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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Standish Meacham. *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform, 1880-1914: The Search for Community.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987. xiii + 211 pp. $22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-03821-7.

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Published on H-State (January, 1996)

The purpose of this book is to describe the "ethos" of Toynbee Hall and to examine its evolution in the lives and philosophies of three men associated with Toynbee Hall: Samuel Barnett, Toynbee Hall's founder, William Beveridge, a Toynbee Hall resident and one of the architects of the British welfare state, and R.H. Tawney, another Toynbee Hall resident, an eminent economic historian and an educator of the working classes.

According to Meacham, the Toynbee Hall "ethos" consisted of a belief inculcated in students at Balliol College in Oxford in the late 1800s of the obligation to overcome class differences in Victorian England through the creation of a shared community among the well-to-do and the working classes. According to Meacham,

The hall's existence proclaimed its supporters' conviction that community was of transcendent importance. They believed that industrialism had subjected English men and women to centrifugal pressures which, in league with the precepts of philosophical individualism, economic laissez-faire, and class consciousness, had accelerated a dangerous, nationwide drift toward social disintegration. (p. x)

This sense of community was to be created by siting of the settlement house and its well-to-do "settlers" in the working class neighborhoods, allowing contact among classes who otherwise would have had little to do with each other in the economically segregated city of London. According to Meacham, the resulting relationships were to be hierarchical in nature, with the well-to-do settlers bestowing their superior culture upon their neighbors:

Their goal was social reintegration. Its accomplishment would result from the imposition of enlightened authority and hierarchy to achieve community, a community in which they saw themselves both as teachers and–at least for the foreseeable future–as governors. (p. x)

Toynbee Hall would

bridge the gulf separating class from class and allow men and women to connect "one by one" with other as human beings. Connection was to be effected by means of a multitude of educational programs, most of which were consciously designed to impose a hierarchy of values upon the pupils for whom they were designed. (p. x)

The book traces the evolution of this ethos in the face of Barnett's exposure to the problems of the working class, and the emergence of newer solutions to the problems of poverty and inequality. Among the most interesting aspects of the book are its description of Toynbee Hall's support of trade unionism and of a cooperative movement. Although approaching trade unionists from a typically superior attitude – of "the need to educate them to responsible politics" – Toynbee Hall supported the late 19th century trade union movement in which "radical members of skilled-craft unions [were] assuming the lead in the organization of the unskilled" (p. 66). Meacham asserts that although "Strikes, as expressions of class consciousness, were socially divisive and destructive of community," they also offered the opportunity to "men and women hitherto excluded from the community of the nation because of the menial and insecure nature of their work" to "petition for membership" in that community (p. 67).

It was Toynbee Hall's involvement in the British cooperative movement that made it amenable to trade unionism, as it saw the problems that workers faced in dealing with their employers. Classes on cooperatives were offered at Toynbee Hall, and

In 1888, Barnett lent his support to the establishment of a Co-operative Aid Association, organized to provide loans to East London producing co-operatives.

Meacham observes that

More and more frequently, the hall played host to groups of Co-operative mantle makers, boat makers, cigar makers, and the like; in this way its residents grew increasingly familiar with the difficulties facing workers determined to organize and bargain collectively in their own interests. (p. 66)

Although Barnett always sustained his belief in the superiority of "one by one" contact among the classes and in the moral inferiority of the working classes (despairing of the fact that they did not take advantage of opportunities for "moral" improvement once their economic situation had improved), he increasingly dismissed theories that bad character was the cause of poverty. Instead, he began to advocate for social programs such as free health and education to ensure that equal opportunity was available to the working poor.

In addition to the influence of his exposure to the problems of the East Enders, Barnett was also affected by three modes of thought or "challenges" to the ethos of Toynbee Hall that emerged in its early years:

o the call for centralization of government and its functions to allow for the creation of strong and efficient social programs that would be designed and implemented by "experts," moving away from the localism and subjectivity of the settlement houses;

o the call for a Christian socialism that was at once more religious than the secular Toynbee Hall and more collectivist in its solutions;

o the call for a more scientific and objective study of society in place of advocacy and efforts at improvement. These early sociologists argued against the ethos of community because

...the notion of community, as articulated by thinkers like Green, possessed little utility as a concept and little relevance as an end, because it ignored the intermediate institutions of family and class and because it refused to acknowledge the degree to which social organization was prey to irrationality–again, "ought" as opposed to "is" (p. 89).

Meacham argues that it was the centralizers who offered the most successful challenge to Toynbee Hall and its ethos through the construction of the British welfare state, making the efforts of the settlement house appear ineffective and insignificant in comparison – especially those efforts that dealt with character-building. Among the centralizers were two former residents of Toynbee Hall, William Beveridge and R. H. Tawney. Beveridge epitomized the rise of bureaucracy in creating a national system of ameliorating unemployment and underemployment, including labor exchanges. Tawney's efforts aimed at offering relevant education in economic history to the working classes so that they'd be better able to articulate their own theories explaining inequality, and to develop superior solutions.

Meacham accentuates the different attitudes about democracy among the three Toynbee Hall residents: Barnett's fervent fear of the masses, Beveridge's belief in bureaucracy and rule by the experts, and Tawney's acceptance of the working classes and their culture in shaping public policy. Meacham writes:

Tawney's work to establish an equalitarian educational system was a lifelong manifesto of his early conviction that regardless of class all men and women were worth listening to, that genuine equality of opportunity was as vital to the national community as was equality of treatment (p. 188).

He expresses dismay for the turn of events in England toward the bureaucratic and elitist society envisioned by Beveridge:

Such a notion has not fared particularly well in twentieth-century England. Insistence upon equality has run counter to the continuing powerful traditions of hierarchy and authority, in which there is no place for the sort of democratically inspired connection Tawney championed. The result has been an elitist educational system bound to preserve the "we and they complex" he so deplored and a bureaucracy staffed in the main by those who have managed to climb to the top of the ladder he despised. (p. 188)

Meacham elaborates on this:

It is Beveridge's point of view that has far more often prevailed: the belief that social morality depends ultimately on the efforts of disinterested reformers, whose education and consequent position have fitted them specially to undertake for others the "intelligent consideration' that produces a community of best selves.... The capitalist triangle he [author Keith Middlemas, in *Politics and Industrial Society*] has discovered in the insistence of progressively minded industrialists, trade-union bureaucrats, and civil servants that they are best suited to make decisions on behalf of the country is no more than Harold Perkin's "fourth class," reorganized to suit twentieth-century needs. It is based and sustained on assumptions that class antagonisms must be discouraged–and that the best way to do so is by surrendering leadership into the hands of a supposedly classless, disinterested elite (pp. 188-89).

For those further interested in the book, I've placed on the H-Urban gopher and fileserver an informative and critical *Journal of British Studies* review of Meacham's book by Seth Koven of Villanova University. It is available by gophering to H-Net.msu.edu and selecting H-Net E-Mail Discussion Groups/H-Urban/Seminars/Seminar on the History of Community Organizing/Papers/The Force of Tradition at Toynbee Hall or by sending e-mail to listserv@uicvm.uic.edu with the message: GET

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Citation: Wendy Plotkin. Review of Meacham, Standish, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform, 1880-1914: The Search for Community*. H-State, H-Net Reviews. January, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=257

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