, a Socialist Britain, and a Socialist world. It might be that Britain is destined to finally become a Socialist state and a Socialist society. For Socialists such a society is preferable — and it is necessary. Britain might go on being a Capitalist society, but its own politics implies that Britain can change and will change. It is still possible that Britain will become a Socialist society — and a free society and a better society. It will be up to both Britain's politics and Britain's society to decide on that political question of Britain's future. The future is not set — a Socialist future might be part of that future. The present is not set — any discussion of British politics shows this. Britain might yet still achieve the potential of a better society — a Socialist society.

Notes

1. E.P. Thompson, *Socialist Humanism*, (1957)
2. P. Anderson, *Origins of the Present Crisis*, (1964)
3. G. Orwell, *Notes on Nationalism*, (1945)
4. G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, (1941)
5. E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, (1980)
6. E.P. Thompson, *Zero Option*, (1982)

(2016)

CHAPTER IV

BRITISH HISTORY

This short essay is a study of British history. Britain has been a united and unified state since the 1600s and the 1700s — since the English Revolution, the Glorious Revolution, and the Acts of Union. This history, over centuries, has produced modern Britain and modern British society. Britain, today, is a Capitalist society and a Capitalist state, thanks to that history. In order to really understand British history, we need to engage with the real social development of both British history and British society — specifically its classes, its class struggles, and its social revolutions. Britain, today, needs to be seen in light of its history and its development. British history, today, needs to be seen through a theory and a politics which can really engage with the social reality of Britain itself. The only really effective way to engage with British history is through Marxism.

A Marxist history of Britain is needed — simply because of the domination of British history, and the writing of British history, by the Right. Since the end of the Cold War the majority of history writing, about British history, has come from Liberal and Conservative historians. It is vital, for the Left, and for the struggle for Socialism, in Britain, today, for a new Left account of British history, and a new Marxist account of British history. A.L. Morton's 'A People's History of England' (1938) remains the classic Marxist account of British history, but it is now decades old, and needs to be updated, simply because Morton's account finished with the First World War (1914-1918).¹ Morton's book is still a classic — but it is a classic which needs to be rewritten and updated to account for the development of British history and British Capitalism since the 1930s. The rise of Neo-Liberalism, in particular, needs to be accounted for within British history — from a Marxist perspective and from a Socialist perspective. The end of the British Empire also needs to be accounted for within a Socialist history of Britain. There is also a need for a new Marxist history of Britain, simply to respond to the massive amount of historical research which has happened in British history since the 1980s and the 1990s.² Effectively, there needs to be a Socialist history of Britain in order to help develop a new Socialist politics in Britain.

Britain is a class society. This means that British history can be assessed, effectively, from a Marxist position — using the methods of Historical Materialism. The theory of Historical Materialism shows that human history is based on material conditions. Britain, as a class society, has gone through a number of class struggles and social revolutions, since the emergence of modern British society, itself, in the 1600s and the 1800s. Indeed, the history of Britain could easily be written from the perspective of its social struggles and its social revolutions — despite the power of Conservatism for much of British history since the rise of Capitalism. British history, really, begins with the rise of Capitalism and the unification of the British state (the Acts of Union of 1707). British history, really, is a history which has developed because of its social struggles and social revolutions. The ancient, medieval, Tudor, Stuart, Georgian, Victorian, and modern periods of British history can all be written about, from a Marxist perspective, because of the reality of social struggle and class struggle for much of British history — especially the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class since the Industrial Revolution. Accounting for the development of British history, from a Marxist position, is not difficult. Britain has developed from a Feudal society into a Capitalist society, a Capitalist society with the potential of becoming a Socialist society. This development, of British history, is completely in accordance with Marxist theory. Marxist theory, and Marxist historical research, is verified by British history — namely that economic development, social development, social struggle, and social revolution, plays a major role in history. British history, especially since the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (1450-1850), has confirmed other aspects of Marxist theory — namely that modern history is the history of the class struggle between the capitalist class and the working class, a struggle which has the potential of achieving Socialism. Marxist theory has also done much to confirm the importance of the British working class in the making of Britain and the making of British history — from the period of the Industrial Revolution to the present. Much of the social progress in Britain and British history, from democracy to social struggle, has come from the movement of the British working class. Any serious historian of Britain, today, has to engage with Marxist ideas — even if they firmly reject them. Every British historian has to engage with the reality of the working class in British history, and the struggle of the working class for Socialism. Britain has an interesting history — and that history can be effectively researched and described using Marxist theory and Marxist ideas. We need to engage with British history today, given the reality of how Britain and British society has developed since the end of the Second World War (1939-1945). Britain, today, is a society in crisis. This crisis confirms other aspects of Marxist

theory — namely that class societies produce economic and social crises, crises which can only be resolved by class struggle and by social revolution. Britain might be a Conservative country, when compared to many other countries, but its history still provides a powerful vindication of the basic ideas and theories of Marxism and Marxist history — namely that economic development and social development occurs due to social struggle and social revolution. British history, in the end, is one of the best national examples for showing the legitimacy of Historical Materialism as a means of understanding history itself.³

Marx wrote a great deal about British history. Indeed, his description of the rise of Capitalism, in 'Capital Vol. I' (1867), relies heavily on the reality of how Capitalism emerged in Britain.⁴ Marx also wrote about the English Revolution of 1640 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, outlining an effective Marxist interpretation of both. British Marxist accounts of British history, today, do not rely completely on Marx's own account of British history, but his work still forms a vital part of developing any Marxist account of British history. Marx described the reality of British history — as a history of economic development and social struggle. Indeed, Marx was one of the great historians of British history.⁵

Marxist historians have written a great deal about British history. Indeed, some of the best historians of British history have been Marxist historians — especially after the Second World War. The CPGB historians really engaged with the reality of British history, and the research of British history.⁶ Their work showed not only their genius and their brilliance but also showed that British history can be interpreted in Marxist terms. Their work also pushed British historians to really engage with the economic and social history of Britain — alongside the history of the British working class. Their work is disputed by many on the Right, but their work, even today, remains vital — and it is a clear basis for developing further Marxist history in Britain.⁷

We can, briefly, outline a Marxist account of British history. For Marxists, British history, since the creation of Britain, has been the history of economic development, social struggle, and social revolution. British history is the history of the social struggles which have occurred in Britain, and the British Isles, especially since the 1600s. British history has been the process of British society going through the stages of ancient, feudal, and capitalist society — hopefully towards Socialism. British history has been the process of class struggle — between the various social classes which make up British society. Modern British history began, in the 17th century, with

the English Civil War, the English Revolution, the Glorious Revolution, and the unification of Great Britain. British history began with the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism — from the 1600s to the 1800s, from the English Revolution to the Industrial Revolution. The rise of Capitalism, in Britain, led to the rise of the British Empire — which dominated Britain and the world from the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century.⁸ The history of Britain has been the history of class struggle in Britain — particularly the struggle between the feudal lords and the capitalist class, particularly the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class. British history, since the 1840s, has been the history of the struggle between Capitalism and Socialism in Britain, as the British working class has struggled for its rights, for democracy, and for Socialism. The greatest social struggle in modern British history was the struggle for democracy — from the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s, to the Suffragette movement of the 1900s. The decline of the British Empire and the decline of British Capitalism, since the World Wars, points to the overall development of British history — the rise of Capitalism, the decline of Capitalism, and the possibility of Socialism. Britain might be a Conservative country, but like all countries its history points to the social struggle for Socialism.⁹

Marxism is an effective way of approaching British history. Indeed, it is one of the best ways to approach British history. This is because of six reasons. The first reason is the power of Historical Materialism as a way of understanding and explaining history: history is based on material conditions, productive forces, social relations, social struggle, class struggle, human agency, and social revolution. The second reason is that the Marxist approach really deals with the economic, social, political, and intellectual development of Britain and British history — especially during and after the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism. The third reason is that the Marxist approach argues that British history can be explained in materialist terms — by looking at the economic, social, political, and intellectual developments of British history. The fourth reason is that the Marxist approach presents a comprehensive and effective narrative of the overall development of British history — based on material developments and social revolution. The fifth reason is that Marxism places ordinary people, and their agency, at the centre of British historical development, alongside social revolution. The sixth reason is that some of the best historians of Britain have written about British history from a Marxist perspective — specifically Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, and Rodney Hilton. These six reasons show that Marxism is an effective way of approaching British history. A Marxist account of Britain and British history, today, is possible — and it is necessary.

Notes

1. A.L. Morton, A People's History of England, (1938)
2. A.L. Morton, A People's History of England, (1938)
3. A.L. Morton, A People's History of England, (1938)
4. K. Marx, Capital Vol. I, (1867)
5. K. Marx, England's Seventeenth Century Revolution, (1850)
6. H. Kaye, The British Marxist Historians, (1984)
7. H. Kaye, The British Marxist Historians, (1984)
8. E.J. Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848, (1962)
9. E.P. Thompson, Peculiarities of the English, (1965)

(2014)

CHAPTER V

DEMOCRACY IN BRITAIN: A HISTORICAL STUDY

An essay on the politics and history of Democracy in Britain.

I. Outline

This essay is a study of democracy in Britain. British politics is based around the politics of British democracy. Understanding British politics, since the 19th century, requires understanding the nature of democracy and the politics of democracy in Britain. In terms of British democracy, the politics of democracy have been shaped by British society and by British history. The politics of democracy in Britain began with the emergence of modern society. The history of democracy in Britain began with the struggles of the 17th century and the 19th century. Democracy, in Britain, was finally achieved in the 20th century – with the victory of universal suffrage. In order to understand democracy in Britain we must understand the politics and history of democracy in Britain. Britain, today, is a democratic society – with a democratic state. Britain, today, is also a limited democracy – due to the power of British Capitalism. British democracy, today, is a Capitalist democracy.¹ British democracy, today, is a bourgeois democracy. The struggle, today, is to make Great Britain a working-class democracy.² The struggle, today, is to make Great Britain a truly democratic society — to win the battle for democracy. Britain has a long history of struggle for democracy – from the Levellers to the Chartists, from the English Revolution to the Industrial Revolution. A key part of the history and politics of the struggle for democracy in Britain has been the working class. The working class, as the majority of modern society, has always been a key social force for the struggle for democracy in modern society. The working class, in Britain, has always struggled for democracy – since the emergence of the working class in the 19th century and since the emergence of the first British working-class movements, such as Chartism. The history of democracy and the struggle for democracy in Britain is part of the politics of the working class. Indeed, the working class has always been a