

THE POPULAR FRONT
AND THE PROGRESSIVE
TRADITION

Socialists, Liberals, and the Quest for Unity, 1884–1939

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Introduction

Contrary to myth, the most numerous and strategically significant group to support the Popular Front campaign in Britain was not the Communist Party but the left of the Labour Party. The success or failure of the proposal to join the 'parties of progress' in a common struggle against the Conservative government depended solely on whether the Labour left could persuade the rest of their party to agree to it. This book is therefore mainly about the Labour left. It aims to show that the left's support for the Popular Front campaign, and to a lesser extent the United Front campaign before it, can best be explained in terms of the left's place in the mainstream of the British progressive tradition. This view implies that the campaigns themselves are best seen as episodes in that tradition, and demands reinterpretation not only of the history of the Labour left in the 1930s, but also of the nature of the United Front and Popular Front campaigns, and of the British progressive tradition itself. The book is devoted equally to each of these three interlocking tasks.

The historiographical and conceptual problems that surround this subject-matter are considerable and require some preliminary discussion. To begin, however, it will be helpful to provide a brief sketch of the United Front and Popular Front campaigns.

(1)

The United and Popular Front campaigns are fairly straightforward episodes, at least in outline. The United Front campaign may be said to have begun as early as March 1933, when the Communist Party of Great Britain, acting on instructions from the Executive Committee of the Communist International, dropped its policy of relentless vilification of the Labour Party and trade union leaders and attempted to interest them in joint activity. This approach

received virtually no support from any section of the Labour Party and was quickly rejected by the leadership, who were not only ideologically hostile to Communism, but were also understandably disinclined to work with a body that had spent most of the previous decade denouncing them as class traitors and 'social fascists'.

The Independent Labour Party, however, accepted the Communists' invitation and entered into an uneasy partnership with the CPGB, whose chief aim appeared to be to exploit the new relationship as a device to poach ILP members. This was consistent with the CPGB's earlier tactic of the 'United Front from below' in which the Party had established various political and industrial organisations open to all rank and file workers with the objective of inducting them into their own ranks, and with the effect of disrupting the work of the official Labour organisations and undermining their leadership.

The United Front did not become a contentious issue within the Labour Party until 1936 when the Socialist League – the formally constituted organisation of the Labour left – supported the Communist Party's application for affiliation to the Labour Party. This application was a result of another change of tack by the Communist International, which in 1935 had decided to support the formation of Popular Fronts of all anti-fascists, as opposed to United Fronts consisting only of socialists. The change may be attributed in part to the increasing menace of fascism as Hitler consolidated his power, in part to the Soviet Union's new line in foreign policy which now sought alliances with capitalist states in order to contain Germany, and in part to the successful, spontaneous formation of a United Front in France in 1934. Despite this change in line, however, the Communist International and the CPGB insisted that the broader Popular Front must be preceded by a United Front – that socialists must attain the fullest possible unity before seeking to enlist non-socialist anti-fascists.

The ILP and most of the Labour left supported the United Front, but at first rejected the Popular Front on the grounds that socialism was the only effective means to prevent the spread of fascism. They argued, as the Communists themselves had done, that fascism was merely a particular form of capitalist dictatorship, and that to fight fascism without dismantling capitalism was futile. While the CPGB sought affiliation to the Labour Party as a phase in its Popular Front strategy, the ILP and the Labour left supported the United Front as an end in itself.

When the CPGB's application for affiliation was rejected by the Labour Party conference in June 1936, the supporters of unity fell back on the more limited aim of concerting the electoral and propaganda efforts of the three parties. This too was rejected by the Labour Conference, which reiterated the Party's ban on co-operation with the Communists. In January 1937 the Socialist League defied this ban by publishing, jointly with the ILP and the CPGB, a 'Unity Manifesto' advocating unity of 'the whole Labour Movement . . . to oppose fascism in all its forms'.¹ The Labour Party executive responded first by disaffiliating and then by proscribing the Socialist League. Rather than face the expulsion of its members from the Labour Party, the League dissolved itself.

While some prominent Labour leftists, such as G. D. H. Cole and H. N. Brailsford, were converted to the idea of a Popular Front as early as 1936, and while others never supported it at all, the bulk of them, including Sir Stafford Cripps, chairman of the now defunct Socialist League, began to advocate it in 1938 after Germany annexed Austria. Their main aim was to unify the opposition to the Chamberlain Government's policy of appeasement, which they felt amounted at best to extreme cowardice and at worst to deliberate and sinister encouragement of fascism. The Labour Party declared its opposition to the Popular Front as soon as it was first proposed. Some leaders of the Labour left nevertheless continued publicly to campaign for the Popular Front. As a result, Cripps was expelled from the Party in January 1939 and was followed two months later by five others, among them two MPs, Aneurin Bevan and George Strauss, and a former cabinet minister, Sir Charles Trevelyan.

Considered from any angle the lasting consequences of this conflict were small. The Labour Party dropped its opposition to cross-party co-operation and played an important role in the wartime Coalition Government, and all of the expelled members eventually returned to the Labour fold. Cripps and Bevan were key figures in the post-war Labour Government in which Strauss also served in a junior post. As I have stated, however, my interest in the campaigns is not in their consequences but in their origins, and in what they reveal about the political attitudes and the political heritage of those Labour leftists who took part.

(II)

The Labour left's participation in the United Front and Popular Front campaigns, and indeed the behaviour of the entire non-Communist left throughout the 1930s, is often explained (or rather, explained away) as an aberration engineered by the Communist Party. While all the different breeds of anti- and pro-Communist historians have advanced a wealth of different accounts of this state of affairs (as well as a considerable number of moral judgements), almost all have shared the premise that the non-Communist left's history in this period can be largely, or even completely, understood as a function of the activities and propaganda of the CPGB. Too many studies of the non-Communist left in the 1930s seem to focus on the Communists themselves. The non-Communist left itself is written about as though possessed of neither volition, reason, nor history.

The ideological imperatives of the Cold War are only the most obvious of the many strong historical and historiographical reasons for this tendency.² During the thirties the numbers and prestige of the CPGB were at their highest ever. The Party's energetic and frequently effective organisation of the unemployed earned it the support of many working-class people, and the heroism with which the Party rallied to the cause of the Spanish Republic captured the imagination, if not the support, of a wide cross-section of people alarmed at the rapid growth of fascism on the continent and in Britain itself. Most importantly in the present context, a number of causes, chiefly the apparent helplessness of British institutions – including the Labour Party – in the face of the political and economic crises of the time contrasted with the economic and social achievements of the USSR, meant that British intellectuals of the left generally were more favourably disposed towards Soviet Marxism than at any time before or since.

This led many people to take up embarrassingly uncritical positions towards the Soviet Union and the activities of the Communist International and its constituent national parties. When most of these people recanted, either on the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in August 1939 or on the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, the pattern for much of the subsequent historical understanding of the 1930s was set: left-wing politics in the 1930s had been an enormous confidence trick perpetrated by the Com-

munist International on a generation of young idealists who had been made psychologically and politically vulnerable by sheer despair. There is, of course, a lot of truth in all of this. Specifically, the recantations give an accurate picture of the historical experience of those who wrote them, and probably of a good many other people. For them, Communism had been a god, and it had undoubtedly failed.

These people were not, however, a representative sample of the 'Popular Front' left of the 1930s, nor even of those who were enthusiastic defenders of the Soviet Union. They were for the most part young, and many (W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender are the best known examples) were literary men who lacked both theoretical knowledge and practical experience of politics when Communism first captured their imaginations in the 1930s. Their very youth has contributed to the undue weight given to their experience in conventional understandings of the period. Unlike most of those who were politically experienced in the 1930s, and whose attitudes towards Communism tended to be somewhat more judicious, most of those who were thoroughly and publicly infatuated with Communism in the 1930s lived into the 1950s and beyond to tell and retell their tale.

The most influential exponent of the view that left-wing politics in the 1930s was a gigantic Communist confidence trick has been George Orwell, whose works – especially *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia* – are today without a doubt the most widely read British political texts of the 1930s. Orwell, who joined the ILP in 1938, opposed the Popular Front and had excellent reasons to hate and mistrust the Communists. In May 1937, while on leave from the front in the Spanish Civil War, where he was fighting with the POUM (non-Stalinist Marxist) militia, he took part in the week of fighting that erupted in Barcelona between the Communist controlled police on one side and the Anarchists and the POUM on the other. Indeed he only narrowly escaped the murderous suppression of the POUM by the Communists who libelled the POUM as a fascist front. In England he had a serious dispute with Kingsley Martin, the editor of the *New Statesman and Nation*, who, as a supporter of the Popular Front, refused to publish Orwell's account of the events he had witnessed in Spain for fear of creating friction within the British left.³ But Orwell's version of the British left's attitude to the Barcelona events is greatly exaggerated. The left-

wing press in Britain, although it reprehensibly shied away from reporting the suppression of the POUM, did not retail the Communists' lies about the POUM, and the Barcelona rising itself was fairly reported and analysed in the *New Statesman and Nation* by Brailsford and another writer.⁴

There is, however, a far deeper problem in Orwell's version of the left-wing politics of the 1930s than any particular piece of exaggeration. It is that the recognised political leaders of the non-Communist left, as opposed to the literary 'fellow-travellers', are entirely absent. In Orwell's whole output before the war there is no reference whatsoever to Cripps, Cole, Trevelyan, or Bevan, nor to Harold Laski – another prominent Labour leftist who for a time supported the Popular Front. Brailsford, a journalist and writer who had been active in the Labour Party for three decades, is mentioned only once in a letter in which Orwell disputes a detail of the account of the Barcelona fighting which Brailsford wrote in the *New Statesman and Nation*.⁵ Orwell's letter gives no indication that Brailsford's account contradicted the Communists on almost every significant point; still less would one guess that Brailsford wrote one of the two letters of introduction that Orwell carried with him to Spain – letters which put Orwell in touch with the POUM rather than the Communists.⁶

Orwell's work has value as a sincere and powerful revolt against the many deceptions of the 'red decade', but it cannot be accepted as an analysis of the left-wing politics of the 1930s. Even the most casual study of the writings and actions of the leaders of the Labour left reveals a far more complex, and, mercifully, a far less disgusting picture than anything derived from Orwell or the cold warriors can allow. It reveals, for example, that among seasoned members of the Labour left there was a wide variety of attitudes towards the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and the CPGB. It reveals that a significant section of the Labour left was at first hostile to the proposal for a Popular Front, and that different individuals became convinced of the need for a Popular Front at different times and for different reasons. It reveals that many of those on the Labour left who supported Soviet foreign policy in the late 1930s remained critical of that country's repressive practices at home and sceptical of its motives abroad. In short, it reveals that the left's history in this period cannot simply be written as though the Communist Party were a sort of Doctor Pavlov needing only to ring the bells of 'democracy and progress' to produce the required response.

Even to the extent that the non-Communist left's activities and attitudes were influenced by Communist propaganda, they still cannot be understood solely by reference to that propaganda. No matter how skilfully conducted, a propaganda campaign must strike appropriate chords in its listeners if it is to be successful. Indeed, understanding which chords to strike and how and when to strike them is one of the propagandist's most important skills. The successful propagandist must understand the values, anxieties, and idiom of his or her audience, just as the historian must who wishes to understand the operation and importance of a propaganda campaign.

This is merely to reiterate in a different context a principle argued long ago by E. P. Thompson. Discussing the English crowd in the eighteenth century, Thompson protested against the tendency of many historians to assume that there was a simple causal relationship between 'elementary economic stimuli', such as hunger, unemployment, or high prices, and popular disturbances. He argued that in order to understand such episodes we must ask, 'How is [the participants'] behaviour modified by custom, culture, and reason?'⁷ This is precisely the question that I wish to pose in relation to the behaviour of the non-Communist left in the 1930s. Just as Thompson disposed of the image of 'the eighteenth-century English collier who claps his hand spasmodically upon his stomach, and responds [by rioting] to elementary economic stimuli',⁸ so I hope to dispose of the equally unhelpful (and insulting) image of the 1930s British intellectual who claps his hand to his forehead, and responds – by worshipping Stalin or by working for a Popular Front – to the elementary emotional stimuli of fear and despair.

It might be objected that Thompson was arguing in the context of a particular historiographical problem: the view that 'the common people can hardly be taken as historical agents before the French Revolution',⁹ and that it is superfluous to try to do for an intellectual elite what it was urgently necessary to do for a mostly illiterate 'mob' of common people. While this would certainly be a valid point in relation to the intellectual left for most of its history, it does not apply to the 1930s. As I have suggested above, most historians have dismissed the behaviour of the left in the 1930s as an aberration, and have thereby excused themselves from considering the ways in which that behaviour was conditioned by custom, culture, and reason, and have taken the operation of Communist propaganda in the context

of despair to satisfy (to echo Thompson again) 'all requirements of historical explanation'.¹⁰ The fact that the subjects of my study were mostly of the intellectual elite makes my task less difficult than Thompson's, but it does not make it less necessary.

(III)

One of the most common consequences of historians' former unwillingness to study the actual words and deeds of the non-Communist left in the 1930s was a failure to distinguish adequately – or even at all – between the United Front and the Popular Front. This was common, as one might expect, in general histories, where fine distinctions are frequently lost;¹¹ but it was also apparent, as recently as 1975, in more specialised studies. Thus Alfred Sherman, 'The Days of the Left Book Club', Julian Symons, *The Thirties*, Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, and David Caute, *The Fellow Travellers*, all, by one means or another, elided the two campaigns.¹² These texts had other common features: all were written from an anti-Communist viewpoint, and placed the Communist Party of the USSR firmly in the centre of their accounts of the left-wing politics of the 1930s.

The delightful irony of this is that these anti-Communist authors all accepted without question the Communists' central strategic assumption that the United Front was a mere preliminary to the Popular Front, and in their anxiety to demonstrate the Communists' hegemony over the left (incidentally another point congenial to Communist mythology) simply took for granted that the rest of the left shared this view. As I have already suggested and shall show in greater detail in the body of the work, this is by no means true.

More recent writers have recognised that the campaigns were separate but have not fully realised the extent to which they were contradictory. This has less to do with the grinding of ideological axes than with the sheer deceptive simplicity of the apparent historical progression: according to this version of events fascism emerged as a threat in the early 1930s, so Labour leftists sought alliances with other socialists; as fascism became more threatening they sought them with an ever widening circle – first of Liberals, then of 'democratic' Tories. The logical culmination of the whole process – the ultimate Popular Front – was the wartime Coalition Government under the leadership of the anti-Nazi Winston

Churchill, generally viewed though he was as an imperialist and a reactionary.

This notion has a psychological ring of truth, but rides roughshod over the political processes involved. The theoretical assumptions behind the United Front and the Popular Front were in fact contradictory. The United Front strategy was based on the belief that fascism was the form contemporary capitalism inevitably took when in the grip of crisis. Socialism was its only antidote. Liberals and democratic Tories, who supported capitalism, were not merely useless but positively harmful, as they would never consent to the administration of this antidote. Worse still, they would, for all their good intentions, inevitably be forced to support fascist measures in order to maintain the capitalist system. The Popular Front strategy, by contrast, assumed that fascism was a free choice taken by cliques of evil and reactionary capitalists. The main threat of fascism came from those states – principally Germany – whose capitalists had already chosen it. The problem was essentially the military–diplomatic one of standing up to Hitler. There was room in this argument for the idea that there was a clique of capitalists in Britain who desired fascism, and that Neville Chamberlain was their puppet. There was even room for the idea that Churchill's opposition to Hitler stemmed from his desire to defend the British Empire and that he was therefore an unsuitable ally, but there was no room for the idea that every supporter of capitalism must of necessity turn fascist in a crisis. The move from United Front to Popular Front was not, therefore, a logical progression, but a fundamental change in strategy and a correspondingly fundamental change in the left's understanding of the nature of the evil they faced. Even under the most severe threat people do not seek help from among those whom they believe form part of the threat itself. People make choices. And the choices they make are determined, to repeat the phrase, by custom, culture, and reason.

This consideration obliges us to look at the political past of the leading supporters of the United Front and Popular Front campaigns, an exercise which will not only show at once how unremarkable was their advocacy of cross-party collaboration, but will also finally rule out the idea that their actions in the 1930s can be attributed to mere political naïveté.

The oldest prominent supporter of the campaigns was Sir Charles Trevelyan.¹³ Born of a famous Liberal family in 1870, Trevelyan

entered parliament as a Liberal in 1900, at which time he was a close friend of Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Ramsay MacDonald. He served as a junior minister in the Asquith Government in 1908–14. He resigned his post on Britain's entry into the First World War and immediately helped found the Union of Democratic Control, an organisation of Liberals and members of the ILP who opposed the British government's wartime policies and advocated a negotiated settlement with Germany. In 1920, as a result of the Liberal Party's failures and divisions during the war, Trevelyan, like all the other Liberals in the UDC, joined the ILP, which was then an important constituent body of the Labour Party. He was a cabinet minister in the first two Labour Governments, but resigned from the second in protest at its failure to fund his education portfolio adequately. He retired from parliament in 1931, but when the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party in the following year he became a fairly active member of the Socialist League, which was formed out of those members of the ILP who did not wish to leave the main Party.

Brailsford's career could almost be seen as a journalistic equivalent of Trevelyan's.¹⁴ Born into the Liberal non-conformist middle class in 1873, Brailsford, while a member of the Liberal Party, helped found the Glasgow University Fabian Society in 1896. He left the Fabian Society in 1899 when it failed to declare a position on the Boer War, which he opposed. He was active in two organisations against the Boer War, one of which was a coalition of socialists – including revolutionary socialists – and Liberals. As a journalist, Brailsford worked on many different liberal and socialist papers and continued to do so after he joined the ILP in 1907. Like Trevelyan, he was prominent in the UDC and was a founding member of the Socialist League.

G. D. H. Cole and Harold Laski were about twenty years younger than Trevelyan and Brailsford and were both academics.¹⁵ Their careers are therefore different, but reveal some of the same characteristics. Laski came from a middle-class Liberal family, graduated from Oxford in 1914, and immediately began work for the socialist *Daily Herald*. He spent the war years in the USA, but on his return in 1920 immediately resumed his pre-war activity in the Fabian Society and joined the ILP. He also began to contribute to the liberal *Nation*, and became a regular attendee at the weekly lunches organised by its editor. It was here that he became friendly with Brailsford and with the assortment of Liberal and socialist journalists

who made up the rest of the paper's staff. In 1930, Laski helped found the *Political Quarterly*, a journal which deliberately sought to convey a 'progressive' liberal and socialist point of view.

Cole too was a member of the Fabian Society as a young man shortly before the war, although he soon came into conflict with its leaders when he attempted to capture the Fabian Society for Guild Socialism – a variant of syndicalism of which he was a leading exponent. Although he resigned from the Society over this dispute he helped found the Fabian Research Bureau immediately afterwards. After the war, he, like Laski, although now a prominent member of the Labour Party, became a fairly regular contributor to the *Liberal Manchester Guardian*. Like Laski and the others he was a founder of the Socialist League.

Cripps's career was different again.¹⁶ He came to politics comparatively late in life, after he had established himself in a very successful career at the Bar. His family, however, was political. His father, like many others, had made the transition from the Liberal Party to the Labour Party after the First World War, and as Lord Parmoor was Lord President in the first two Labour Governments. Beatrice Webb was Cripps's maternal aunt. On that side of the family both of his great-grandfathers were active in the Anti-Corn Law League with Richard Cobden. Joseph Cripps, Stafford's great-great-grandfather, spent forty years in the House of Commons where he supported both the Great Reform Act and the repeal of the Corn Laws. Stafford Cripps had deep Christian convictions and considered a career in the Church. He was close to forty when he joined the Labour Party in 1928, partly as a consequence of his family connections, but also because of the influence of the Christian Socialist ideas of R. H. Tawney. By chance he soon became prominent. In 1930, while still without a seat, he was appointed Solicitor-General on the sudden retirement of the incumbent. A safe seat was soon found, and when the Labour Party was trounced in the 1931 election Cripps found himself one of only fifty-two Labour MPs and one of a small handful with any parliamentary ability. Together with George Lansbury and Clement Attlee he formed the triumvirate that led the Parliamentary Labour Party through some of the most difficult years of its history.

Aneurin Bevan was far removed from the plutocratic heights of the Cripps and Trevelyan families, or even the middle-class life of Brailsford, Laski, and Cole.¹⁷ He was a coal-miner who cut his

political teeth on industrial disputes and local government struggles in a South Wales village. He was converted early to Marxism, educated at the National Labour College, and elected to represent his home constituency in 1929. But Bevan, born in 1897, was young enough for Brailsford's seminal work, *The War of Steel and Gold* (first published in 1914), to have been influential on his thinking as a youth. Bevan was a militant whose relationship with the Labour Party was always problematic. He was a vociferous critic of the second Labour Government's failure to respond creatively to mass unemployment, and in 1931 was an active participant in Sir Oswald Mosley's unsuccessful revolt against the Party leadership, which ended in Mosley and his closest colleagues leaving the Labour Party to form the short-lived New Party. Bevan never contemplated this step,¹⁸ but of those who did follow Mosley, two, Allan Young and John Strachey, later emerged as supporters of the Popular Front.

With the exception of Bevan all the people here seem obviously fitted to be supporters of a Popular Front. Brailsford and Trevelyan had both been members of the Liberal Party and had not turned their backs on Liberal colleagues when they joined the ILP. The others either came from Liberal backgrounds or enjoyed good relations with Liberals or both. On the other hand, if we are to account for their support for the Popular Front by these biographical incidents, we are left unable to account for their support for a United Front, which, as we have seen, was in some measure an anti-Liberal tactic. Similarly, Bevan's biography may help us to understand his support for a United Front, but provides no clue to his support for a Popular Front. Helpful as they are, these biographies, considered in isolation, leave much unexplained. The gaps can be filled only if we consider these individuals' political trajectories as symptomatic of their participation in the British progressive tradition.

(IV)

The point may be clarified if stated somewhat differently. The United Front and Popular Front campaigns were both in large measure about the relationship between liberalism and socialism. Were they at bottom irrelevant, or even hostile to each other, or were they in some sense natural allies, with enough common ground to warrant practical political co-operation? Far from being a new

question in the 1930s, this was the most constant and important theme in the British progressive tradition for at least seventy years before the Second World War. Whether we consider the progressive philosophical and political discourse, or whether we consider the relationships between the organisations to which the participants in the tradition have belonged, that single theme recurs again and again.

These seventy years – roughly the 1860s to 1939 – form the chronological boundaries of this book. But in order to clarify my claim that the relationship between liberalism and socialism was the dominant theme of the progressive tradition throughout those years, it will be helpful to focus first on a narrower period in which the relationship was most explicitly and continually discussed and debated, and where the main issues involved are therefore clearest.

This period has been given a very thorough treatment in the works of Dr Peter Clarke, who uses the terms ‘progressivism’ and ‘Progressive Movement’ to denote a group of people, bound loosely by common ideas, who were prominent in the quarter century before the First World War. Their common ideas were inspired by both liberalism and socialism. On the one hand were the ‘New Liberals’, whose principal aim was to persuade fellow Liberals that the realisation of their traditional ideals of liberty and equality required a serious revision of their equally traditional distrust of government and faith in the *laissez-faire* doctrines of the classical economists. Among this group were the economist J. A. Hobson, the philosopher L. T. Hobhouse, and the politicians Herbert Samuel and, significantly, Charles Trevelyan. On the other hand were avowed socialists who argued that Liberalism’s historical moment had passed, and that Socialism (in the mild and cautious form they advocated), by virtue of its subsumption of all that was valuable in Liberalism, was its only logical successor. Among this group were Ramsay MacDonald of the ILP and the early members of the Fabian Society, including Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Graham Wallas, and William Clarke. H. N. Brailsford moved from the first position to the second early in the new century. Taken together (and, given their close political, social, and quite often familial relationships, that is how they should be taken) these groups constituted the ‘Progressive Movement’.

My use of the term progressive for this period is practically identical with Clarke’s whose work has opened up many lines of