

## Social Opulence and Private Restraint: the Consumer in British Socialist Thought Since 1800

**Review Number:** 1919

**Publish date:** Thursday, 14 April, 2016

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**ISBN:** 9780199646012

**Date of Publication:** 2015

**Price:** £60.00

**Pages:** 256pp.

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/social-opulence-and-private-restraint-9780199646012?cc=gb&lang=en&>

**Place of Publication:** Oxford

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Contemporary punditocracy suggests that the Left has never grasped the joy of shopping, its late 20th-century political katabasis being no clearer indication. Captured by clunky notions of producer interest such as collective bargaining and full employment, the institutions of organised labour were swatted aside in the 1980s by the forces of the resurgent Right with their grasp of workers' wants and needs. It was immaterial whether these wants or needs met pietest tests of the common good: people wanted stuff, and the easy credit and open markets that enabled this accumulatory libido. Those on the political Left were fooling themselves if they did not acknowledge this truism; indeed, were doing themselves no favours if they crassly condemned the behaviour of the very constituency they were supposed to embody. It was only with the New Labour project, that the Left got, to quote Alan Milburn, that "[w]e live in a consumer age" (p. 152).

In Noel Thompson's *Social Opulence and Private Restraint: The Consumer in British Socialist Thought Since 1800*, his survey of the Left's attitude to the worker-consumer in the heyday and beyond of British industrial society, high-minded ethical leftism is ever-present. For example, the Webbs and the Fabians prioritised 'higher order ends' (p. 53) over unenlightened consumption of shoddily made, mass-produced bounty. R. H. Tawney in *The Acquisitive Society* spurned material enrichment at any cost (p. 80). In Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* (not *Chestnut Soup* as mistitled here), the protagonist Sarah Khan, reflecting on the post-war era of we've never had it so good, bitterly opines '[y]ou give them a few shillings in the bank and they buy a television, so they think it's all over' (p. 105). 'Commentators', Thompson writes, referring to the same era, 'have also remarked on a Left reaction to affluence which saw it as engendering lifestyles which were inimical to political activism and commitment' (p. 109). And, as Thompson has it, 'a socialist tradition critical of consumerism has been sustained into the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries ... it has had as its core a conception of the good society predicated on material sufficiency rather than material abundance' (p. 192). Neal Lawson's *All Consuming* might serve as more contemporaneous example of this.

In debating the proletariat's turns towards cheap reproductions of bourgeois households, brash marketing and the package holiday, socialists in Thompson's survey have not fundamentally negated the consumer

inasmuch as they have recognised that the working-class consumer, if not necessarily a paragon, was a profound feature of British capitalism. In Thompson's mapping of 200 years of British socialist comment, the role of consumers was not merely ignored. Socialists of earlier vintages hardly lost sight of the customer in some unrelenting, myopic consideration of the worker at work. The significance of the cooperative movement testifies to that. Moreover, for many British socialists, it has not been a question of being for or against the consumer. In reference to former Labour Cabinet Minister Anthony Crosland's statist conception of consumer choice, Thompson notes 'the issue of the Left's position on consumer rationality is a more complex and nuanced one than can be articulated in terms of such a crude puritan/liberal dichotomy' (p. 111).

*Social Opulence and Private Restraint*, though, in its presentation and emphases, does generally buttress the popular version, the myth if you will, of socialist prejudices regarding consumerist tendencies. The book comprises a number of pen portraits and allusions to that effect. Going back to the origins of British socialism one has the lofty convictions and preachy tenor of Robert Owen's adherents and their advocacy of model communities. In the 1960s, well after the Webbs, Fabians still held 'that consumers were all too often "ignorant about things they use or want"' (quoted p. 114); for these high-minded theoreticians, workers were seen as "materialist, self-interested, philistine, television addicts, corrupted by prosperity" (E. P. Thompson quoted p. 120). Today, the leftist Green movement stands as a traditional paternalist voice of no to modernity's direction of travel, 'a general plea and predilection for restraint' (p. 194) in the British mixed economy.

I say *myth* not because I wish to impute that Thompson, in an act of dereliction, fails to falsify a catalogue of mistruth. I say *myth* because *Social Opulence and Private Restraint* presents such a familiar framing of British socialism and such a familiar archetype of the non-revolutionary socialist, committed to a suitable balancing act within the confines of the mixed economy. A different analytical, radical socialist critique is dealt with in a quite underwhelming manner, for example the New Left's understanding of the consumer within a certain set of socialising relations. The axis of puritan/liberal, the extent to which the consumer is awarded their freedom in socialism when confronted with affluence, is the key social democratic concern here. The production of the consumer, the creation of the worker-consumer subject, is not particularly prominent.

It may be argued that *Social Opulence and Private Restraint* is a history of British socialist commentary on capitalism, not an analysis of the reproduction of the worker-consumer from a motivated leftist position. But, even writing as a non-expert in the history of British socialist political economy, I would be surprised if the profoundly political economic aspect of Left thought, a deep take on the constitution of the economy and its bearers, is not somewhere represented in the British Left experience – one thinks of David Harvey. In this vein, the New Left and post-Fordists such as Stuart Hall perceived how the consumer was being fashioned and utilised in certain hegemonic politico-economic projects, appreciating, in a way which the hard left could not, that one should not cast aside people's 'dreams, fantasies, social pretensions' (p. 196). To his credit, Thompson acknowledges that figures such as Hall were no fans of individualistic, rightist notions of the hero consumer. Hall was well aware that '[c]onsumers were locked into a pattern of existence' (p. 127). Overall, though, *Social Opulence and Private Restraint* is weighted towards a gamut of socialist thinkers that either got the liberating values of consumerism or were more Roundhead, less Cavalier and struggled to get Crosland's common sense dictum that "[s]urprisingly enough ... ordinary people like to be materially well off" (quoted p. 134).

In *Social Opulence and Private Restraint*, Thompson limits himself to several epochs in Britain's modern history: the expanding consumables markets of the early 19th century; '[t]he birth of modern British socialism' (p. 5) in this last two decades of that century; the 1920s and 1930s period of boom and bust, and the contributions of Tawney and G.D.H. Cole; Britain's *Wirtschaftswunder* after the Second World War and before 1970s stagflation; the years of socialist revisionism in response to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, leading to the Blair ascendancy and New Labour's embrace of the 'citizen consumer' (p. 156); and, finally, a consideration of modern trends such as ecosocialism, happiness indices and the sociology of

identity.

What unites these epochs is what Thompson calls a 'leitmotiv' of British socialist thought; namely, there has been on the part of socialist theorists a general unease 'with the desire for, and prioritization of material things' (p. 40). Easily caricatured as 'a Spartan civic republicanism' – no doubt fuelled in our collective imagination by Anglocentric stereotypes of orderly, austere shop keepers vis-à-vis romantic continental radicalism – British socialism has maintained 'a belief that human fulfilment, the good life and the good society, could be jeopardized by, and must certainly transcend, the relentless acquisition of things' and yet understood 'a generalized abundance could manifestly deliver in ending the degradation and dehumanization of material impoverishment' (pp. 40–1). Socialists have had to wrestle with their natural inclination to see a large body of workers enriched enough for them to move beyond subsistence as a victory for redistributive policy, and to question the ameliorative benefit of money and cheap goods when collective untrammelled spending equals the fuelling of capitalism's fundamental malappropriation.

This classic dilemma, a greater share of the fruits of the capitalist mode of production versus the transcendence of the mode, was complemented by British socialism's base religiosity, palpable in the first two-thirds of Thompson's 200 years. Was socialist theory the basic meeting of needs (that admittedly grew in scope the better the economy became in satisfying those needs), or was it a rationalising morality, that saw in the more, the surplus over and above providing homes, food, warmth, hospitals and schools, a creep in sinful practices? After all, no sooner had one reckoned with the latest faddish more, than a new untested more, an answer to a hitherto unrealised un-satisfaction, was in circulation, providing temptation.

In the early 19th century, as Brits developed the taste for tea and sugar, Britain 'entered a new age of abundance' (p. 15). Present were the means, if put to the right ends, towards greater individual appropriation and the alleviation of the poor's lot, that could assuage poverty. Thompson stresses that this instinctive pro-poor response to the upswing in resources was not wholly welcomed by early socialists, particularly in the case of Owenite utopians. Wanting a bigger share of the pie, a larger proportion of what were after all ill-gotten gains, risked replicating the crude avariciousness of the owning class. The Scot Alexander Hamilton wrote in his *Owenism Rendered Consistent with our Civil and Religious Institutions* (1825) of the dangers of "launch[ing] the undereducated artizan into ease and affluence all at one". This should be tempered by "discipline" and "real and general information of men and things" (quoted p. 30). In 1841 in *A Prospectus for the Establishment of a Concordium* it was noted that "the inmates [of the Concordium] should on all occasions endeavour assiduously to reduce the number of the[ir] adventitious wants. Their drink will be water" (quoted p. 33).

As the economy expanded as the 19th century drew to a close, adventitious wants became 'degenerate desires' (p. 47). Modern Socialism could not be content with the battle for higher wages and lower working hours. It had to be aspirational in the right ways. For the trailblazing voice of new unionism in Parliament John Burns, one needed to want the right things (p. 47). Leisure, for instance, time in and of itself, was nothing if put to feckless ends. The same applied to victuals. For Blatchford of *The Clarion* "... we should be as temperate and as simple as possible in our use of mere bodily necessities, so that we may have as much time as possible to enjoy pleasures of a higher, purer, more delightful kind" (quoted p. 54).

'[A] measure of private restraint' (p. 67) was part of socialist doctrine even as British living standards rose further, and the regulation of production and exchange became a fixture of national 20th-century politics. Allied to the awareness that the consequentialism of a pig satisfied should not be *de facto* the religion of the mass working class was the awareness that it was in the interest of the capitalist order to broaden the ways in which workers were indebted to the system. Advertising, for instance, generated an allegiance to positional goods (p. 78). As Fordist production methods became more refined and workers became even more appendages to their machines, any capability of consumers as producers to influence production directly, to steer it towards their wants, naturally diminished. Masters of production determined what was 'freely' available, as observed by Barbara Wootten in her 1934 *Plan or no Plan*. If workers truly were masters of their own consumable destiny then they could determine what they required (p. 82–3). Thompson points out

one exception to the scepticism shown towards appropriating abundant produce, the liberally-minded socialist J. A. Hobson, who would remain ‘unmatched in British socialist writing’ with regard to his pro-consumerist views until Hall *et al.* (p. 88). Hobson too though saw socialist planning as generating a correspondence between demand and supply on a far more rational basis than heretofore (p. 92).

In the golden age of Butskellism, Crosland’s contribution is writ large by Thompson. It was Crosland’s revisionism, in the context of historic levels of public expenditure and individual mobility, which eruditely challenged his tradition’s antipathy towards consumerist inclinations: ‘[t]he relatively affluent working-class consumer should therefore be regarded as a more liberated entity than his impoverished historical counterpart’ (p. 119). Contra the puritanical socialist, Crosland saw that the Left had to change attitudinally. And it was with a ‘particular historical moment in the late 1980s and 1990s’ (p. 141) that this shift occurred. As everything about the post-war consensus entered into flux, the slow death of manufacturing and diminishing class solidarity providing key drivers thereof, the liberals of the Left began to secure ideological ground, culminating with New Labour. British socialism’s refusal to take the worker-consumer seriously, as an actuality, was to be accepted as a proposition on the part of with-it members of the Left, thus concurring with rightist decriers of left-wing anachronism. ‘Post-Fordist socialism therefore bid fair to recapture the consumer from the clutches of the New Right’ (p. 147). It was up to New Labour, in order to reclaim aspirational Mondeo Man and Worcester Woman and to further the core socialist belief in the social, to try and add discursive qualification to consumer, like the term ‘*citizen* consumer’. This impressed that alongside one’s subjective hankerings, there were objective ‘*responsibilities*’; although, as Thompson makes clear, ‘in the rhetoric and practice of New Labour, it was the noun rather than the qualifying adjective which was prioritized’ (p. 156).

In more recent decades according to Thompson, there has been somewhat of a shift back towards the perils of consumerism position, the Left’s adjustment to a pro-consumerist bent questioned from decidedly non-authoritarian ‘liberal’ standpoints. Writers such as Zygmunt Bauman have reflected ‘the Frankfurt School notion’ (p. 168) that consumerism entrenches economic dependence and social hierarchies. Furthermore, ecosocialist trends have tried to disabuse British society of the more is good tenet of ‘an essentially Promethean vision of human progress ... a realization of socialist ideas predicated on the material abundance made possible by a rapid and efficient expansion of output’ (p. 179). Green political economy now replicates the key socialist concern with valuation outside conventional capitalist costing mechanisms.

Over the course of *Social Opulence and Private Restraint*, Thompson essentially makes a continuity thesis. He does not contend that British socialist thinkers have been inclined to monotonously chastise, as the crudest New Labour advocate may insinuate, the base human desire for a better life; his is not a polemic against or in favour of a tired cliché. Rather, Thompson shows a British socialist history that is, to a large extent, repetitious in its concern, albeit with individual thinkers that have been conditioned by different economic circumstances and impulses. Thus Thompson can claim ‘the eighteenth-century debates over the impact of commerce, luxury and acquisitiveness on civic virtue have been sustained into the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries’ (p. 169). ‘[F]rom the Ham Common Concordists through to the Fabians and [Richard] Crossman, asceticism or restraint have periodically surfaced in socialist political economy’ (p. 184). From this work, one has the constant impression of a British socialist theorist inclined, since their High Victorian coming-forth on the public stage, to be deeply troubled by the all-too simple metric of rising living standards. ‘Thus’, Thompson observes at one point, ‘there have always been theorists and politicians on the Left, who, if by no means ascetics, have nonetheless leaned in the direction of austerity’ (p. 184).

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