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**THE OMINOUS PROBLEM OF THE TWO NATIONS:
TWO SOLUTIONS FOR THE REGENERATION
OF SOCIETY. DISRAELI'S *SYBIL* AND CARLYLE'S
"CHARTISM" AND *PAST AND PRESENT*.**

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In 1837 a sharp downturn in the economy ushered in what has come to be regarded as the most serious social crisis of the nineteenth century in Britain. By this time, the utopian expectations nurtured by the passing of the Reform Act had long since foundered in disillusionment. The working class bitterly resented what they regarded as their betrayal by the Whigs and the middle class, who had used the threat of popular violence to extort the Reform Act from the ruling aristocracy and had then "thanked" their former allies with the wholly inadequate Factory Act of 1833, the persecution of the Todpuddle martyrs, and above all the repressive New Poor Law of 1834.¹ When the depression of 1837 added industrial unemployment on a huge scale to these grievances, the working class responded with the Chartist movement, based on a demand for universal manhood suffrage to be enforced by the weight of mass petitioning.² This working class movement can be described as a major "turning point" in history, for it was an event in which socialism first manifested itself as an active ideology, and one which left the proletariat decidedly ranged against the ruling class. Hence, it was in an atmosphere of rising public alarm engendered by the grinding

collision between two sectors in society that Disraeli and Carlyle's writings made their impact.

Having said this, Benjamin Disraeli and Thomas Carlyle can now be presented as two of the writers who responded creatively to the "Other Nation," for they both played an important part in publicizing the Condition-of-England question by reacting to the challenge of Chartism. *Sybil*, "Chartism," and *Past and Present* each reveal, on the other hand, the general fear of the more dominant classes faced with the brewing discontent of the masses and, on the other, the fantasies and sympathies of two individuals who genuinely tried to find some kind of solution for the regeneration of society.

At the time, Disraeli seemed the most unlikely man to become the leader of the land-owning party in the House of Commons. His outlandish Jewish name, his dark, foreign looks and his taste for bright and showy clothes (Maurois 1967: 224) did not augur the brilliant political career that was to be his. In the forties, Disraeli was still trying to forge a place for himself both in the Commons and in the literary field. It was his Trilogy—*Coningsby*, *Sybil*, and *Tancred*—that finally put him on the front rank of authors. The novel *Sybil* is of particular interest, since from it stems the core of the author's whole colourful and romantic aspirations for the future, and because it describes quite accurately the most striking consequence of the industrial revolution and the root-cause of the chartist movement, that is, the split into the two nations, the division of society into rich and poor—"have" and "have not."

Even though the "haves" (the industrialists and the landowners) often seemed disunited, their common interests were usually far stronger than their rivalry. In times of trouble, the wealthy classes therefore clung together as one body and held on tight to their positions and mutual privileges. The only institution which had the potential wealth and strength to be a powerful ally of the poor—the Established Church—also sided against them. The Church as an institution was deeply committed to the "haves." An example of this commitment could be Bishop Blomfield's declaration to a committee set up in 1832 to promote the better observation of the Sabbath. The bishop believed that it would prove difficult to attract the poor as well as the rich to the churches:

on account of the objections which were made by the richer classes to too great an intermixture of the poor among them; objections which it was absolutely necessary to attend to because the whole income of the minister depends on the pew rent, accruing exclusively from the richer classes. (Ingليس 1971: 404)

In other words, even the Church was forgetting its traditional Christian duty to the poor.

Although a few lawyers had given their services to the poor, particularly in connection with trade union cases, the Law, as an institution, was as biased as the Church in favour of the rich—and for the same reason: only from the rich could solicitors and barristers earn their living. Therefore in ordinary circumstances, the law afforded little protection to the lower classes since the poor lacked the means to resort to lawyers in case of litigation.

With the Government, the Church and the Law all ranged against them, discrimination against the poor became easy. It manifested itself in a great variety of ways: high rents, taxes on malt, on windows, on corn, game laws, mantraps, sentences of transportation and even Sunday observance regulations. The rich could use their carriages and their servants to get out into the country or visit friends on Sundays, while all recreation grounds, parks and gardens were closed for the workers. On top of that, all the shops were closed—except for the sale of gin. This, in broad lines was the gulf that separated the two nations.

Although the phrase "the Two Nations" was actually coined by Disraeli, discussion of the idea that the British nation was split into two by increasingly obvious and manifest poverty and discrimination had been a "sign of the times" for some years. Carlyle had already analysed the ills of English society by having his fictitious professor Teufelsdröckh divide the community into Dandies and Poor Slaves (Carlyle 1975: 204-206; 210-214) and evidently, Carlyle was conscious of the ominous problem when he invited his readers in *Past and Present* to:

Descend where you will into the lower class, in Town or Country, by what avenue you will, by opening your eyes and looking, the same sorrowful result discloses itself: you have to admit that the working body of the rich English Nation has sunk or is fast sinking into a state, to which, there was literally never any parallel. (1976:3)

By means of the novel *Sybil*, Disraeli likewise invites his readers to accompany his main character Egremont—a typical representative of the "haves"—into the world of pauperism, labour and chartist leaders with the hope that the enforced acquaintance with the other nation would "give a new aspect to much that was known" and "ultimately reveal much that was utterly obscure" (1980: 169). In other words, that the experience would induce his audience, as it did Egremont, to "view public questions in a tone very different to that of a few weeks back" (1980: 170).

The story opens with the death of William IV and the accession of Victoria. The action covers the period from the first chartist petition of 1839 to the riots that followed the rejection of the second petition in 1842. Around these

events, the author weaves in the story of a love affair between his young aristocrat and Sybil Gerard, the daughter of the chartist Walter Gerard, who turns out to be the true heir to Mowbray Castle and an aristocrat in his own right. However, this Cinderella-type fairy tale does not blot out the more sinister theme in the novel. Disraeli uses Egremont as a sort of go-between from one nation to the other. As we follow him, we are taken from the elegant circles in London to Mr Digg's Tommy shop in Wodgate; from his brother's estate at Marney Abbey to Sybil's humble home, from the political conspiracies of his mother's salons to the secret intrigues of chartist organizers. This is how the author manages to present a series of parallels between the two worlds and to bring out into the open what, he believed, were the major deficiencies or shortcomings of each faction. For instance, Disraeli intermingles scenes of violence and misery among the destitute with lengthy descriptions of the upper class busying itself with trivial issues like the bedchamber plot and the Jamaica bill³. In this way, the author consistently exposes the darker side of England's nineteenth-century prosperity and the ruling class's unhealthy complacency and shallowness. It says much for Disraeli that he should feel constrained to produce such a picture of his own world and it gives some indication of the author's political attitude. But his proper analysis of the strife must be seen in the development of the love affair between Egremont, the young aristocrat, and Sybil, the daughter of the people.

When Egremont's real identity is finally disclosed to Sybil, her immediate reaction is to shrink away from him in disgust:

"The brother of Lord Marney!" repeated Sybil, with an air almost of stupor.

"Yes," said Egremont: "a member of those oppressors of the people, whom you have denounced to me with such withering scorn."

"I am sorry for my words, sorry indeed for all that has past; and that my father has lost a pleasant friend."

"And why should he be lost?" said Egremont mournfully, and yet with tenderness.

"Why should we not still be friends?"

"Oh, sir!" said Sybil haughtily; "I am one of those who believe that the gulf is impassable. Yes, utterly impassable!" (1980: 299-300)

By means of Sybil, the author clearly shows that the chartists' simple and narrow-minded division of society into oppressors and oppressed, or miserable and innocent people on the one side and luxurious tyrants on the other, was erroneous and contributed just as much as the despotism of a few to the widening of the existing social gulf.

We may now ask ourselves what solution Disraeli proposed to remedy this sharp disconnection between social classes, for no clear-cut prescription is

anywhere laid out in the book. It seems, as mentioned beforehand, that the author's motive in writing the novel was simply to invite his readers to enter the experience of his hero in the novel. But now that a certain relationship has been established between Egremont and Sybil, it may be said that the reader finds himself "hooked" into following the fortunes of both the young people. In other words, as the story advances, Disraeli's political philosophy will slowly unravel itself if we consider his characters as "sociological case studies rather than individuals" (Blake 1966: 218).

What Sybil and Morley show to Egremont of the horrors in manufacturing towns and agricultural districts is terrible enough, but the reader soon learns that even more terrible is the previous unawareness of the young man that such things did exist and that his class was responsible for them. On the other hand, Sybil (and through her, the reader) is made aware of the fact that the rich did not invariably tyrannize the poor with that mingled sentiment of hatred and scorn.

In raising this double issue Disraeli showed himself quite lucid as to the failings of his own class and very sympathetic to the sufferings of the working class. However, the author was condescending to both nations' political aims. Whereas he portrayed the upper class's politics as entirely manipulative and self-seeking, he saw the chartists' claims as an innocent but totally mistaken attempt to cure deep-rooted evils by means of democracy. This is made evident when he has Egremont warn Sybil, who is full of exultation at the prospect of a People's Parliament, that "your convention is in its bloom, or rather its bud; all is fresh and pure now; but a little while and it will find the fate of all popular assemblies. You will have factions" (1980: 286).

These factions are then personified in the character of Morley—a leader of the People, but one, like many others, who wished to shape the movement to his own ends. Infuriated by the discovery of Sybil's feelings for Egremont, he cruelly tells her that Gerard, her father, stands alone in the purity of his ideals and is surrounded by "emulous and intriguing rivals" (1980: 305). He concludes his vicious rendering of the state of affairs by saying: "Our career (the Chartist Movement) will be a vulgar caricature of the bad passions and the low intrigues, the factions and the failures, of our oppressors" (1980: 305).

This explains why, further on in the novel, Disraeli labels the whole episode of Chartist agitations as "a mean and selfish Revolution" (1980: 497). In his opinion, the vote for the working class would not reconcile or mediate the gulf between the two worlds. Morley, in his anger, is convinced that "the spirit that will cure our ills must be of a deeper and finer mood" (1980: 304). In other words, what was needed was a revolution of a different kind. The cold and factual relationship between employer and employee, or exploiter and exploited, should be replaced by a nation-wide alliance and bond of loyalty and mutual

t between the people and a regenerated aristocracy. We therefore find in the final chapters of the novel not only a rather sobering moral for any of the cause but also a clear indication of Disraeli's long-term solution to the problem. The violent and uncontrolled attack of the chartists on Mowbray Castle is heavily the sort of horrors that dominated the English image of the French Revolution. On the other hand, the eventual marriage of the heroine Sybil—Disraeli's variation of Cinderella—with Egremont—"the prince"—is not simply a happy finale to a fairy tale. Rather, if we look upon the heroes as representatives of each nation, then, their union becomes a symbol of the author's romantic visions for the future.

It was a very conservative ideal. Disraeli never contemplated either redistribution of wealth or wider franchise. His idealized future relied entirely on the visible and benignant leadership by the aristocracy, as the natural leaders of the country, and a faithful dependance and collaboration from the people with their socially-conscious rulers. In this way, both factions, instead of colliding and ignoring each other, would work together for the general happiness of all. In other words, the novel *Sybil* can be looked upon as a romantic appeal for responsible leadership and, as such, it recalls heavily Carlyle's best piece of criticism "Chartism," and anticipates the major theme of the thinker's later work *Past and Present*.

In "Chartism," published in 1839, Thomas Carlyle coined two other terms: "The Condition of England Question" and "The Cash-Nexus," both of which soon became household words in social debates throughout the nineteenth century.

In spite of its title, the Chartist movement is not the major theme of the novel. It is only, according to Carlyle, the latest and most alarming manifestation of the "deep-lying struggle in the whole fabric of society" (1964: 186). Nor had Carlyle any sympathy with the Chartist remedy of universal manhood suffrage. Carlyle considered that suffering on this scale was the fault of the ruling class and the society that permitted it. And it is in connection with the appalling famine of Ireland under English rule that the writer makes his strongest point: English misgovernment had brought starvation in Ireland. The famine was the arrival in England in the 1830s and 1840s of a flood of Irish labourers whose competition lowered wages in the mainland and led to more unemployment, in turn leading to the rise of mass popular protest in the form of Chartism (1964: 186-87). Hence, the importance of the Chartist movement to Carlyle was the self-

not the more emphatically mean, "See what guidance you have given us! What delirium we are brought to talk and project, guided by nobody!" (1964: 222-23).

Consequently, the author's fiercest denunciations are reserved for the laissez-faire theorists who did nothing to relieve suffering—an attitude which he stigmatizes as "Paralytic Radicalism" (1964: 227). In his opinion, the leading class of society is responsible for the physical and moral well-being of the people over whom it rules, but is representative for the people rather than to them. In other words, the duty of the ruling class is not to carry out the will of the people but to guide and direct them.

Having reached this point, it seems that both Disraeli and Carlyle agree entirely on the necessary remedy for the times. In other words, only one solution has so far been forwarded for the regeneration of society. This almost mystical vision of rulers and ruled, bound by a relationship of mutual dependence, evidently took shape in "Chartism" and was then taken up and fictionalized by Disraeli in his novel. However, a basic difference in the prescriptions forwarded emerged in *Past and Present*.

In the first chapters of this book, which could be described as a fuller and more carefully worked out version of "Chartism," Carlyle very effectively shows up the great anomaly of the times: the contrast between the gigantic productive possibilities unleashed by the Industrial Revolution and the massive unemployment that resulted from it. His most vivid picture is that of heaps of unsellable factory-made shirts on the one hand and, on the other, thousands of "bare backs" willing and anxious to work but unable to acquire the bare necessities of life (1976: 165). But, according to Carlyle, the physical hardship of the working classes was only a secondary problem. What they stood in dire need of was a sense of purpose and direction. Above all, he insisted, the suffering mass clamoured for leadership, for heroes to rule them. The writer does not mince his words and his message or warning to the public can be summarized in the following way: if the existing ruling class did not mend its ways and show itself capable of responsible leadership, Britain would follow France, and find its heroes through revolution. However, the novelty to be found in *Past and Present* is Carlyle's sharp categorization of the upper classes into "Dilettantes" and "Mammonists." By "Dilettantes" he referred to the privileged landowning aristocracy, who, like the aristocracy in France before 1789, had abandoned the duties of governing and retained only its privileges. In other words, they had become a class of idle and unproductive parasites (1976: 144-147). The "Mammonists" represented the industrial middle class. Carlyle much preferred

they worked blindly, with no aim but the accumulation of wealth and with total disregard for the well-being of their employees (1976: 139-144).

England could be saved, but only by the emergence of a new, morally responsible, working aristocracy, a phenomenon which Carlyle saw as much more likely to arise from the new middle class than from the old aristocracy. This is basically the thinker's message to his readers and the point on which he fundamentally differs from Disraeli. For, it must be noted that never at any moment in *Sybil* does Disraeli contemplate any member of this class as a feasible ruler or rescuer of society. As the reader is shuttled from the top to the bottom of the social ladder, he only gets a glimpse of the industrialist in the person of Hutton at Wodgate. The fact that this captain of industry is portrayed as a down-and-out villain and perverse tyrant indirectly reveals the old exclusive spirit of aristocracy or the inherent Toryism of the author-cum-politician.

This could probably explain the tremendous impact on the public of Carlyle's works in comparison with Disraeli's novel. At the time, people viewed with terror the mere thought of extending the vote to this mass of uneducated brutes. Hence, although both authors rejected any purely political solution—including Chartism—to the problem of the two nations, although neither of them advocated any economic remedy which could affect in any way the public's property, it cannot be forgotten that these works owed part of their success precisely to their appeal to middle class readership. Carlyle's upholding of the middle class potential was bound to cause sensation whereas Disraeli seemed more concerned to demonstrate the continuing relevance of aristocracy. For this reason, his proposed remedy surely constituted, in the eyes of the great public, a sort of watering-down of the more radical elements of Carlyle's thinking.

However, Disraeli must not be thought of as a standard-bearer of traditional toryism. The whole purpose of his novel *Sybil* was to propound the political programme of Young England which could be described as a radical fraction within the old Tory party (Blake 1966: 194). Disraeli and a group of young élites from Eton and Cambridge had developed a common viewpoint: they opposed utilitarianism and therefore disliked the middle classes for their self-benefitting attitude and greed but they were equally impatient of the general inaction of Toryism in power. Instead they wished to restore monarchy to its ancient authority and to see their new Toryism revive a harmonious relationship between the throne, the peers and the people.

So basically, it seems that in spite of the different election of potential rulers, the two solutions forwarded for the regeneration of society are at bottom one and the same. And yet, it is in the pictures of past times that dimly emerge in *Sybil* and "Chartism," and which are more fully delineated in *Past and Present*, that the one divergence between them arises. Once and again Disraeli

has his characters Gerard and Sybil compare present times to an idealized past under William the Conqueror, with its closely integrated hierarchical society, its religious faith, its natural leaders and its contented peasants: "I deny that the condition of the main body is better now than at any other period in history; I say, for instance, the people were better clothed, better lodged and better fed just before the War of the Roses than they are at this moment" (1981: 214). Disraeli used this very personal image of early medieval times as a striking contrast to the new order that was pushing it aside and, as a romantic dreamer, he upheld feudal society as an ideal which could still be revived. This is why his aristocratic character Egremont is endowed with all the qualities of a knight, and, yet again, why the hero of the story acquires the status of a political symbol.

Carlyle also looked upon medieval times as a model of healthy society. Book II of *Past and Present* is a description of life in the Abbey of Bury St. Edmund's in the late twelfth century. By means of his chronicle, the thinker portrays a society not yet infected by individualism, in which "cash nexus" is not the only bond between men, and, most important of all, where men had a natural instinct for recognizing their natural leaders. However, with respect to leadership, the important point is that Carlyle did not have a whole class in mind, but only one single leader. At the beginning of the story, the Abbey is in a sad state of debt under the control of an incompetent Abbot. After his death, because men were still guided by a healthy instinct, the apparently illogical and confused process of election (1976: 74-80) produces the right man, the reforming Abbot Samson. Carlyle depicts this ideal leader as a hard-headed realist, a harsh disciplinarian and a sharp man of business, that is, a man possessing all the qualities of the nineteenth-century captain of industry. But implied throughout the story is also the thinker's call for an absolute ruler or, to put it more bluntly, for a Führer. In other words, Carlyle's ideal solution or recipe for the crisis of the times had a very fascist tinge to it. The writer's cult of the hero and passionate rejection of democracy can strike readers nowadays as rather unsympathetic; but seen against the background of his time, it is possible to understand his ideas. In a period of radical transition and vast problems, men felt lost in a maze of ideas. Utilitarianism, Feudalism, Fascism, Chartism, Socialism—which was the road to salvation? The choice was so baffling and the need for guidance so imperative that many confused Victorians earnestly wished for the appearance of some dynamic hero or saviour that would lead them out of the general havoc of the time. Hence Carlyle, who so memorably expressed the anxieties and aspirations of his contemporaries, presents Oliver Cromwell as a romantic archetypal "loner," who made his own the essentially solitary role of the prophet:

Oliver Cromwell . . . remains to me by far the remarkablest governor we have had here for the last five centuries or so. For the last five centuries, there has been no governor among us with anything like similar talent; Oliver, no volunteer in Public Life, but plainly a balloted soldier strictly ordered thither, enters upon Public Life; comports himself there like a man who carried his own life in his hand; like a man whose Great Commander's eye was always with him. Not without results. In senate-house and battle-field, in counsel and in action, in private and in public, this man has proved himself a man. (1976: 214)

It now seems that instead of reaching a logical conclusion, this survey has developed into a paradox: both Disraeli and Carlyle look back to past times in order to find a solution for the present. In other words, according to these two authors, future progress depends on the reassertion of old values—feudalism, the alliance of peers and people or a Cromwell type of dictatorship. Both Disraeli and Carlyle disregard the political importance of the Chartist movement because the concept of the lower classes organizing themselves to press their own claims clashes with traditional values of loyalty and respect for the regeneration of society rely on the attitude which each "Nation" should adopt towards the other.

However, this apparently earnest, benevolent and idealized vision of society also encloses specific arguments that were particularly appealing to the public the authors were trying to reach. It seems that, in an age dominated by utilitarianism, when the only valid sanction was self-interest, both the authors' defense of the aristocracy really bore testimony to a feeling entertained by many people in the nineteenth century: that is, the feeling that all the rich heritage of one nation must have, or must have had, a justification. This feeling of necessity is what generated that myth of the aristocracy, present in the works of Disraeli and Carlyle, together with the pictures of a golden age when the existence of such a class was fully justifiable. On the other hand, this need for reassurance was also met by the more desperate expediency present in Carlyle's *Past and Present*, of the justification for dictatorship.

In short, for both Disraeli and Carlyle the point is that the existing ruling classes had better awaken to the impending threat, and do something about the ominous problem of the Two Nations before it was too late.

NOTES

1. Lord Althorp's factory bill was a real advance in comparison with former attempts at factory legislation since it appointed paid inspectors, whose duty it was to see that the law was carried out. However, although the important principle of state interference between masters and employees had been established, the act represented a

very diluted answer to the demands of the people who had long been campaigning for the Ten Hour Bill. The working people's dissatisfaction mounted still more with the incident of the Todpudde Martyrs in 1834. These were a group of farm workers who met in Todpudde in Dorset, to form a farm-workers' Trade Union branch. To join the branch the members were made to swear an oath of loyalty to their fellow-members. Even though Unions were legal since 1824, the leaders of the Todpudde labourers were prosecuted and condemned under an old law of 1797—The Unlawful Oaths Act. This incident increased the widespread feeling that the newly reformed government was just as much the People's enemy as the old Tory parliament. One of the first measures passed by the 1832 parliament was the New Poor Law which aimed at forcing the poorer members of the community into the market of labour by removing the relief that had traditionally been given to labourers in support of low wages. (See Thompson 1981: 104-107; Carter and Mears 1960: 806; 821; 810-11; Hopkins 1979: 58-59; 42-43; 88-91, 146-148).

2. The origin of the movement lies in the setting up of the London Working Men's Association in 1836 by a group of London radicals of whom William Lovett was the most prominent. In 1837 Lovett drafted the famous charter which summed up the major demands of the Association. These demands were widely publicized in popular pamphlets, one of which was in the form of a dialogue between Mr Doubtful and a Radical. Mr Doubtful asks the meaning of "Chartist":

Radical: "It is one who is an advocate for the People's Charter."

Mr Doubtful: "The People's Charter, pray what is that?"

Radical: "It is an outline of an Act of Parliament, drawn up by a committee of the London Working Men's Association, and six members of parliament; and embraces six cardinal points of radical Reform."

Mr Doubtful: "What are these points?"

Radical: "They are as follows: 1. Universal suffrage 2. Annual parliaments 3. Vote by Ballot 4. Equal Representation 5. Payment of members 6. No property qualifications." (Hopkins, 1979: 44)

The most serious attempts at an armed rising in the Chartist period occurred in 1839, after the first National Petition had been rejected by the House of Commons. The petition was presented with over a million signatures and the House of Commons was asked to consider the six points but only 46 members voted in favour while 235 voted against. In 1842 a second National Petition was drawn up. It contained the same six points and some three million signatures were attached to it. This time 49 M.P.s voted for it and 287 against. The Third Chartist petition was presented to Parliament in 1848, and its acceptance was moved by Feargus O'Connor, leader of the chartist movement recently elected as M. P. for Nottingham. But there were fewer signatures than in 1842, and even less support among the members of the House of Commons. (Hopkins 1979: 45-48; Thompson 1981: 113-119).

3. In 1839, Lord Melbourne resigned as Prime Minister, making way for Sir Robert Peel. The first thing the incoming minister demanded of the Queen as proof of her entire support and confidence was that the Whig ladies in waiting (of the Bedchamber) should be removed from the royal household. The Queen refused point blank. The whole

incident caused a certain flurry in the upper circles of society and ended in Peel's refusal to form a ministry. The Jamaica Bill was a Whig proposal to suspend the Jamaican constitution as a punishment or retaliation to the Jamaican assembly who insisted on managing their own affairs without interference from the mother country. The point at hand is the fact that such an insignificant matter concerning a small and distant colony could fill the minds of the ruling class and blot out the much more pressing problems at home.

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