

# R.H. Tawney, Conservative Social Democrat

One day in France in July 1916, during the Allied advance on the Somme, a British sergeant named Tawney rallied troops to rush a trench. Crawling low he cried, "Reinforce!" The men did not move. Unbeknownst to the sergeant, they were mostly dead. As he knelt up to cry out again, machine-gun shots pierced his chest and abdomen. He lay there for two days before mates found him.

Richard Harold Tawney was born in 1880 in Calcutta. His father, who lived in India for years, rose to be Principal of Presidency College in the University of Calcutta. Harry (as everyone called him) became the leading British social-democratic mind of the twentieth century. He married Jeannette Beveridge, sister of William Beveridge, intellectual architect of the British welfare state under Clement Attlee. The future prime minister ("Clem") fought alongside Tawney behind hedges in France. When Tawney died in 1962, Attlee's successor as Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell said of the gruff, pipe-smoking Tawney, "I think he was the best man I have ever known."

At Oxford Tawney joined the Christian Social Union, but war knocked a few holes in the doctrines of his Christianity. (Some Christians, he quipped, talked "as if the events of the Gospels had all happened on a Sunday".) War taught him that human beings were not angels. From the trenches of France he wrote to his brother-in-law (the future Lord Beveridge): "A year with the British worker has taught me that his philosophy, as much as that of his masters is, 'get as much and give as little as you can.'" This realism about human nature made Tawney's social democracy unusually conservative.

Tawney rejected the late-nineteenth-century institutions that shaped him: Indian Civil Service, Rugby School, mainstream Church of England, House of Lords, and Oxford ("Dissent [at Balliol]" one Master said, "was transmuted by the sense Balliol gave its students that they were being trained to run the show"). An upper-middle-class Victorian came to be a critic of Victorian triumphs and a prophet of

a society and economy based on non-acquisitiveness and equality. At graduation, Oxford did not give Harry a "First", a failure he (and Jeannette) never forgot. He was to have a fondness for the informality of the LSE, as against the elitism of Oxford and Cambridge. Still, those Victorian institutions shaped Tawney.

In the 1930s some of Tawney's Labour Party friends, including the Fabian monks Beatrice and Sidney Webb, worshipped at the font of the Soviet Union. They called Stalin's realm a New Civilisation. Tawney differed. He quarrelled with few people, but a "bitter tiff" occurred with Beatrice when she said the BBC and the Labour Party lied more about the Soviet Union than Radio Moscow lied about the West. Her diary reads: "Tawney's contempt for our ruling class is more intense than ours, but he does not share our faith in Soviet communism."

Again differing from both Webbs, Tawney said:

A conception of socialism which views it as involving the nationalization of everything except political power, on which all else depends, is not according to light. The question is not merely whether the state owns and controls the means of production. It is also who owns and controls the State.

Communism had no appeal for him.

Other Labourites, including the flashing star Harold Laski, thought winning socialism in England was even more important than preserving democracy in England: democracy is the train; socialism is the destination. Tawney felt democracy was not a path to socialism, but intrinsic to socialism. Laski even briefly broached revolution for the UK during the depression. Tawney called the decade before the Second World War, years that so excited Laski and the Webbs, "the long silly season of the 1930s". British democratic institutions, in which Tawney had unshakeable faith, saved the UK from Sidney and Beatrice. They also saved the brilliant Laski from his own Marxist streak.

Tawney's diary looked back on the horror in France when 820 British soldiers attacked: "We lost 450 men that day and by two days later we had 54 left." Tawney laconically added: "I suppose it's worth it." If the horror of war was to be ended, he concluded, the horror of industrial injustice in UK must be ended. So, the war also taught Tawney the indivisibility of English society and the battles in the French countryside. "War is not the reversal of the habits and ideals we cultivate in peace," he wrote. "It is their concentration." This seemed dubious. British officers at the Somme, haughty perhaps, were not an equivalent to greedy coal mine owners in Wales.

"It is very nice to be at home again," he told his diary in 1917. "Yet am I at home?" He wondered if British soldiers had not "slaved for Rachel" only to return and "live for Leah". (In the Bible, on Rachel's wedding night, Rachel and Leah's tricky father substitutes the dull Leah for the desirable Rachel.)

As the war continued, Tawney wrote an essay to his countrymen from an army hospital bed in Oxford: "Every inch that you yield to your baser selves, to hatred, to the materialism that waits on spiritual exhaustion, is added to the deadly space across which the Army must drag itself to its goal and to yours." These words suited Tawney's times, but seem over-dramatic today. Overall, we may adapt Balfour's remark, that Gladstone was a Tory in everything except essentials: Tawney was a Victorian in everything except essentials.

Tawney *did* things constantly, as well as write things, and he influenced people around him through his character. They called him a good man. Often, this meant they concluded socialism was worth a try. One worker in a tutorial class Tawney taught in north England eventually became editor of the *Manchester Guardian*. Looking back, he said, "Tawney made me."

Kingsley Martin, editor of *New Statesman*, said of Tawney's first major work, "Tawney wrote a book called *The Acquisitive Society* and Mrs Tawney illustrated it." Harry would reach for a book and find Jeannette had sold it. He gave money quietly to friends in need, but his wife had to pester her brother for money. "Thanks so much for saying you'd contribute to a new fur coat," ran one note to Beveridge. "Why don't you add it to the wireless account?" Tawney left most of his modest funds to the Workers Education Society.

The marriage did not seem ideal. For two years Jeannette had turned down Harry's entreaties. "I half-hoped that you'd see my weaknesses and scorn me but I fear you won't so goodbye for the present." Both were upper-middle-class, but Jeannette self-consciously so, while Harry took maximum pains to ignore class status. "All I can give you is friendship," she wrote, "a sorry substitute but I can do no more." Indeed, she gave him rich friendship. But another letter soon declared: "I know I don't love you now and honestly don't feel I ever shall."

But they went ahead. From the start Tawney defined their marriage as a "feeling that we belong to a cause and are members of an army". There were no children. It was a marriage, perhaps naturally, more of the Victorian era, or the barricades, than of the routinised mid-twentieth century.

What do I mean by a conservative social democrat? The highest political value for Tawney was self-fulfilment of the individual. When he grew to maturity in the early twentieth century, that fulfilment seemed blocked by lack of female voting, economic inequality, British snobbism, and low educational opportunity for working people. Hence, Tawney concluded, the individual at that time must look leftward to social democracy.

Tawney, in his influential book *Equality*, wanted equality only at the starting line, not equality also at the finish. That kept him from left-wing socialism. Later, the memoryless "resistance" Left made him shake his head. "Discontent is common," he said. "It cooks nobody's

dinner." He judged the greatest sin of the Left "in our century" was to slight the opinions of ordinary people. And that's just what leftists in the USA, UK, Australia and other democracies do today.

Tawney defined the ordinary man as a mythical Henry Dubb: "The common, courageous, good-hearted, patient fool—who is worth, except to his modest self, nine-tenths of the gentilities, notabilities, intellectual, cultural and ethical eminences put together." The goal for Tawney was the flowering of Henry Dubb. Anything else—nationalisation, five-year plans, national minimum wage—was method, to be measured by the goal. Society should be organised so that "all its members may be equally enabled to make the best of such powers as they possess". Today, this may happen as much in the Walmart Corporation as within Harvard University.

Surprising some, Tawney smiled upon Elizabethan society. The first Queen Elizabeth's

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reign displayed a “loosely-knit, decentralised” England and “an outlook on life that was surprisingly homogeneous”. Attractively, in this sixteenth-century society “most men worked for themselves, not for a master”. There seemed to Tawney to be a common culture, not seen before or after until Attlee’s rule. He detected a “genial, passionate vulgarity”. With a swipe at the Victorians, he said, “Whatever the crimes of the Elizabethans, respectability was not among them.”

Tawney enjoyed a story his close friend William Temple told of a visitor to whom he politely said, “Take a chair, Mr Jones.” Said the visitor, “Mr Montague-Jones, if you please.” The Archbishop beamed. “Indeed? Take two chairs.” Tawney disliked the love of money and hoped for an England free of snobbery. Whether or not these were political goals, Tawney judged them signs of his moral socialism.

Like others in the history of the Left, Tawney urged socialism for ailments not really political. “If men are to respect each other for what they are,” he said, “they must cease to respect each other for what they own.” Transcending politics, he criticised the “reverence for riches which is the hereditary disease of the English nation”. Candidly, he said: “When their masters are off their backs, they [the working class] will still have to choose between less and more wealth and less and more civilisation.” So much, today, for Bill Shorten’s soak-the-rich policies, and the American Left’s greedy push for an ever higher minimum wage, without weighing the public good. Tawney’s crowning idea was fellowship because only in community is the individual fulfilled, whether she was rich or not.

At a Balliol summer school for workers that young Tawney organised, the College Master showed coal-miners around. Said one miner: “This is the sort of place my mates and I are going to smash.” Responded the Master: “Look, let me show you round and tell you its history. You’ll be able to smash it so much better, once you know.” Fellowship, Tawney believed, was what England would have if class divisions like this disappeared.

Today, leftists no longer stand for the individual, and rightists no longer oppress workers in factory and office. “The man who employs governs,” Tawney claimed. That was often true in the early twentieth century. But later it was much less true.

**S**ocial democracy had won major successes by Tawney’s death in 1962, and he was not one to tilt at windmills. In the 1950s young leftists came to his long-time home in Mecklenburg Square, London, to argue that workers were little better off than fifty years earlier. Tawney was annoyed. He told them

about Manchester when he grew up: families had fewer shoes than children, so each child would wait his turn to put on the shoes and leave the house. The young radicals stared blankly when Tawney told them education in the WEA had been directed at the spirit, not only or mainly at the mind.

The playwright John Osborne explained why Tawney’s romance with British workers had to end:

The trouble is that history has rather pulled the carpet out from under the working class. If anything takes over it will be technology, not the working class. And student power is a very factitious thing. It always seems to me that “What am I” is a much more interesting question than “What are we”, but now they’re all “we-ing” all over the place. And acting as groups, which I find both uninteresting and ugly.

Prescient words for 1968, when Osborne spoke them to the *Observer* in London. He implies that “Me Too” and “Black Lives Matter” are tribal cries.

Twenty years after Tawney’s death, in China of all places, a free market lifting all boats proved better for rich and poor alike than a government-planned economy. Oddly, the success of right-wing economic policies in Beijing (alas, not its political policies) undermined the arguments of social democrats against conservatives in Europe. Tawney was a Victorian in everything but essentials. Those essentials put him on the Left for decades. In his last years, essential trends were surely pushing him to the Right.

Today, Tawney would support many conservative policies: Jack Kemp’s empowerment idea, charter schools, resistance to big unions, less control of small businesses to let them flourish. As for the crown jewel of nationalisation, the Left in the UK and Australia considers it a closed episode.

Tawney thought Henry Dubb had a lean existence in the Soviet Union. Asked to sign a petition for Britain’s nuclear disarmament in the late 1950s, Tawney demurred: “Unilateral disarmament would not only be the death of British Socialism, but would also greatly *increase* the probability of atomic war.” By this time Tawney was often unhappy with the Labour Party.

During the last election campaign of his lifetime in 1959, a young Labour volunteer reported back to the party office after knocking on Tawney’s door at 21 Mecklenburg Square:

Crumbly old boy at number 21. I asked him, very politely, if he was Labour. He said he was Socialist. I kept asking if he was Labour and he kept saying he was Socialist. Then I put

it to him straight and I said, "What I really want to know is are you voting for Mrs Jeger [Labour member for the district]?" And he said, "Yes, of course." I said, "Then you are Labour," and he said, "I'm a Socialist." So, I put him down as doubtful. You can't be too careful.

Identity politics would have appalled Tawney. He wanted the companionship of all people on equal terms (fellowship) paying no regard to race or gender. He declined a commission in the army in 1916 and said in refusing a peerage: "Even dogs don't tie tin cans to their tails." He wanted a social order that puts people within reach of each other; thereafter, how they deal with each other goes beyond politics. He did broach animal rights, only to declare, "I have no duties to a tiger or a fish."

Asked what made him a socialist, Tawney replied, "Going out into the world and meeting working people." Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton wouldn't know what he was talking about (though Bill Shorten might). At the same time this pair might be puzzled why Tawney didn't stick with Lloyd George but carried further his Workers Education Society romance with the English worker and a trade-union-based political party. It is a reasonable question.

Tony Blair in his later years wanted to "unite two great streams of left-of-centre thought—democratic socialism and liberalism—whose divorce in this century did so much to weaken progres-

sive politics across the West". In 1893 the British Left founded a trade union party, the Independent Labour Party, which Tawney joined in 1909. Blair felt it was a mistake.

Does this mean Tawney should be placed in the radical liberal stream (with Beveridge), rather than the socialist stream? Perhaps not, because of Henry Dubb.

In truth Tawney was a Lloyd George liberal who also revered the "foolish" Dubb; he tried to blend these two streams. Lloyd George's measures from 1906 were astonishing: eight-hour day for miners, labour exchanges, old-age pensions, protection of trade union funds, some minimum wage rules, progressive tax bills, health and unemployment insurance. Attlee's successes after 1945 were also historic, but only possible because of the Second World War's national unity.

The community now touted on the Left is tribal, not Tawney's community of individual citizens. Glenn Tinder wrote in the *Atlantic*: "The core idea of individualism does not have to be that all true life is private and exclusive. It can be rather that all true relationships are formed in freedom." Tawney's philosophy, after he survived the Somme, was Lloyd George-ism plus Fellowship. He was a social democrat in his own era, a conservative in today's terms.

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*Ross Terrill is the author of **Socialism as Fellowship: R. H. Tawney and His Times** (Harvard) and many books on China.*

## Rain in the City

Rain in the city  
washes, weeps, atones:

hard edges softened,  
screaming sounds muted;  
dark dust dissolved,  
dim fumes diluted.

Strangers huddling,  
sheltering, smiling;

stone, water, flesh:  
miracles melding.

*Katherine Spadaro*