

**POLITICAL THOUGHT IN
ENGLAND FROM
HERBERT SPENCER
TO THE PRESENT DAY**

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Political thought in England from Herbert Spencer to the present day by Ernest Barker

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FROM HERBERT SPENCER TO THE
PRESENT DAY

BY
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POLITICAL THOUGHT IN ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE year 1848 was the *annus mirabilis* of the nineteenth century. A whole continent was in travail with new nationalities and new constitutions. If in England the days of that eventful year ran more quietly, they were nevertheless stirring. There were no "national workshops" in London, and English workmen claimed no "right to work"; but at any rate Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* appeared, and the prophet of individualism was found to be drawing a distinction between the laws of production and the laws of distribution, which opened the gates for the entry of Socialism. The Chartist movement came to an abortive end; but the Christian Socialists attempted to found a co-operative movement, and in 1849 Kingsley published *Alton Locke*. A new school appeared in English art. While Thackeray was finishing *Vanity Fair*, and Macaulay was publishing the first two volumes of his *History of England*, a brotherhood was being formed by Holman Hunt, Rossetti and Millais, and the Pre-Raphaelite movement was being born. Ten years later, in 1858, the doctrine of

Natural Selection was enunciated; and a new and powerful leaven was added to the fermentation of ideas already at work in the general mind.

Men began to feel the need of a more scientific explanation of the facts, and a more scientific attempt to cure the defects, of social life. Two revolutions had passed over the world in the last few decades—the political revolution which had started in France in 1789, and the industrial revolution which had begun in England about 1760. The fruits of the one had still to be garnered: the unforeseen results of the other had still to be faced. On the one hand, the political demands of the Chartists had to be met with some reasonable answer; and statesmen had to determine how far, and by what means, the French doctrine of the sovereignty of *volonté générale* should be incorporated into the parliamentary system and electoral machinery of England. On the other hand, sterner and more exacting, there loomed the massive problem of the “condition of England.” With the eye of genius Disraeli had already seized and stated the problem in *Sybil*; with the sympathy of a philanthropist Shaftesbury had already begun to attempt some solution. A new force, partly a complication of the problem, partly, and indeed mainly, a help and a way of solution, had appeared in the Trade Unions, which had now, for some twenty years or more, been freed by the efforts of Francis Place from the shackles of the Combination Laws. Meanwhile the English Church, under the stimulus of the

Oxford Movement, had awakened since 1833 to a new sense of its own corporate life; and devoted churchmen, conscious of the duty of their Society to its members, were turning to those social activities which have ever since marked the work of the High Church party in England.

The accepted creed, which had to face these new problems and tendencies, was a creed proceeding from Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham. Formed at a time when the "policy of Europe" still choked the channels of trade, and feudal survivals still encumbered the laws and filled with "sinister interests" the governments of Europe, that creed had been a corrosive solvent of everything that clogged the free play of individual activity. But times were changed, and the creed was also changed with the times. It had condemned governmental interference in the name alike of economic and political liberty; it continued to condemn governmental interference, when such condemnation could only serve the cause of social oppression. Liberty for the manufacturer and the seller was not necessarily liberty for the worker: it was indeed only too often the very reverse; and a modification of the old philosophy of human action, if not an entirely new philosophy, was an urgent necessity, if social progress was not to be checked by a social creed. A modification, partly conscious and partly unconscious, appeared in the writings of John Stuart Mill, one of the finest minds and most generous natures of the nineteenth century. In the *Essay On Liberty* he gave a deeper and more spiritual

interpretation to the conception of liberty. From a conception of liberty as external freedom of action, necessary for the discovery and pursuit of his material interest by each individual, Mill rose to the conception of liberty as free play for that spiritual originality, with all its results in "individual vigour and manifold diversity," which alone can constitute a rich, balanced and developed society. In a similar way, in the *Essay On Representative Government*, he spiritualised the Benthamite defence of democracy. Instead of regarding popular self-government as freedom for the people to pursue its own self-interest at the expense of the "sinister interests" of classes and sections, he conceived representative institutions as the necessary condition of that individual energy of mind and character which must be developed all round and in all things, and can only be so developed if the area of individual thought and will is extended to embrace the affairs of the whole community. His philosophy found room for Trade Unions, a form of voluntary association which gave scope for liberty; it even admitted the possibility of social regulation of the laws of distribution. Yet when all these allowances are made, it still remains true that Mill was the prophet of an empty liberty and an abstract individual. He had no clear philosophy of rights, through which alone the conception of liberty attains a concrete meaning; he had no clear idea of that social whole in whose realisation the false antithesis of "state" and "individual" disappears.

Not a modification of the old Benthamite