

Ep 49: The early history of secularism

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/podcast/2021/05/ep-49>

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"So it's not just that he was scandalous in some of the stuff

this time and why secularism eventually declined as a political force. This podcast is designed

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that he was advocating - everything from the overthrow of the monarchy to free

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to complement a recent NSS seminar on George Jacob Holyoake led by Ray Argyle who has just

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access to contraception - but it's also that you do so at great personal risk."

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published a new biography about him. I'm going to be joined by three guests for a virtual roundtable

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(EP):

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discussion. My first guest, Paul Fitzgerald (PF), is a political cartoonist, activist and graphic

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You're listening to Episode 49 of the National Secular Society podcast produced

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by Emma Park (EP). The term 'secularism' was coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851.

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novelist also known as 'Polyp'. Paul is currently working on a graphic novel retelling the life of

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By this time, however, Britain's tradition of radicals and free thinkers was already

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Thomas Paine, the 18th century philosopher and revolutionary who was born in Norfolk in 1737

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well established. But the major actors of its early years are little known today.

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In this episode I will be exploring the origins of secularism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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and emigrated to America just before the War of Independence. Not long after Paine's death in

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I will be asking why political radicalism was associated with atheism and free thought at

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1809, his controversial book 'The Age of Reason'

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was republished in England by Richard Carlile,

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a journalist and campaigner for press freedom.

For this and other offences Carlile was sentenced

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to imprisonment for blasphemy. My second guest,

Owen Carter (OC), is writing his PhD on Carlile

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and his collaborators, and their interest in science as an agent for social revolution.

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The work done by radicals like Paine and Carlile contributed to the emergence of secularism

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in the mid-19th century as a working-class political force opposed to organised religion.

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By the turn of the century, secularism in its turn was being sidelined by socialism and the

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Labour movement. My third guest Matthew Kidd

(MK) has just written a book on this topic

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entitled 'The Renewal of Radicalism, Politics, Identity and Ideology in England 1867-1924'.

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(EP): Owen, Paul and Matthew, welcome to the podcast. (OC, PF, MK): Hello.

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(EP): Let's start first of all with a little bit of background. Paul could you take us off

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by giving us a little potted history of Paine, Thomas Paine. Where did he come from what were

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his motivations; where did he end up? (PF): Sure,

I mean he was somebody who was born basically in a

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working-class family in Norfolk who really didn't

seem to sort of have any intellectual impact until

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he moved to America. He met Benjamin Franklin in

London and moved over to America just at the time

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that the American War of Independence was kicking off. Now that seemed to create an explosion of

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writing and ideas coming from Paine. His arguments

that in fact America should separate from

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England just galvanised people, even people like

Washington and Jefferson, who up until then hadn't

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really felt that that was the right route. He seemed to really galvanise them and this seems

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to have been his record ever since. With "Common Sense" and obviously particularly relevant to this

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podcast is 'The Age of Reason' where he seemed to pull together the first large-scale resistance to,

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I think, it's a fundamentalist religion rather than to religion itself. But I think one of the

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most significant things for me about him is that he's been forgotten, it's absolutely astonishing.

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This guy sparked the American War of Independence, was one of the first real people to stand up

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against religious authority. He's just gone from popular history. (EP): Oh, and what about Carlile

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because he's also someone who has perhaps been slightly forgotten. And this is really a theme

0:04:02.960,0:04:07.440
of the investigations which we in the NSS are doing at the moment into the early history of

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secularism. What was Richard Carlile's background and what were his sort of main contributions to

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the development of radicalism and free thought?
(OC): Thanks Emma. So in common with quite a

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lot of working-class reformers of this period Carlile was born into fairly humble circumstances.

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He was born in Devon in 1790. He was the son of a shoemaker, that infamous radical trade,

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but the father walked out on the family when Richard was just very young. So he was raised

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with two sisters by his mother Elizabeth and had by the standards of the time as good an education

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as one could really hope for. But by that we mean a bit of Sunday school and a bit of charity school

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afterwards. So he got his basic literacy, he got a lot of Bible time and not a lot else

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after that. At age 12 he took up the trade of a tin smith, you know a very hard itinerant trade.

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something that was on the way out, but something that was to stay with him for

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the rest of his life. He was very consciously proud of his working-class origins and having

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raised himself from that. Then later on he eventually ends up in London in around 1817

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and this is kind of at the height of post-war agitation. Finally all of this energy which

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has been restrained after two decades of war in the Napoleonic Wars is suddenly,

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it's beginning to bubble over, it can't be held back anymore. There's a series of mass meetings

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being led by Henry Hunt with tens of thousands of people across the country.

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Carlile begins to fall into this radical scene. He starts selling radical pamphlets and then

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shortly he begins writing and editing a radical journal published by a man called William Sherwin

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and then on the back of this he is invited to attend the mass meeting at St Peter's Field

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in Manchester in 1819. And this is the event which will mark really the rest of his life and

0:06:17.040,0:06:21.280
the fate of radicalism through the remainder of the century because it is of course the site

0:06:21.280,0:06:26.400
of the Peterloo Massacre. (EP): Why is the Peterloo Massacre so important for radicalism

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in the 19th century? (PF): I might jump in there as the Chair of the Peterloo Memorial Campaign

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here in Manchester. It's the turning point in the story of both English and global democracy

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and even though it kind of failed in the short term, I think the shock it produced

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really really helped push the democracy agenda forward. It did happen just down the road from

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where I'm sat now. (EP): Owen would you agree with that? (OC): Oh absolutely.

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It's a pivotal moment of trauma and betrayal that really echoes down the century. You have

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you know 50,000 people assembled in their Sunday best calling peaceably for reform

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and they're charged by armed cavalry men and you know slaughtered. There's what 18 people dead,

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hundreds more injured. It's a bloodbath. And it seems to kill off any prospect of peaceful reform

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for the near future. If a government is willing

to do that to crush dissent what hope is there?

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It's a very very dispiriting period and it will colour absolutely everything in the generations

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that follow. (EP): Paine and Carlile of course, early radicals in England and then America for

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Paine and England for Carlile. But after that we have the sort of secularists fitting in in the mid

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19th century and then we moved towards socialism and the rise of the Labour Party in the late 19th

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century. Matthew you recently wrote a book on the renewal of radicalism about politics in the late

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19th to early 20th century. You started in 1867.

Why did you choose that year to begin your book?

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(MK): The main reason was because this was the year in which the Second Reform Act was passed.

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This was an Act that enfranchised a large portion of the male working class population

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and in some constituencies, particularly in some of the mining constituencies, this gave

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working-class men enough clout to send trade unionists to Parliament for the first time, which

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they did in the General Election of the following year. So in that respect it's an important year

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and an important moment in British political history. If we think about the later development

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of the Labour Party, this idea that labour representation or direct labour representation

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by trade unionists in Parliament this actually happened 30 odd years before and that was thanks

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to the Reform Act. I also picked the mid-1860s as a starting point because there was a lot of

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heightened radical agitation and excitement at this time. Radicals are involved in numerous

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campaigns and causes at this time including support for the North in the American Civil War,

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support for foreign nationalist movements in places like Italy and Poland,

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trade unionism and of course the foundation
of the
National Secular Society in 1866. (EP): So
Matthew

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how would you define radicalism and where
did
the National Secular Society and the
secularist

0:09:18.880,0:09:25.120
movement fit into radicalism? (MK): I think
the
way that radicalism was used as a term in
the

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19th century is probably different to how
we'd use
it today. We tend to use it as a way to
describe

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anything outside the mainstream and I'm not
sure
if my fellow speakers would agree with me,
but I

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think in the 19th century even though the
terms
left and right weren't used so much in
political

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discourse at the time, radicals at the time
would
have been seen as on the extreme left or at
least

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the extreme left of the Liberal Party or maybe
just outside. That's a debate that I engage
with

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in my book. But basically radicals were anyone
who
advocated radical reform of the political
system.

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Radical actually comes from the Latin word I
think
radix or radic? My latin isn't very strong, but

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which means 'root', so it's very much this idea
that any problem and political social problem

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we need to strike at the root of it and
reform it fundamentally. and a quicker pace

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than perhaps moderate liberals would would
argue
for. (EP): And the secularist movement? (MK):
The

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secularist movement I mean there's again
debate about how that fits in. For me

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secularism was just one of the many
expressions of
radicalism at the time. As I said that there
were

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various different ways in which radicals
engaged
in the political and social life of the country.

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And in many respects they were seen as 'in
advance'; they wanted to be 'in advance' of

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moderate Liberalism and that could mean not
just
favouring gradual political reform but
actually

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radical reform. That could mean not just removing some of the powers of the Lords but abolishing the

0:10:52.160,0:10:57.120
Lords. And I would argue that their secularism must be seen in the same way in that this wasn't

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just about fighting against the established church for non-conformity. But actually going one step

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further perhaps, and thinking about the whole idea of religion and its role in public life,

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but also whether there is a god for example. And shoemakers were at the forefront of this as one of

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my fellow speakers already mentioned. (EP): Owen, and would you agree with that in terms that idea

0:11:18.800,0:11:25.280
of radicalism as far as it applied to Carlile and the early radicals and freethinkers? (OC):

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Yes I think Matthew's very nicely raised the point that radical, at least in the earlier

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sense of you know 'root and branch reform', going

right to the core of something you know, this is

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the word that had been used in that sense from the I think the 17th century onwards. But it's

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in the 1820s in Britain specifically in response to dealing with the fallout of

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Peterloo and the hardening of attitudes, which is following on other sides,

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which leads to it kind of becoming radicalism with a capital R and while it would never attain say

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the level of a parliamentary party really or even a parliamentary grouping, we might think of it

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perhaps as say a tendency rather than an ideology. What would probably unite radicals of all stripes,

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at least in the 1820s, would be a loathing for what they called 'old corruption', this idea

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that there's some kind of nexus of aristocratic power which has basically stitched everything up

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together so monarchy and the aristocracy and the established religion are all of a parcel

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and they're all scratching each other's backs. And that if you want to tackle one you really

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need to tackle all. (EP): Wat sort of a radical was Carlile? (OC): Oh he was an ultra radical.

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There was none more radical, at least in his own view. He had this paradoxical experience in some

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ways in which - so trials had actually been or prosecutions I should say had been begun against

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him earlier on in 1819. He had already drawn the ire of the authorities through reprinting and

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among other things the works of Thomas Paine and 'The Age of Reason' in particular.

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Then Peterloo happens. It's Carlile's eyewitness testimony which provides the radical account to

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that. And then in reprisal the government resumed those prosecutions with interest

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and he's jailed for what will ultimately be six years for blasphemy. So what happens then is that

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despite being imprisoned he's able to continue his publishing business. He runs it remotely directing

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and submitting copy through the post and because the authorities are loath to interfere overtly

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with the sanctity of the postal system he's able to get away with it, despite being

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banished to rural Dorset. And so what happens then is paradoxically he ends up slightly liberated

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because he's already in prison but he can kind of publish what he likes and so he begins to get

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harder and harder in the stuff that he says. So he shifts from a critique of 'old corruption' to

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the journal is called 'The Republican'. The aim is explicit there. He begins to harden his attitudes

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moving from let's say a kind of free thinking or Deistic tradition to outright atheism and

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materialism. (EP): And republicanism associated with it? (OC): And republicanism. (EP):

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Why were the shoemakers particularly radical?

(PF): Should I jump in on the shoemakers? I'm

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sorry to interrupt but I didn't realise that they

were one of the trades that were promoting this

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kind of radicalism, but one of my favourite scenes in the Thomas Paine graphic novel I'm writing

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is that the upper classes, who you know were just totally preoccupied with vilifying Paine,

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they would quite often go to their shoemakers and insist on having what were called 'TP' nails put

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in the heels of their shoes where the nails put into the heel would spell out the the letters

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'TP' so that they could spend their days treading on Tom Paine's ideas? (OC): On the question of

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shoemakers, it's actually it's one of the longer standing puzzles in social history. At one point

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the legendary historian Eric Hobsbawm actually devoted an entire essay to trying to tackle this

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question. Because it's a phenomenon that plays out not just in Britain but actually across Europe

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is that whoever you are if you're a shoemaker

you're likely, more likely to be involved in some

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kind of dissent or discontent. I think the answer that he came up with it's that it was ultimately

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it's a trade that you can conduct quite quietly, the materials aren't overly expensive,

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it leads itself to having a lot of time for reading and discussing in a small shop

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and everyone's got to buy their shoes somewhere

so you're quite well positioned to get a local

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gossip. (EP): So you can maintain your independence in a way? (OC): Yeah you can

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be a small master but in contact with others as well, so particularly well connected. (MK): Yes

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a lot of my research, the book is actually based on some case studies and it was not

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a coincidence that most of the places Leicester,

Northampton that I based the case studies on were

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centres of the boot and shoe trade and again I read that Hobsbawm article and it was very

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much a puzzle. I actually came across an article from the 1890s by the Shoemaking

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Union trying to answer this question and that they couldn't really answer it. But it was very much,

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you've got to remember, that the mechanisation of that industry was quite late compared to some

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others. So it was the 1890s when they lost a big lockout that was when the manufacturers started

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to impose things like discipline that we think today in the workplace. It's hard to believe

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but in the early 1890s shoemakers could come and go in the factories whenever they wanted.

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They could do as much work on a daily basis as they wanted. It was basically piecework.

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And there was something very famous called 'St Monday' where they'd say they'd worked so hard

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during the rest of the week so they didn't have to go in Monday so they could go and drink beer.

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So this this kind of autonomy and freedom that they had, even as late as the 1890s,

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this article from the 1890s suggests that it was that freedom, that sitting around in a factory on

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your own, there isn't much managerial oversight telling you off for speaking and swearing and

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talking and discussing. Some people would take newspapers in and read it to the other.

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There was that kind of introspection I suppose that allowed them to become,

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all of them politicians as one of Northampton's MPs called them. (EP): Well and Northampton was

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of course the centre for well Northampton was Charles Bradlaugh's constituency.

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Moving back to Paine, Paul, we mentioned 'The Age of Reason' which was of course Paine's big

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book critique of organised religion and his advocacy of Deism. What exactly were

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his views about organised religion and how did his experiences in England, America and France

0:17:43.760,0:17:49.440
influence them? (PF): Yeah I mean this, this is one of the things that I've found fascinating

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about Paine. I mean he kind of has really drawn me in but being a sort of fairly militant atheist

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myself I'm fascinated to see that as you say he was a Deist. He very much believed in a god

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and one of his concerns about the direction that the French Revolution that he was involved with

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was going was that he felt it was becoming more atheist which he thought was a very bad thing.

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I guess the only conclusion I can come to is that Paine was an opponent of religious fundamentalism

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rather than religion itself. And of course the churches in America and Europe were all at that

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time fundamentalist. (EP): They were certainly very much, you know he criticises 'priestcraft'

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doesn't he? And yeah attacks organised religion which attempts to impose itself

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on people? (PF): Sure I mean what he, what he seemed most disgusted with was the idea of

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of revelation of these individuals saying, "I you know I magically have been given THE word

0:18:53.280,0:18:59.440
of God and it's not just the word of God it's THE word of God and everybody else is wrong. And

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Paine with this incredibly modern voice 'In Age of Reason' sort of says "Why should we

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believe you?". I mean he's asking these really simple questions that atheists

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today are still using in debates with religious people. He sort of said "No,

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if there is a testimony, if there is a, you know, a manuscript that God has written,

0:19:23.200,0:19:28.320
it's very much the universe". (EP): And this is already sufficiently radical to get him in trouble

0:19:28.320,0:19:32.640
with the authorities. (PF): Yeah well I mean there have been prosecutions. I mean he'd already

0:19:33.280,0:19:38.720
had a sentence against him for 'The Rights of Man' for his political views and then 'Age of Reason'

0:19:38.720,0:19:42.640

not only brought the authorities down on him again such that he could never go back to England,

0:19:43.520,0:19:47.920

it also alienated loads and loads of other people who would have considered themselves

0:19:47.920,0:19:52.960

radicals or progressives who turned on him. Even the guy who had defended him,

0:19:52.960,0:19:59.040

Erskine, the famous lawyer who defended Paine for 'Rights of Man' and done a brilliant job of it,

0:19:59.040,0:20:04.640

turned against him and prosecuted him or rather prosecuted this impoverished guy who normally

0:20:04.640,0:20:12.640

sold religious tracts but who had sold one copy of 'Age of Reason'. (EP): Owen, on that topic one of

0:20:12.640,0:20:17.280

the things that you've mentioned that Carlile was, one of the charges against him that the

0:20:17.280,0:20:22.320

authorities used to get him imprisoned after Peterloo, was that he had republished Paine's

0:20:22.320,0:20:29.520

'Age of Reason'. How did Paine's thoughts about religion influence Carlile. (OC): Utterly almost

0:20:29.520,0:20:37.360

to the point of veneration I would say. So Paine

was to be the loadstar by which Carlile tried to

0:20:38.560,0:20:43.760

live his life in a lot of ways. He was among the first authors that Carlile began

0:20:43.760,0:20:48.320

publishing and republishing the works of and he would continue that all through the rest of his

0:20:48.320,0:20:52.960

publishing career. He would cite him explicitly you know - if you don't know what to do read

0:20:52.960,0:20:58.640

Thomas Paine - and yet for all that Carlile's own religious views: they meandered around over

0:20:58.640,0:21:02.160

the course of his career. I think that's one thing we need to say is that: if we're talking

0:21:02.160,0:21:08.240

about Carlile in religion there are there are many Carliles. He started off from a position

0:21:09.040,0:21:14.480

in his adult life of distrust of established religion which then hardens into Deism,

0:21:14.480,0:21:18.560

then the experience of imprisonment tilts him into outright atheism

0:21:19.120,0:21:24.560

but then after that he takes another turn again

and begins pursuing a quite idiosyncratic personal

0:21:24.560,0:21:30.400

understanding of allegorical Christianity by which, depending on what mood he's in,

0:21:32.880,0:21:40.160
stories about Christ for example are actually stories about human reason. The Logos is through

0:21:40.160,0:21:46.960
a series of historical corruptions actually proved that there was a pre-Christian worship of reason,

0:21:46.960,0:21:52.800
for example. (EP): So lots of different ideas floating about there? (OC): Yeah and then by the

0:21:52.800,0:21:57.680
end of his career he was effectively in a church of one you know calling himself a Christian but

0:21:57.680,0:22:01.280
you'd have been well placed to find anyone who would agree with that sentiment. (EP): So I

0:22:01.280,0:22:05.280
guess for both Paine and Carlile in a way what distinguished them was they were just prepared

0:22:05.280,0:22:11.120
to think independently and speak independently from the established orthodoxies? (OC): Very much

0:22:11.120,0:22:17.280
so yeah. (EP): What was Carlile's significance for the secularist movement in Britain oh and

0:22:17.280,0:22:22.480
perhaps we can start with you on this I mean of course his common law wife, Eliza Sharples,

0:22:23.040,0:22:28.640
gave lodging to Charles Bradlaugh, the future first president of the NSS when Bradlaugh was 16.

0:22:29.200,0:22:34.800
But how did Carlile's thought and his example influence Bradlaugh and other secularists? (MK): I

0:22:34.800,0:22:39.840
well I'd say he was both a call celebre and a cautionary tale at the same time.

0:22:41.280,0:22:47.280
Against the apparent unjustness and tyranny of the extremely restrictive laws that were

0:22:47.280,0:22:52.320
ushered in after Peterloo, because we mustn't forget those, it's not just a massacre it's also

0:22:52.320,0:22:59.520
a stifling environment and which crushes a lot of the life out of dissent. So he is a you know the

0:22:59.520,0:23:05.200
most strident, most fierce voice and most fierce critic of that regime through the 1820s.

0:23:06.160,0:23:11.440
For all that his example is not one that many people are inclined to follow because if you're

0:23:11.440,0:23:17.440
prepared to spend a decade in prison you know more power to you. But a lot of people frankly aren't.

0:23:17.440,0:23:22.880
So it's not just that he was scandalous in some of the stuff that he was advocating you

0:23:22.880,0:23:28.560

know everything from the overthrow of the monarchy to free access to contraception the abolition of

0:23:28.560,0:23:36.240

marriage as tyrannous to women, But it's also that you do so at great personal risk. So when you have

0:23:36.880,0:23:42.960

another generation of reformers coming after, for example George Jacob Holyoake, a great deal has to

0:23:42.960,0:23:49.760

be done to try and rehabilitate the idea of free thought to try, if you want to make it politically

0:23:49.760,0:23:55.200

respectable. You know whatever personal private respect you may have for Carlile's sacrifice as it

0:23:55.200,0:24:01.280

were, you do not want to associate with that brand too publicly. (EP): Well as we learned from Ray

0:24:01.280,0:24:06.560

Argyle's book launch the other day at Conway Hall online, one of the points that emerged was that

0:24:06.560,0:24:14.240

Holyoake was quite concerned to make secularism and make free thought respectable. (OC): Exactly

0:24:14.240,0:24:20.080

yes and Carlile had left him with a fine piece of work to do that. (EP): Matthew moving on to the

0:24:20.080,0:24:25.520

sort of mid to late 19th century, the figure of Charles Bradlaugh. I mean he wasn't, do you think

0:24:25.520,0:24:30.000

he was in a way more of a successor of Carlile in his willingness to court controversy?

0:24:31.840,0:24:37.440

(MK): Yes basically, it's the Carlile issue which is slightly outside my area of expertise, but just

0:24:37.440,0:24:44.880

listening to my fellow speaker there it definitely run across my mind about Bradlaugh. It sounded

0:24:44.880,0:24:50.160

very similar to him. There was no coincidence that he often signed off as 'Iconoclast' for example.

0:24:50.960,0:24:55.840

One of the historians of Bradlaugh called him 'on the extreme wing of the extreme wing

0:24:55.840,0:25:01.520

of the Liberal party'. I think that neatly sums up where he was. He was never afraid of controversy.

0:25:01.520,0:25:07.120

He was involved in, in 1874 there were riots in Northampton after he lost an election.

0:25:07.120,0:25:14.800

During the 1860s he helped to provoke some riots in Hyde Park around the reform agitation,

0:25:15.680,0:25:20.080

and even though that he, theoretically at least, was a constitutionalist very much

0:25:20.080,0:25:24.960

around peaceful action and change through the ballot box, that kind of thing, he had this

0:25:24.960,0:25:30.640

habit of always being at these kind of places at the wrong time and his supporters definitely

0:25:30.640,0:25:36.080

often went beyond the constitutionalist mode of thinking that he advocated. So I think that

0:25:36.960,0:25:41.680

on those issues but also on his thoughts on free thought and getting involved in legal cases around

0:25:41.680,0:25:45.840

the right to free expression and the right to the freedom of the press and that kind of thing

0:25:45.840,0:25:50.880

there definitely seems to be a similar striking similarity between him and Carlile I think. (EP):

0:25:50.880,0:25:57.680

Paul, for Paine, how did radical politics link to his views about religion? (PF): I mean I think it

0:25:57.680,0:26:03.120

was part of just his thinking that people should

be free to have whatever opinion they want. I mean

0:26:03.120,0:26:10.000

he did actually as I say disapprove of atheism but

I think he very much respected everybody's right

0:26:10.000,0:26:14.720

to have their own opinion you know. I mean that's one of the things he says in the introduction to

0:26:14.720,0:26:20.160

'Age of Reason' so I think it is kind of tied up with his ideas of freedom. But as I say you know

0:26:20.160,0:26:28.320

underneath that is a kind of Paine suspicion that full atheism is actually going to be destructive

0:26:28.320,0:26:34.400

to society. He is one of those people who felt that you know not in quite such a militant way as

0:26:34.400,0:26:42.080

his critics but I think he did feel that a belief in a deity held morality together. It's absolutely

0:26:42.080,0:26:46.720

fascinating for me to hear this discussion - a sort of triangle between Carlile, Peterloo

0:26:47.520,0:26:52.480

and Paine - because of course you know we all know that Carlile was at Peterloo and was very

0:26:52.480,0:26:59.840

much involved in the fight against the six Acts

afterwards. But 1819 is the year that a slightly

0:27:01.120,0:27:09.040

bizarre radical Cobbett dug up Paine's remains

in America and bought them over to England to

0:27:09.040,0:27:16.160

to Manchester specifically because of Peterloo.

He thought Paine's remains would galvanise

0:27:16.160,0:27:21.440

a resistance that had been quite suppressed by

Peterloo. (EP): And did they have any effects

0:27:21.440,0:27:27.440

doing that? (PF): Well no, the remains were stopped on the outskirts of Salford,

0:27:27.440,0:27:32.880

the town outside of Manchester at the time and

yeah a line of soldiers refused to let them

0:27:34.160,0:27:39.600

into the city. They were due to go to a dinner of all things but yeah and that's partly how they

0:27:39.600,0:27:46.640

got lost. Cobbett ended up taking them down south

and and they disappeared afterwards. (EP): Owen,

0:27:47.360,0:27:52.240

for Carlile how did his views about religion well obviously he said he sort of changed them

0:27:52.240,0:27:58.400

from time to time, but how did his hostility towards the organised church link to his radical

0:27:58.400,0:28:06.160

politics? (OC): So I would say for Carlile he views it very much as all of a piece. It's a war

0:28:06.160,0:28:11.280

on all fronts that must be won. And so you're tackling religion and especially established

0:28:11.280,0:28:17.760

religion at the same time that you're tearing down monarchy and the aristocracy and establishing

0:28:17.760,0:28:24.400

republics worldwide. Ideally there's a kind of, there's a universalism to his republicanism

0:28:24.400,0:28:30.480

which is something that he inherits or certainly

feels that he inherits from Paine. (EP): Matthew

0:28:30.480,0:28:36.800

how far did radical politics say in the mid to late 19th century, how far was it associated with

0:28:36.800,0:28:42.160

free thought with atheism with radical views about religion as well as politics? (MK): I think

0:28:43.280,0:28:47.840

the fortunes of the secularist movement ebbed and

flowed in line with the radical movement. So there

0:28:47.840,0:28:54.240

were times when as I said in the 1860s perhaps

when the NSS was founded. This was a time of

0:28:55.920,0:29:00.960

radical agitation on numerous issues and it's

always been an eclectic movement in this time. But

0:29:00.960,0:29:05.120

something I did want to say when we talk about the link between radical politics and free thinking

0:29:05.120,0:29:11.520

is that more broadly in this time religion and politics were intertwined. There wasn't this deep

0:29:11.520,0:29:16.320

politicisation of religion that we have today. It was very much, and I don't want to generalise too

0:29:16.320,0:29:20.320

much, but if you were a non-conformist you were probably more likely to vote Liberal;

0:29:20.320,0:29:23.680

if you're an Anglican you were more likely to vote Conservative; and if you look at election

0:29:23.680,0:29:29.600

manifestos from the 19th century, particularly even going up to the late 19th century, there

0:29:29.600,0:29:34.400

were issues that we today would consider religious issues that maybe have been dealt with or that

0:29:34.400,0:29:40.640

aren't on the place for politics to discuss. So I think that's always important and radicals as the

0:29:40.640,0:29:45.600

advanced thinkers in politics would have been seen

as the advanced thinkers in religious matters as

0:29:45.600,0:29:52.080

well. So I think that's quite an important thing to note as well. In terms of how closely linked

0:29:52.080,0:29:58.720

they were I think that they were just two of many. If we think of free thought and secularism anyway

0:29:58.720,0:30:03.440

there were just two of many of the expressions of radicalism. The link was stronger in certain

0:30:03.440,0:30:07.840

places than in others so in Leicester I would argue it was very closely linked.

0:30:09.840,0:30:15.920

The secularist movement there almost kept alive that post-Chartist enthusiasm for radicalism when,

0:30:15.920,0:30:21.280

after the defeat of Chartism in the 1840s, late 1840s, it kind of went underground.

0:30:21.280,0:30:27.120

It stayed alive in local secular clubs, clubs coming together discussing these kind of issues.

0:30:27.120,0:30:32.080

It was weaker in other places; interestingly secularism was quite weak, or the NSS was

0:30:32.080,0:30:37.280

quite weak in Northampton, which was unusual, even though that was the backbone of Bradlaugh support.

0:30:37.280,0:30:43.600

So it wasn't, there wasn't a nice neat connection.
But I think that they definitely moved in

0:30:43.600,0:30:48.800

parallel with one another. (OC): Having mentioned socialism, we should of course also remember that

0:30:49.840,0:30:56.000

we needn't be talking about Marxist socialism.
There is also the, what Engels would have

0:30:56.000,0:31:02.160

diagnosed as, Utopian socialism associated with the philanthropic industrialist Robert Owen,

0:31:03.200,0:31:09.360

which was, you know, through the 1830s and 40s a very important force for the later development of

0:31:09.360,0:31:15.520

secularism. Holyoake, we've mentioned him before,
he got his initial training as an Owenite social

0:31:15.520,0:31:21.440

missionary; so when we're assessing the experience and the developments of later in the century we've

0:31:21.440,0:31:27.600

got to remember that there was an integrated political and secular programme being pursued

0:31:27.600,0:31:33.920

there, and which then failed in a number of acrimonious breakdowns of these ideal communities.

0:31:34.800,0:31:39.520

With Carlile sniping from the sidelines all the while saying "I told you so. You didn't

0:31:39.520,0:31:44.480

listen to me." . (EP): But Robert Owen wasn't necessarily an atheist himself I

0:31:44.480,0:31:47.920

believe. (MK): No he wasn't; it's one of those really strong distinctions between

0:31:48.960,0:31:56.000

the person and the followers. The Owenites certainly had a lot of outright atheists among

0:31:56.000,0:31:59.600

them. (EP): This has been a really interesting discussion and we could talk about this all

0:31:59.600,0:32:06.800

day but let's just have a couple of final points. Firstly Paul and then Owen. As far as

0:32:06.800,0:32:11.520

Paine and Carlile are concerned, do they still matter today? Are they still relevant

0:32:11.520,0:32:17.040

to Britain in the 21st century? Paul, what about Paine? (PF): Yeah I think he is. I mean

0:32:17.920,0:32:25.040

I think partly because to some extent he's not an apolitical voice but he's not a kind of factional

0:32:26.000,0:32:34.080

voice, arguing for reason and common sense. I think that's one of the things that's fascinating

0:32:34.080,0:32:40.320

about him. But I think also you know as kind of

Sagan predicted - we are heading into this era

0:32:40.320,0:32:45.760
now where irrationality seems to be getting a much stronger grip on society again after

0:32:46.480,0:32:51.360
sort of receding for quite a long time. And of course I include in that religious fundamentalism.

0:32:51.360,0:32:56.880
So I think Paine's very fresh modern voice is one that we should be rediscovering, as well as just

0:32:56.880,0:33:03.840
the justice of him not being forgotten given his impact on history. (EP): And what about Richard

0:33:03.840,0:33:09.040
Carlile? What's his legacy? Is he still important today? (OC): Well I think in some ways he's more

0:33:09.040,0:33:16.560
important today than he has been in quite some time. What I mean by that is that quite strikingly

0:33:17.280,0:33:22.720
and perhaps in distinction to some of his peers from that kind of era and subsequent generations,

0:33:23.680,0:33:30.480
he was absolutely forward-focused in his view. It wasn't just about defending

0:33:30.480,0:33:35.760
old liberties. For example it wasn't

like a kind of a local radicalism,

0:33:36.800,0:33:42.000
but as he inherited from Paine he was universalist in his vision and also - and I think this is

0:33:42.000,0:33:49.840
something that really marks him out - he was in love with the promise of science. I think we're in

0:33:49.840,0:33:55.840
an era now where you know, whether it's thinking on the global level with regards to the power of

0:33:55.840,0:34:02.400
the climate crisis, or on a deeply personal level, do we actually possess free will? Can we image the

0:34:02.400,0:34:08.800
brain and begin to see how human beings actually come to the decisions that they think they make?

0:34:10.080,0:34:18.080
His kind of idiosyncratic brand of scientifically motivated materialism there would absolutely cease

0:34:18.080,0:34:24.720
on everything that's under discussion in the problems of our modern world and in some ways

0:34:26.640,0:34:31.200
it's almost like a running of the tape beforehand. We've seen what happens. He built an entire

0:34:32.080,0:34:39.360

ethical system, a programme for revolution on the idea that science is going to drive us forward.

0:34:39.360,0:34:43.600

So I mean he would certainly have a lot to say today if he was still alive. (EP):

0:34:43.600,0:34:50.960

Finally Matthew do you think that the relationship between religion and radical politics as such is

0:34:50.960,0:34:56.720

sort of closer or further apart? We talked about you know secularism and politics in general but

0:34:56.720,0:35:01.600

what about specifically radical politics? Do you think the issues of religion are of greater or

0:35:01.600,0:35:06.400

less interest to people campaigning for radical change in the 21st century than they were say

0:35:06.400,0:35:13.360

in the mid or late 19th century? (MK): That's a big question. I think that probably less so.

0:35:13.360,0:35:19.440

I think that this is maybe slightly off topic but I think that the changing nature of

0:35:19.440,0:35:24.880

socialism within the Labour Party and maybe just outside the Labour Party through the 20th century

0:35:25.920,0:35:32.720

took religion out of the question. Following on

from, we talked about Robert Owen earlier in the

0:35:32.720,0:35:37.360

late 19th century, a lot of socialism was a kind of religion in many ways. And people like Keir

0:35:37.360,0:35:42.000

Hardy, he was very religious. He said that he got all his ideas from Jesus and that kind of thing.

0:35:42.000,0:35:48.080

You wouldn't hear a leader of the Labour Party say that today. (EP): Tony Blair almost did, right?

0:35:48.800,0:35:53.840

(MK): Truly it depends who/which voters they were talking to. But yes,

0:35:53.840,0:35:59.440

so I think that further away, I think that the kind of socialism that fed into the Labour Party,

0:35:59.440,0:36:06.160

particularly during the 30s onwards, was a kind of not necessarily Marxian but definitely more of

0:36:06.800,0:36:13.440

a kind of materialistic form of socialism, where not necessarily atheism but secularism

0:36:13.440,0:36:17.680

was stronger than it had been in the 19th century and I think that's definitely had an influence.

0:36:17.680,0:36:23.040

This idea of a separation between politics and religion. Obviously that's not just the case

0:36:23.040,0:36:27.840

in the Labour Party, There are other forms of radicalism today but I think that you're more

0:36:27.840,0:36:33.200

likely to find devout religious people in other forms probably non-radical political parties

0:36:33.920,0:36:38.480

today. (EP): Matthew, Owen and Paul - thank you very much. (MK,OC,PF): Thank you.

0:36:38.480,0:36:48.960

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