

Gladstone, Marx and Modern Progressives

Andrew Adonis examines the relationship between Karl Marx and William Ewart Gladstone, between revolutionary Marxism and reformist Gladstonian Liberalism.

Karl Marx's funeral at Highgate in March 1883 was attended by Engels and some ten others. Fourteen years later William Ewart Gladstone, Queen Victoria's longest serving Liberal prime minister, lay in state for four days in Westminster Hall so that vast crowds could pay their respects. Yet, claimed EH Carr in his 1934 biography of Marx, the future lay in Highgate. "Marx could see - as hardly anyone else of his time could see - that not only Metternich and Bismarck, but Bright and Gladstone, belonged to an outworn epoch ... Marx proclaimed the coming of the new age. He knew that its leaders and heroes would be men of another mould, of other traditions and of other methods."

Now that Marx has joined the outworn epoch, new age liberals in search of traditions and methods for guidance might do well to exhume Gladstone, the pre-eminent liberal leader in modern British politics. Marx himself would not have been surprised by the quest, for he never regarded Gladstone as yesterday's man. On the contrary, from his arrival in England in 1849 - when Gladstone was a leading Peelite in transition from the Tories to the evolving Liberal coalition - until his death 34 years later, during Gladstone's second government, the German socialist was obsessed by the character and methods of Britain's political colossus. Gladstone features on 307 pages of the Lawrence & Wishart edition of the Marx/Engels collected works, mostly in Marx's letters and journalism.. Even in illness, the Liberal leader was a preoccupation. "He is still very, very unwell," Jenny Marx told Engels when Karl was laid up in May 1854. "There can be no question of writing. He labours over Gladstone's long speeches and is very annoyed at not being able to write just now when he's got enough material on Mr Gladstone and his SCHEMES."

Gladstone is not short of biographers. Another two studies join the shelf this year, one by Roy Jenkins, the other by Colin Matthew, whose edition of the Gladstone diaries was recently completed at 14 volumes. Yet the essence of the Gladstonian method needs to be distilled from the mass of a political life spanning 65 years, nearly 30 of them spent in government. An illuminating - but curiously neglected - perspective is to be gained by examining the Gladstone/Marx relationship over its three decades, setting the revolutionary and the liberal reformer in apposition.

Gladstone and Marx shared a parallel parentage, education, and approach. The Liverpool merchant was far richer than the Trier lawyer, yet their offspring were both sons of the early 19th century's rising bourgeoisie. Both were classical scholars with a journalistic bent and a political mission; both were intellectuals in politics, concerned to establish the first principles of collective action; both radicalised with age, roused to passion by injustice, alienation, and imperialism - with plenty of "honest idiocy of flight" in both cases. But for the

suppression of his *Rheinische Zeitung* (1843), and the reactionary governance it symbolised, Marx might never have ended up a Marxist. For his part, although ignorant of Hegel's dialectic, Gladstone held an optimistic conception of political progress leading to freedom, and was remarkably dialectical in method. Marx once compared his method with Gladstone's:

I am a machine, condemned to devour them books and, then, throw them, in changed form, on the dunghill of history. A rather dreary task, too, but still better than that of Gladstone's, who is obliged, at a day's notice, to work himself into 'states of mind', yclept 'earnestness.'

In reality, Marx was far more akin to Gladstone than he cared to admit. Gladstone's great departures invariably followed the relentless amassing of facts, books, opinions, and a subtle perception of the balancing action needed to right the status quo towards an attainable liberal mean. Marx noted in *Kapital* that the investigation of social and economic statistics, critical to his work, was a prime British trait not followed on the Continent. It was a Gladstonian trait *par excellence*.

Gladstone's view of Marx can be stated simply. He had none - at least, none is recorded. The index to the 21,000 books and pamphlets noted in Gladstone's diary, which covers a remarkable range of political and historical literature, contains no entry for Marx. Gladstone's German reading consisted mainly of theology and the classics. *Das Kapital* appeared in English only a few years before his death: although based largely on British sources, it attracted minimal notice in Britain. An 1881 article in the *Contemporary Review* noted the "curious and not unmeaning circumstance" that for all their impact on the Continent "the writings of Marx are hardly better known in this country than those of Confucius."

The *Contemporary Review* believed the explanation for this ignorance to be "obvious". Marxism was rooted in the "long Continental struggle for political emancipation." In Britain, by contrast, "the course of politics has long run very smooth; none of the questions of the day have forced the fundamental principles of the existing system into popular debate ... and the working classes are preoccupied with the development of trade unions." Marxism could only flourish "either by the injudicious obstinacy of those in power, or by the direct teaching of influential thinkers." Gladstone was insufficiently obstinate for the purpose: he even refused to ban the socialists. When in 1871 the German ambassador asked Downing Street to follow Continental governments and denounce the First International, foreign secretary Granville, in a letter seen by Gladstone, firmly declined. "It is thought that here, at least, the best mode of meeting any danger which may be feared from the proceedings of the association is to encourage their publicity," he responded.

Gladstone's ignorance of Marx flowed - ironically - from his acute sensitivity to the causes of social strife and his relentless struggle to address them by liberal methods. To Gladstone, the only means to achieve social peace and communal growth was government commanding wide consent, deeply rooted in its local and national society. His entire career, from darling of the "stern unbending" Tories in the 1830s to *bête noire* of the aristocratic Establishment in the 1880s and '90s, was a struggle to reconcile first himself, and then the political class, to the incremental reforms necessary to promote class harmony, broadly based economic growth, and self-government in its widest conception. Like Tocqueville, whom he had read, Gladstone founded liberal principles of toleration, inclusion, compassion and duty on the Gospels: unlike the French liberal, he wore his faith on his sleeve, infuriating Marx ("pietistic casuistry" is a recurring phrase) and Disraeli in equal measure.

Yet for the mature Gladstone, faith dictated principles not policies. When it came to public policy, he retained into old age an extraordinary suppleness of mind and action, a flexibility exhibited not so much in pragmatism, an art at which he did not always excel, but rather in his conception of ripeness - the notion that in applying principles, reform should be incremental and attempted only when circumstances and public opinion are sufficiently ripe for it to secure general acceptance. Ripeness is readily enough the cry of the weak-willed and nakedly populist. But not for Gladstone, who never doubted that the politician's duty was to aid the ripening process; and who never supposed that the implementation of reform would be uncontroversial, however ripe the time.

Marx's own observation of Gladstone bears this out. It takes the form practically of a dialogue between the two men, in which the liberal politician responds to the revolutionary polemicist in terms of action.

In his letters and journalism, four themes run through Marx's diatribes on Gladstone: the poor, foreign policy, Ireland, and the futility of parliamentary politics. It was, of course, central to Marx's economics that England's working classes were exploited and getting poorer, and to Marx's politics that Gladstonian liberals were their chief persecutors. As he wrote in 1878, the collapse of Chartism in the late 1840s inaugurated

a long "period of corruption" during which the workers "finally reached the stage of being no more than an appendage of the great Liberal Party - ie of its oppressors, the capitalists".

In his inaugural address to the First International (1864), Marx seized on Gladstone's 1863 budget speech for the purpose. Gladstone had lauded the 20 per cent rise in Britain's taxable income between 1853 and 1861 as an "intoxicating augmentation of wealth and power". But, Marx alleged, he went on to note that this augmentation was "entirely confined to the classes of property." When repeated in *Kapital*, these last words were furiously denied by Gladstonians, who cited their non-appearance in *Hansard*.

The riddle of the missing words says much about the Gladstonian method. The report of the budget speech in *The Times* unambiguously supports Marx, although the key sentence needs to be read with the ensuing remarks on the labouring masses:

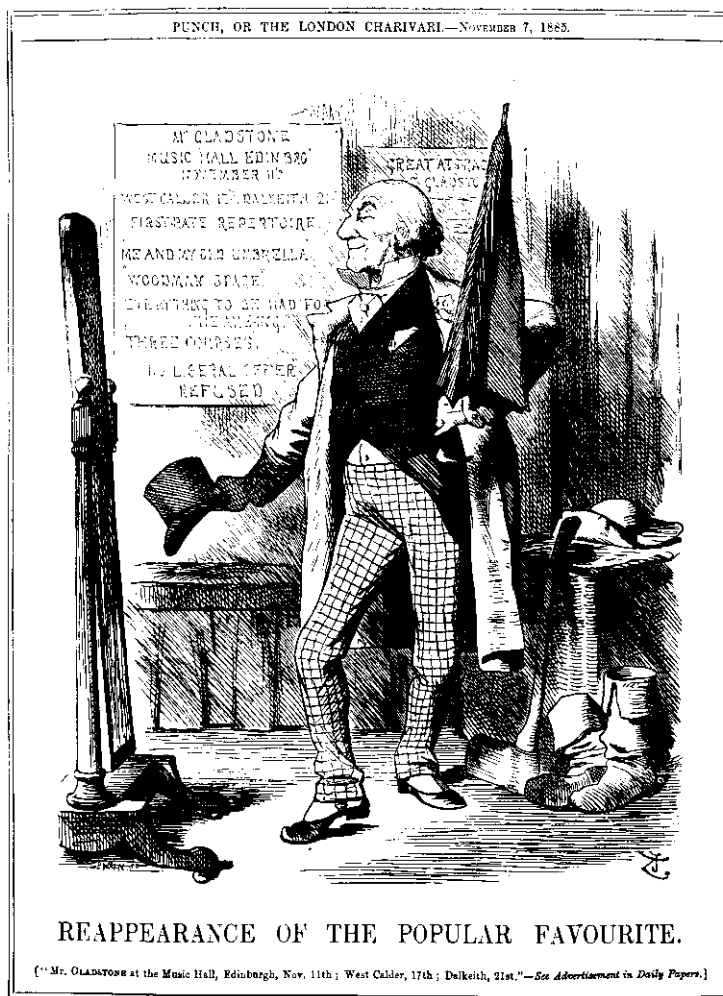
The augmentation I have described, and which is founded, I think, upon accurate returns, is an augmentation entirely confined to the classes possessed of property. Now, the augmentation of capital is of indirect benefit to the labourer, because it cheapens the commodity which in the business of production comes into direct conflict with labour.

In the *Hansard* report of the speech, the first sentence is radically recast to omit the crude reference to the "classes possessed of property" and to extend property to the labourers, while the second sentence

is reworded to magnify the "indirect benefit" to the poor of the rich getting richer:

The figures I have quoted take little or no cognizance of the condition of those who do not pay income tax; or in other words, significantly accurate for general truth, they do not take cognizance of the property of the labouring population, or the increase of its income. Indirectly, indeed, the mere augmentation of capital is of the utmost advantage to the labouring class, because that augmentation cheapens the commodity which in the whole business of production comes into direct competition with labour.

The Times' report is a verbatim transcript, whereas speeches were 'corrected' by MPs before their appearance in *Hansard*. It is clear enough that Gladstone rewrote the passage to remove



the implication that the labouring masses, unpropertied, had gained only a few crumbs from a boom for the rich. The time was not ripe for such an admission.

However, Gladstone did not delude himself as to the scale of distress in industrial Britain and the need for an effective response. His response was two-pronged. The first involved modest reforms - such as extending the use of the new Post Office Savings Banks to trade unions - to make the free trade and minimal government regime, which he believed to be fundamentally sound, more immediately palatable to the working classes. (His confidence was to be supported by the return of growth in the late 1860s.) The second, and more important, was a rhetorical offensive aimed at redefining the notion of political community so as to include most of the male unenfranchised, deploying an elevated picture of the fortitude of industrial workers during the cotton famine of the American civil war years to justify their admission within the "*pale of the constitution*". The result was the 1866 Reform Bill to extend the franchise in urban districts, including the typically Gladstonian flourish of a vote to holders of savings accounts of £50 for two years. Limited to the towns, the 1866-67 reform settlement ultimately enacted by Disraeli in a stroke of brilliant opportunism was inherently unstable, and the great work of Gladstone's second government was to extend the vote to rural workers, after a rhetorical offensive reminiscent of the early 1860s.

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Gladstone's economic strategy exhibited the two characteristic strands noted above: an incremental policy backed by a rhetorical offensive of far more ambitious dimensions. The rhetoric was a prolonged course of public education in the virtues of personal and governmental thrift and fiscal responsibility; the policy consisted of assiduous budgetary fine tuning to reduce borrowing, improve efficiency and achieve a fairer balance between direct taxation and the indirect taxes bearing hard on the middling and lower-income classes.

Marx despised and avoided public debate, and was scathing of Gladstone the "*financial alchemist*". "*There exists, perhaps, in general, no greater humbug than the so-called finance*", he snapped after Gladstone's sweeping 1853 Budget. "*The public understanding is quite bamboozled by these detestable stock-jobbing scholastics and the frightful complexity in details.*" Yet the alchemy and scholastics delivered political and economic 'material' on an enviable scale. Governments were perceived as holding the ring honestly between competing interests; confidence in executive competence remained high; while for the public at large, politics was sport between competing idols Gladstonian memorabilia still haunts the antique shops and not warfare between class enemies. Instead of stoking anti-regime riots and passing anti-socialist laws, ministers and union leaders in general bargained with mutual respect, seeking to reach accommodations and to maximise their autonomy vis-à-vis their less disciplined followers. There was no shortage of industrial disputes, but as Marx put it of Britain in 1879: "*strikes take place which, victorious or otherwise, do not advance the movement by one single step.*" Up-and-coming late-Victorian working class leaders spent their leisure in such activities as

imitating the speechifying Gladstone in 'mini-Parliaments' across the land. Parliament and the party system possessed an ideological strength which steadily increased throughout the 19th century. As Ross McKibbin puts it: "*The demand for the vote, the emphasis on the instrumentality of enfranchisement, made it difficult to conceive of any other form of political action as legitimate, or indeed, of any other form of political action.*" Marx told the First International that "*the great duty of the working classes*" was "*to conquer political power*". In Britain Gladstone was their chief ally in the conquest, and in the process he earned their conditional trust for an institutional and ideological framework which disabled them from transforming numerical dominance into executive arrogance, let alone class dictatorship.

In international affairs Gladstone, like Marx, recognised that harmony required justice and consensus on norms, not just a 'balance of power' or a superpower policeman. In the succession of crises he confronted over the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, Gladstone evolved notions of collective security and the 'Concert of Europe' which, as Henry Kissinger recognises in his recent *Diplomacy*, laid the foundations in statecraft for Woodrow Wilson's subsequent efforts to reconcile national autonomy with peaceful co-existence. Gladstone's thinking evolved through heated experience. In his 1851 campaign against the brutalities of the Neapolitan government, he appealed to the conscience of the Bourbon regime and spoke as a Tory "*compelled to remember that that party stands in virtual and real, though perhaps unconscious, alliance*" with established governments. By 1876, he was appealing to the conscience of the British masses to uphold the rights of Bulgarians to revolt against oppression, urging the eviction of their Turkish rulers "*bag and baggage*". As one historian remarks, by the mid-1860s Gladstone's "*mature European sense*" had "*fused with his new democratic sympathies. They formed a highly combustible compound*" - one much apparent in the ambiguous western response to today's Balkan atrocities.

It is in relation to the Irish question that the Marx-Gladstone dialogue is most striking. For Marx, exploitation of the nationalist and economic grievances of the Irish was the key to - indeed the only likely cause of - an early social revolution in Britain. "*After studying the Irish question for years,*" he wrote in April 1870, "*I have come to the conclusion that the decisive blow against the ruling classes in England ... cannot be struck in England but only in Ireland.*" Gladstone concurred. Hence his preoccupation with Irish policy, which grew with each passing year after the mid-1860s until by 1887 he was confessing to his diary: "*Now one prayer absorbs all others: Ireland, Ireland, Ireland.*"

In 1868 Marx saw controversy over the future of the established Anglican Church of Ireland as the likely ignition for social upheaval, because of its status as "*the outpost of the Established Church in England ... as a landowner.*" So did Gladstone. After his election victory later in the year, he promptly disestablished the Church of Ireland, in the teeth of bitter Church and landowner resistance in England. Next came the agricultural land question. Gladstone's 1870 Land Bill, with its tentative safeguards for tenants, did little to contain the Land War. But Marx lighted on the real problem, writing to Engels when the bill was before the Commons:

The best bit of Gladstone's speech is the long introduction, where he states that even the 'BENEFICENT' laws of the English always have the opposite effect in practice. What better proof does the fellow want that England is not fit to be lawgiver and administrator of Ireland!

On this premise, Marx urged that England's working class "not only make common cause with the Irish, but even take the initiative in dissolving the Union ... substituting a free federal relationship for it." Gladstone proposed just such a "free federal relationship" three years after Marx's death, believing the time ripe for admission that "England is not fit to be lawgiver and administrator of Ireland." Immersed in the literature of federalism and Irish nationalism, he saw the rise of a conservative Nationalist elite under Parnell, and the failure over decades of disestablishment and successive coercion and land acts to quell Irish discontent, as evidence that Home Rule was both prudent and necessary. In the event, lamentable party management - particularly the maladroit handling of Chamberlain - defeated his first Home Rule bid (1886), and his second was wrecked beforehand by the Parnell affair; but it is hard to fault Gladstone's judgement on other than narrow tactical grounds.

What separated Gladstone and Marx was the notion of class struggle and experience of working political institutions. An "out and out inequalitarian," Gladstone nonetheless worked himself into his most "yclept earnestness" in denouncing national and international oppression, not least (as the Whigs deserted him) the 'upper ten thousand' at home. Indeed, he

shared with Marx a conception of class division and evolution which was altogether too static and coloured by recent history - witness his romantic attachment to the Whig aristocracy and his curious inability to grasp the social potential of state-provided education. Yet the notion of endemic conflict, between classes or nations, aroused his profound repugnance. In part this reflected a Christian view of conciliation and the 'bonds of mutual sympathy' transcending classes and nations. Equally important was his faith in the power of sound institutions and well-trained politicians to yield a government sufficiently class neutral to promote the interests of all classes. Contemptuous of parliamentary politics, Marx was supremely unconcerned about institutional design. By contrast, Gladstone summed up his political life as "greatly absorbed in working the institutions of his country."

Marx was an acute, as well as caustic, critic of the Gladstonian style. Here he is on "Gladstone's eloquence" in 1855:

Polished blandness, empty profundity, unction not without poisonous ingredients, the velvet paw not without the claws, scholastic distinctions both grandiose and petty, quaestiones and quaestiunculae [minor questions], the entire arsenal of probabilism with its casuistic scruples and unscrupulous reservations, its hesitating motives and motivated hesitation, its humble pretensions of superiority, virtuous intrigue, intricate simplicity, Byzantium and Liverpool.

Yet such invective, for all its telling thrusts, failed utterly to make the connection between Gladstone's style and his



phenomenal success in uniting and inspiring social coalitions broader than virtually any other in modern British politics. For Gladstone, the art of politics was as much process as policy. He set high store by the processes of professional politics - rhetoric, debate, suasion, electoral and parliamentary procedure - and was a past master of them all.

Procedure, it has been said, is the only constitution the poor English have. Gladstone was a procedural bore, yet he never confused the respect due to established form with the need to ensure that the substance was in harmony with contemporary needs. Indeed, his profound empathy with old forms and new exigencies - "*Byzantium and Liverpool*" - may be counted his greatest strength. His ruling conviction, he told his mentor Sir Robert Peel in 1841, was "*that it is possible to adjust the noble and ancient institutions of this country to the wants and necessities of this unquiet time.*" This made him at once Britain's greatest constitutional reformer since Cromwell, yet a great stickler for time-honoured forms and institutions. The extension of the vote, the modern Treasury, parliamentary scrutiny committees, company and university reform, civil service recruitment by merit, the abolition of payment for army commissions: all these exhibit the Gladstonian dualism.. To take just the first, the 1867 and 1884 extensions of the franchise turned Britain into what contemporaries considered a fully-fledged democracy; yet at every stage Gladstone worked to safeguard the historic link between MPs and constituencies - one of the most effective curbs on the pretensions of party machines then and now - and actually enhanced it by his creation of single-member seats in 1885.

What of Gladstone's legacy to modern progressives? Foremost is the method - being "*greatly absorbed in working the institutions of the country*". It means resisting the belief - the bane of modern left and right alike - that the destruction of institutions (county councils, grammar and independent schools, the BBC, the NHS, the House of Lords) is a canon of reformist wisdom.. It means talking up, not down, to the electorate; putting political parties in their place; respecting the notion of ripeness, even in pursuit of goals (a federal Europe? an end to welfare dependency?) passionately supported. It means the cultivation of professional politicians - in the sense of politicians who are professional at the job of working institutions, deliberating on policy, and inter-acting with elites, interest groups and voters. Not least, it means government by discussion and consideration, not government by soundbite and reflex, however democratic the age.

Less definite is the legacy of Gladstone to the realm of policy - within this framework. There can be no transplant of Home Rule, "*peace, retrenchment and reform*" or the Concert of Europe, just as no liberal could regard Himmelfarb's "*Victorian virtues*" - exemplified by Gladstone - as a prescription for social health in the 1990s. Any message lies, rather, in Gladstone's drive to leave his society more democratic, internationalist, prosperous and socially cohesive than he found it. Motivated by no Utopian vision of democracy, or of social and international harmony, he nonetheless had an ambitious view of the progress which could be made in all three directions in his lifetime and by his exertions. As he put it to the Commons, introducing the 1884 Reform Bill:

Ideal perfection is not the true basis of English legislation. We look at the attainable; we look at the practicable; and we have too much of

English sense to be drawn away by those sanguine delineations of what might possibly be attained in Utopia, from a path which promises to enable us to effect great good for the people of England.

Moreover, Gladstone understood that without passion there is little motivation in politics; yet, to a degree perhaps unique in modern peacetime politics, he mobilised passion behind immediate goals, not only attainable without civil strife, but themselves likely to reduce that strife once achieved. Above all he stood for greater self-government, for individuals, communities and nations.

Which takes us back, full circle, to EH Carr on Karl Marx in 1934. "*In the epoch of humanism,*" Carr wrote, "*there had been individual liberty - except for the despised and unimportant masses who lay outside the pale.*" In the Marxist epoch of mass rule, individual liberty would of necessity either be meaningless (as automatic acceptance of the mass will) or noxious (as a revolt against it). But, Carr concluded wistfully, the time would come for a new revolution in human thought. "*The inveterate tendency of man to individualise himself will ultimately reappear; and unless all historical analogies are false, a new differentiation of the mass will lead to a new renaissance of humanism.*" Individualism has reappeared with a vengeance. Gladstone's heirs might see the issue of the age as whether it leads to a new humanism, or a new barbarism.

Andrew Adonis is Public Policy Editor of the Financial Times. His books include Making Aristocracy Work: The Peerage and the Political System in Britain 1884-1914 (1993). This article will also be published in the Times Literary Supplement.

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis - or if you know anyone who can - please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information.

The Young Liberals 1970-79: their philosophy and political strategy. MA thesis. Ruth Fox, 9 Chapel Terrace, Headingley, Leeds LS6 3JA.

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945-64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Ph.D thesis. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH. (See full article in this Newsletter.)

The Liberal Party in Southampton 1890-1945 (particularly 1890-1918). Sources needed for Ph.D thesis on the development of labour politics in Southampton. Graham Heaney, 132 Hayling Avenue, Copnor, Portsmouth, PO3 6ED.

If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.