

A USABLE HISTORY: TAWNEY AND THE PURITANS

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It is difficult to exaggerate the role played by Richard Henry Tawney in shaping the mind and culture of Britain in the present century. Before coming to my subject I should like to sketch a brief summary of the achievements of this remarkable man, teacher, and scholar, especially in consideration of young readers who may not have heard of him.

Tawney is one of the great *engagé* intellectuals of the twenties and thirties, like so many others on the Continent in those years; only, his engagement was profoundly British in nature. In the first decade of the Twentieth century, he chose to be a social worker in poor districts in London and in the industrial counties; he became a socialist, and a member of the Independent Labour Party, then one of the most well known figures of the Labour Party, respected as a leader and as an ideological guide. He even wrote the program of Labour for 1928 and 1934. He devoted a great part of his life to the education of workers and adults — founding and presiding the W.E.A., a lively organization even today. From the beginning, Tawney's idea was that the working classes had to be given a real education: not pre-digested, simple notions, but real problems, on the same scientific level as the higher classes received in their restricted universities, with no compromise at all with vulgarization. For a long time he was an influential member of that very celebrated institution, the London School of Economics; he had a large part in the foundation of the well known periodical «The Economic History Review», thus bequeathing us a research instrument which is still precious. His academic life was, in a way, very anti-academic, very much against the style of life in Oxford and Cambridge, which he knew well, having been educated at Oxford.

Many Britons of his generation wrote against the English public school system, and against its stupidity and cruelty: the essay by George Orwell *Such, such Were the Joys* is maybe the most well known among such pieces of criticism, and one could add books like *Enemies of Promise* by Cyril Connolly, memoirs by Robert Graves and others. But Tawney *did something* to change the English school system; he denounced it as the very core of injustice in his book of 1931, *Inequality*, a masterpiece of sociological analysis.

This leads me to the last of Tawney's achievements I wish to mention: his being godfather to the Welfare System legislation adopted in Britain by the Labour Government between 1945 and 1951; finally obliterated forty years later by Mrs Thatcher and still the object of heated political debate all over Europe. A large part of the program adopted by the so-called Welfare State springs from the pages of *Inequality*, and from ideas Tawney spread in the Labour Party and in the Anglican Church, many of whose young leaders had been his pupils. He was brother-in-law to William Beveridge, and had more than a hand in the famous *Beveridge Report on Full Employment in a Free Society* of 1944.

Lastly, we may also mention Tawney's relations with the United States. During the Second World War, he was eager to serve his homeland against Nazism, but the Churchill government got him out of the way by sending him to America, on the somewhat improbable mission of studying the labour problem in the allied countries. As usual, Tawney settled down to hard work, and in a one year stay in the USA organized a Joint Labour Office which later helped conquered countries, like Italy and Germany, to build up a new democratic Union system¹.

All this time, Tawney devoted himself to his intellectual tasks as well. I shall discuss later his historical work proper. But he made a name really in the fields of economic history and sociological analysis. His first great book, *The Acquisitive Society*, published in 1921, instantly became a best-seller. Tawney was the first to give a name to a social phenomenon which is still very active, to define a trend which has become synonymous with Western civilization. Elsewhere I have noted that this book is an exact pendant to Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Both books reflect their times, denouncing the growing loss of values and the advent of a materialistic society. Spengler is pessimistic, tracing a decline from a golden age to barbarism: a whole line of thought of the European Right was founded on such pessimism. Tawney is optimistic; he, too, evokes the disgregation of what he thinks was the organic society of medieval and early modern Europe, but in so doing he accepts that progress is inevitable, and there is a way to humanize it. Thus he points to a way out of the devastations of capitalism to a different idea of progress, led by Socialism and revitalized by religion. *The Acquisitive Society* was soon followed in 1926 by *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, another book soon to become a classic, introducing Max Weber's arguments into Anglo-American culture. Then

¹ R. H. Tawney, *The American Labour Movement and Other Essays*, Ed. by M. Winter, Manchester 1979.

came the already mentioned *Inequality* of 1931, together with a large quantity of historical, economic and sociological essays on many subjects.²

Such a man, then, was Richard Henry Tawney. But in order to understand the problems of his historiography, we should understand, as I said before, his Englishness. Tawney's intellectual and political engagement in the Left had different roots from other French, German, Italian or Continental intellectuals; and this is one of the reasons why he was never really tempted by Marxism, while freely adopting and using many of Marx's ideas. Indeed, we might even be surprised at learning that this Socialist, who made economy and society the basis of historical analysis, was in fact a religious believer, although very discreetly. All his life he was a member of the Anglo-Catholic church, and the life-long friend of an Anglican Bishop; his outlook was in general High Church.

I do not wish to overemphasize this fact, but only to remark that as he was no materialist, so he was no Puritan. His concern for the working classes, for equal opportunities, had a very peculiar root. Tawney was profoundly marked by his education in Edwardian England. His criticism of the acquisitive society came, so to speak, «from inside», and this is why it was so effective.

He was born in 1880 in Calcutta, where his father was Rector of an important College, and a scholar of Sanskrit. Coming from a family of bankers, entrepreneurs and churchmen, he was a typical example of those devoted civil servants who made an empire under Queen Victoria. Young Richard was therefore raised to be a member of the same intellectual, privileged, class; he studied at Rugby and at Oxford. In those times, the University was very clerical, in all senses of the word. The religious circles that attracted young Tawney were those concerned with poverty, with mending the ravages of the industrial revolution, and curing social evils; they were the pupils of the philosopher T. H. Green, and of Arnold Toynbee senior, who was to die young, leaving a memorable series of *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution*. Tawney became a Socialist *and* a Christian. He jettisoned a career in the diplomatic service to go and teach the working classes, at first in London's deprived East End, then in the industrial district in the area of Birmingham.

He became a sociologist by practising the technique of direct enquiry; he became a historian by trying to explain how the present social structure came into existence. Tawney's first large book, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912) - which by the way is pure history - came to be

² For the benefit of Italian readers one should mention that the Tawney volume published by UTET for the care of Franco Ferrarotti includes all the three major books (Torino, 1975).

written as a summing up of courses he gave to steel workers and coal miners, and out of research into archives he did together with his pupils.

Why the agrarian problem; why the 16th Century? In post-Reformation England he saw a turning point: private property, riches, profit began to enjoy legitimate consideration; this meant the expropriation of the many by a few: the few who cared for private property, the many who did not even conceive that land could be put to private use. It was a cultural transformation, marked by a gradual withdrawal of the church from society, as if religious leaders gradually abdicated their age-long right of declaring right and wrong in economic matters. So «Economy» became to be separated from society, and religion from both. This brief summary may give the idea that the book is a kind of political pamphlet. On the contrary, *The Agrarian Problem* is a large book, by no means easy reading, packed with archival documentation. The rise of new ways of behaving is traced by Tawney through scores of wills, acts of litigation, letters, diaries, maps. It is a work of accomplished social and economic history, although of course today it appears outdated, if compared with the sophisticated techniques of present research, and serial analysis.

In 1912 such a book could only be written by an outsider. There existed nothing like economic history or social history in the university system: these subjects had then no status as autonomous disciplines. Worse even, the intellectual world considered them as below the level of dignity and interest; they were subjects for social agitators. Furthermore, they were tainted with Germanism: from Karl Marx to Schmoller, to the Katheder-Sozialisten it was the Germans who treated social history. At the time Tawney had not yet read anything by Max Weber (whose famous essays on *Capitalism and the Spirit of Protestantism* were first published between 1904 and 1905). But he went to Germany for more than a year to study in the school of economic and social historians; there he discovered that the Germans had studied English history very thoroughly, precisely because of their interest in the evolution of society, while the English still ignored those contributions (to say nothing of German history).

Talking to an Italian audience, I feel obliged to recall briefly that the terms of cultural controversy in Italy were much the same in the decades around 1900. One could recall works like Salvemini's study of social classes in medieval Florence, Volpe establishing a connection between social revolt and medieval heresies, and the economic history of Saponi or Luzzato. Compare Croce's position which connected such interests with Socialism and, having decreed the decline of the latter, proclaimed in 1903 that history was a work of art, and banned economy and society from the domain of history.

But, I think, Tawney's position was revolutionary in two ways.

He not only introduced economic history and social history. He also felt ill at ease with specialistic boundaries and fences between them. Was not the autonomization of economy, its separation from social concern, the original sin of modern, acquisitive society? Was it not an illusion, to divide artificially the unity of man and to glorify an *homo oeconomicus* who could not exist?

For Tawney, the study of the past, therefore, becomes a program for the present. Not only must economic history be introduced into research and teaching, but it must be something more than a mere enumeration of figures and statistics; economy, society, and culture should explain each other. Such was to be the program, in 1937, of the «Economic History Review».

At the same time, Tawney was uncompromising in whatever concerned scientific exactness. He would not accept ready-made ideological catchwords; he wanted hard archival research, as in his article on *The Assessment of Wages by the Justices of the Peace* (1913: significantly the essay appeared in the German *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*) an essay which is still occasionally quoted by scholars, or that for the three volumes of *Tudor Economic Documents*, published in 1924 in collaboration with Eileen Power, an anthology that is still standard reading for students in economic history.

Tawney belonged to those researchers who in a sense *create* a period, a problem, a whole lot of individualities out of a section of the past where people did not suspect anything of the kind. The sharpest of his opponents, Hugh Trevor Roper (later Lord Dacre), paid Tawney exactly this homage, when he christened the period between 1540 and 1640 as “Tawney’s century”.

Between those dates a time honored tradition had been able to see nothing more than a juxtaposition of obscure periods in English history, connected by even more obscure links. From the last years of Henry VIII to the accession of Elizabeth, religion was the main topic in the books of historiographers, most of them embarrassed by what they considered essentially as a prolongment of the Middle Ages. There followed the early and the late Elizabethan age; in 19th century books, this was the domain of politics and myth, of patriotic glory and Shakespearean pageantry. With the coming of the Stuarts a fracture was felt, and textbooks sometimes expanded on analysing the differences between James and Charles; religion became again a dominant topic, together with an unexplained “rise of Parliament”, especially a “rise of the house of Commons”. The reign of Charles I was rarely interpreted in itself, but only as a prelude to revolution.

We can label this cultural outlook as the historiography of “classical liberalism”. As we can see today, the liberal vision was totally unable to explain — indeed to notice — a contradiction in early modern history. On one side there was, very evidently, a process of construction of the modern state, something which saw both the mild Elizabeth and the savage Henry VIII (the so-called Tudor despotism), cutting heads off their subjects’ neck, and dissolving Parliaments with almost no qualms. On the other side, there was the Liberal myth of a steady progression of Parliamentary liberties and representative government, which was supposed to begin at the same time. It was not easy to reconcile the two views, particularly when it came to evidence that Elizabeth was accustomed to pack parliamentary elections, to bully her Parliaments, and to dissolve them when they did not comply with royal wishes. Where was «Liberty» then?

Compare for example the gigantic *History of England* written in 18 volumes by Samuel Rawson Gardiner in the last decades of the 19th Century³ and continued by that other Oxford master of archives, Charles H. Firth (the author of *Cromwell’s Army*). Between them, Gardiner and Firth established the orthodoxy of what was called “the Puritan Revolution”: a social upheaval that was *told* in political terms, but *explained* in religious terms. Such a contradiction was the extreme consequence of a vision of British history that can be traced down to Macaulay (first edition of his *History of England* published in 1845), and to the obsession to remove even the memory of violence from the course of English history. Another example, this time from America, may be found in the well known essay by Charles Mc Ilwain, *The Rise of the House of Commons* (1921) one of the most accomplished pieces of propaganda for representative government.⁴ Mc Ilwain traced a neat and straight line from the Petition of Right of 1628 to the League of Nations of 1919 and to the planetary triumph of democracy. He did not even think of asking who was the subject of such a triumphal march: rather, the subject was an idea, pure ideas growing and unfolding themselves one from the other.

Religious conflict was for liberal historians one of the ways of explaining conflict in general. Since the liberal age was characterized by

³ S. R. Gardiner, *History of England, from the Accession of James I*, London 1886 (10 vols.); *History of the Great Civil War (1642-1649)*, 1893 (4 vols.); *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate (1649-1660)*, 1894 (4 vols.; interrupted at 1656 and continued by C. H. Firth). See also Gardiner’s *Cromwell’s Place in History*, 1897, and his *Oliver Cromwell*, 1899. The last book became one of the Oxford Classics. Gardiner’s new image of Cromwell was instrumental in persuading the political world to erect a bronze statue of Oliver the regicide just under the Houses of Parliament.

⁴ See also his article “The English Common Law, Barrier against Absolutism”, *American Historical Review*, XIX (1943-44) n. 1.

science and progress rather than by religious enthusiasm (Hume's word), this was a quite convenient way to remove — to marginalize — conflict and violence in Victorian society. Puritanism, therefore, kept coming in and out of history as required. From 19th Century books (or from Trevelyan's, for that matter, still popular as reading matter in Italian universities) we learn for example, that Elizabeth in her last years severely quenched the Puritan movement, especially after Essex's rebellion (1598-1600). How was it, then, that less than five years later James I had to face a very strong Puritan movement, expressing itself in the Millenarian Petition of 1603? From similar textbooks we learn that the civil war broke out for political reasons, but all the blood shedding, the regicide and the republican experiment are imputed to religious enthusiasm.

Such then was the orthodoxy, before Tawney, on both sides of the Ocean. I have painted it at a certain length, but that was necessary to understand how radically new Tawney's contribution was. Instead of four separate reigns, he delineated a single social process giving an overall sense to the period from the Reformation to the Revolution. The central point of the process he found in the changing social role of the land. The land — for centuries the pivot of society, invested by a whole set of divine meanings and symbols — was gradually transformed into a commodity, an economic factor, something that could be bought and sold. This process did have a leading character, a social subject that could be clearly identified: a new human type, prepared to work for profit, and to dissolve all previous ethical and religious bonds. This new type of man was not the Puritan, the Calvinist whom Max Weber believed frenetically active. The new bourgeois had no religion, or at most he was of the religion of his king. Calvinism had been working, rather, against its own aims, unwillingly leading to a general dissolution of religious bonds.

This, of course, was already in the pages of Marx's *Capital*, and was going to be picked up by Karl Polanyi (it is interesting to recall that the exiled Polanyi worked for a period as a teacher for the WEA, and wrote *The Great Transformation* in circumstances not very different from those of Tawney's own first book). But the main thing about Tawney is that he did not simply formulate ideas, he told stories out of a huge collection of documentary data. In other words, he did a historian's work. It is peculiar of his style that he rarely aimed to establish cause-effect relations. He was at his best, rather, when he described a complex, many-sided process, in which several phenomena were at the same time both cause and effect: the dissolution of religious bonds, religious enthusiasm, a crisis of the aristocracy, the rise of lesser gentry, the rise of a commercial bourgeoisie, new agricultural techniques, the growth of new markets, a different view of

nature, and last but not least, a need for cultural individualism and for a lay culture.

Tawney was lucky in that, notwithstanding the war, and his old age, he was able to publish, between 1941 and 1953, part of the enormous amount of his research in three articles that gave a place to the controversy over the Gentry.⁵ This is well known, and is still giving rise to new spells of discussion.⁶

To conclude. Is Tawney's history still usable? He is certainly a model for a *responsible* historian. There is a marked ethical drive in his work, that is now outmoded, and has even been the object of easy satire in the eighties.⁷ However, the lasting value of his historical research, in my view, is not simply to be found in his ethical concern, but in the richness and exactness of his research into archives, and also in a somewhat artistic quality, in his ability to recreate the past. It is almost a truism to say that without ethical tension he would not have developed his creativity: the Academy of Sciences, East and West, have been, and are, full of zealots who have no creativity to show.

After much thinking, I must probably resign myself accepting a plain conclusion, almost a commonplace. The philosopher Berkeley wrote, in his *On Patriotism*, «a knave is a thorough knave; and a thorough knave is a knave throughout». So we might say that an honest and unselfish individual is always honest and unselfish, even when he or she handles the instruments of his or her calling.

⁵ "The Rise of the Gentry", *Economic History Review*, XI (1941). The main texts of the controversy are: H.R. Trevor Roper, "The Elizabethan Aristocracy: An Anatomy Anatomized", *Economic History Review* 2nd s., III (1951); Lawrence Stone, "The Elizabethan Aristocracy: A Restatement", *ibid.*, IV (1952); H.R. Trevor Roper, *The Gentry*, "Supplement" to *Economic History Review* for 1953; and the final word by Tawney, "The Gentry: A Poscript", *ibid.*, 2nd s., VII (1954).

⁶ The theme was picked up by Perez Zagorin, Eric Kerridge, and indeed by almost every 17th Century specialist. A ten-years summary in G.E. Mingay, *The Gentry. The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class*, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

⁷ See for instance John Kenyon, *The History Men*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983, p. 235-49.