Socialism Next Time

In this timely review article, Roger Coates looks at the early development of Australian socialism, with particular reference to Verity Burgmann’s recently published book *In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labor 1885-1905*. 
In her recently published book In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labor 1885-1905, Verity Burgmann takes us back a hundred years to a much simpler time. In the 1880s, the immigrant people of a large southern hemisphere island, fairly recently seized bit by bit from its Aboriginal inhabitants, in six quite disparate colonial settlements, parts of greater Britain, were struggling towards an ambiguous nationality and a degree of independence.

This very important book deals with the early development of a socialist sentiment in these British colonies. It is a fairly straightforward account of first wave Australian socialism, written largely by colony, with the emphasis on New South Wales. One of its strengths is the forceful narrative, and there are some very useful political biographical vignettes of some of the less well-known radicals and agitators of the time, as well as better known figures such as William Lane, William Morris Hughes and William Holman. (These of course all rated. One of Burgmann's sub-themes is the whys and wherefores of socialist ratting, but I think her analysis is a bit superficial.)

The book as a whole is a much more thorough treatment than any previous account, filling many gaps and enabling us to get a much clearer idea of what happened and of some of the connections and interactions. Unfortunately, however, despite the subtitle, it tends to focus too narrowly on its own period and the socialists as such. It sometimes ignores or minimises the wider context, thus tending to leave important points underdeveloped. For this reason it needs to be read in conjunction with other texts, particularly those of Gollan, Nairn, Turner and McQueen, and the economic histories of Fitzpatrick. 1

Socialist thinking, propaganda and agitation appeared on the eastern seaboard of Australia in the mid-1880s, first, because it reflected contemporary intellectual trends in the major anglophone centres of the world, especially London, New York, Chicago and San Francisco. British and American publications and news arrived and circulated in Australia six to twelve months after publication, and directly and indirectly the ideas they brought were taken up, printed and talked about. Returning colonists, new immigrants or visitors were other sources of new ideas. 2

The Australian colonies were a British base in the South Pacific, and the Australian economy and society reflected this state of affairs. The evolution of Australian political culture was the result of the continuing struggle between various conservative and opposing reforming currents. The colonial economy, apart from the exploitation of the large, accessible gold deposits, operated largely as a supplier of raw materials to the metropolitan industries and markets. By the 1880s, the principal colonies had become very valuable British assets with important cities whose town halls and other principal public buildings reminded visitors of the great Victorian structures found in Manchester and Birmingham.

British Influence

Paralleling the British influence in the economy and institutions, from at least the 1820s, a simplified form of political and cultural debate and action spread outward from the centre, permeating colonial life. As great movements of ideas were generated, mainly at the imperial centre, the echo in the Australian colonies, even if somewhat muted. Often, because of the truncated, incomplete form of the transported society, these ideas took on a different shape and tone and an Australian, but still recognisably British style, emerged. While the forging of the Australian colonies promoted the growth of imperial Britain, an increasing conflict of interests led to an Australian sentiment, the precondition for an emerging nation.

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By the middle of the 1880s, an identifiable Australian class structure had taken shape, with workers and owners of capital as the two principal social forces. Conservatism remained the dominant ideology, but a rival liberal-radical praxis gave the conservatives little peace. Through the 1870s and '80s, the active workers, principally through the growing trade union movement, forged trade and inter-colonial links to the point where, in one major heavily capitalised industry — mining (both metalliferous and coal) — a genuine if simple industrial union ideology emerged and bits of this ideology quickly spread to the pastoral industry (the other major productive capitalised industry) and to the crucially important maritime transport industry.

In this context, then, socialist ideology appeared in the Australian colonies although, in fact, the socialisms from Britain and the United States were not first in the field. While, after 1878, the dominant Australian society and culture was largely Anglo-Saxon with a Celtic admixture, leaving aside the interaction with Aboriginal life and culture, there were always other ethnic and cultural components of the social mix.

Burgmann forcefully demonstrates that the German and, to a lesser extent, other communities, especially the Italian, provided a leavening of continental socialism. It affected, not always marginally, the majority anglophone communities in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

The Altegemeiner Deutscher Verein (ADV) (General German Association) in South Australia, the site of a German community since the 1850s, actually predated the Melbourne Anarchist Club (1886) by a few weeks. Although the ADV fulfilled a very important general cultural and social role for the German-speaking people, its political orientation lay very definitely towards the Social Democratic Party of Germany. The ADV participated in many activities of a general political character including affiliation to the Labor Party in 1891.

Continental Socialism

German socialists and radicals were very important in Melbourne (1887) and Sydney (1890) too, and influenced such important native Australians as William (Dr.) Maloney and Harry (H.E.) Holland. The latter, one of Australia's and New Zealand's most
important international socialists, was strongly influenced by the emigre Sicilian architecture student, Francis Sceusa. Sceusa had been forced into exile in the 1870s after being active in the Italian section of the First International. In 1893 he represented both the Social Democratic Federation of Australasia, an ASL breakaway, and the ASL (Australian Socialist League) at the Zurich Congress of the Second International. On his return to Australia, after a triumphant visit to Sicily, he continued his activity in the very important, anti-racist International Socialist Club (ISC). In 1907 the ISC was one of the important centres of the socialist second wave. From its bar profits it financed the publication of the International Socialist Review (ISR) modelled on the American ISR, with Holland as its increasingly influential editor.

The continental influence aside, it must be acknowledged that the socialism and socialist models followed in Australia were predominantly British and, to a lesser extent, American. The three main British socialist organisations in the 1880s were the SDF (Social Democratic Federation), the Socialist League and the Fabian Society and all these were replicated to some degree in name at least in Australia. Just as the naming of organisations followed British models, the Australian sort of socialism that they propagated predominantly followed British and American schools of socialist thought.

What sort of socialism took root in the Australian colonies?

First-wave Australian socialism was not uniquely eclectic. Socialism in most countries was heterogeneous, but British socialism from which the Australian brand largely derived was particularly unsystematic with many cross-currents. Australian socialism was certainly pluralistic if not, at times, ill-defined and fuzzy. Burgmann lays greater stress on Marx's influence on first-wave Australian socialism than is usually the case. Before examining this claim in a little more detail, it may be worth considering the various schools of socialist thought that became part of Australian socialism in the 1880s and '90s.

Four or five more-or-less distinct schools or trends emerge from Burgmann's account. She distinguishes four main schools, apart from Marxism: state socialism, municipal socialism, bush socialism and Christian socialism, although she identifies another school, referred to as Modern socialism, a form of small-scale, self-helping, co-operative socialism. This school shared its anti-authoritarianism with the libertarian socialists and anarcho-communists, who formed a possible sixth school. It would be wrong to suggest that the early socialists and socialist organisations operated solely within a particular school or that there were mutually exclusive trends, with no cross-currents or individual shifts of opinion.

The first groups in both Melbourne and Sydney were

William Lane in 1892
municipal reforms in the far northern city (pp. 170-180).

It was the English Fabian socialists who advocated and pushed so-called municipal socialism as part of their tactic of "permeation", initially regarding it as a preferable approach to strict state socialism, which was more the domain of the British Social Democratic Federation under H.M. Hyndman's leadership.6

**Karl Marx**

Although so-called scientific socialists insist that their argument is not ethically but scientifically based, Karl Marx was clearly a great moralist, and one of the appeals of Marxism has been its underlying ethical force. But in the development of socialist thought, especially perhaps in England, a concern for ethical and liberal values became divorced from the economic and deterministic values that most early English Marxists emphasised. (The outstanding exception, of course, was William Morris.)

British socialism tended to draw quite heavily on both an evangelical, dissenting and non-conformist Christianity and a secular rationalism for its social and personal ethics. Within English socialism, dating back at least to Robert Owen, there is a strong ethical strain. Burgmann, I think, fails to fully pick this up. If she had, it would have been analytically reasonable to subsume a lot of Bush socialism and Christian socialism into a more comprehensive school of ethical or idealistic socialism. Moreover, such an analytical point makes it possible to approach William Lane with greater balance.

As part of the heterogeneity of early Australian socialism, there were strong libertarian and anti-authoritarian strands from the start. The Melbourne Anarchist Club and the early ASL both had marked libertarian leanings. Because of William Lane's proclivities and attachment to the American socialist writer, Edward Bellamy, in Brisbane the libertarian influence seems to have been weaker. However, Lane's younger brother, Ernie (E.H.) was quite at ease with all manner of rebels and radicals. Long after the older Lane had abandoned his socialist beliefs and ideals, Ernie Lane, throughout a very long life, remained in the forefront of the work of building socialism from below.

The broad aims of the libertarians were essentially the same as the state socialists', but they differed radically about detail and method. They believed in a socialism that was at once more individualistic and more concerned with the self-action of the workers themselves. They favoured a self-helping socialism rooted in self-managed co-operative enterprises. They sought to prepare the working class for a revolution in their own image.

The most important of the purely libertarian organisations was the Active Service Brigade (ASB), formed in Sydney in 1893 as the 1890s depression hit home. It prefigured much of the style, philosophy and tactics adopted by the Chicagoite direct-actionist IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) in Sydney twenty years later. In fact, one of the ASB's principal figures, John Dwyer, took part in launching the Sydney IWW local in 1911.

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**Marxism**

Which bring us to Marxism and one of the major points of Burgmann's argument. In the early development of Australian socialism, just how important was Marx's influence? Were Marxists thick on the ground?

When W.G. Higgs, asked at the 1891 Royal Commission on Strikes to name a well known socialist writer, said "I think Karl Marx, who believes in State Co-operation, would be the nearest", he seemed to suggest they were.9 On the other hand, Robin Gollan does not list Marx in the index of either of his books on the period and observes that "Perhaps Marx's theory of value was not widely known..."11

Burgmann disagrees, stating in her introduction that "labour historians have underestimated the impact of Marxism in this period" and arguing "if any single idea could be isolated and designated as the driving force of the socialist movement in this period, it would be the notion of surplus value". Even Burgmann herself, in at least one very important case — that of William Lane — has failed to recognise the impact Marx made in a specific conjuncture. Her second point, however, is very dubious.

If Burgmann is right about the underestimation of Marxist influence, what was this Marxism like? Especially at the beginning of the period, there were probably few of Marx's works readily available. Capital I was translated into English only in 1887, although there may have been copies of the German or French versions around for those who could read those languages. Those Marxist ideas that were propounded tended to be economic and deterministic in the spirit of Orthodox Marxism (pp. 58, 122-3, 168, 176, 180, 194). Burgmann does draw attention to one or two reasonable accurate discussions of surplus value, particularly in the early pamphlets of the important Victorian socialist pamphleteer Tom Turnelliffe,12 but to say, as she does, that the socialist movement aimed at "the reconquest of surplus value" is overstating the point. Moreover, it appears that she believes that the frequent references to the right of labour to its full product confirms this claim.

"There is no way round the state, conceding all the limitations and sources of weakness in state action. Any viable socialist strategy in Australia is dependent on this realisation."

Loosely, very loosely, this demand could notionally be linked to Marxist economic and social analysis, but it is not really Marxist. That labourers are entitled to and should demand the full product of their labour is decidedly pre-Marxist. It is, in fact, the principal economic point which arose from the Ricardian anti-capitalist school of economic thought that flourished in the 1820s and '30s. With Owen, it provided the theoretical basis of the first phase of English socialism.13 Thus, first-wave Australian socialism can be linked to the earliest developments of the
English school, but to seem to attribute it to Marx is misleading.

A Marxist socialist would have raised the demand for the abolition of classes or at the very least the abolition of the system of wage-labour. Of the most significant theoretical analyses Burgmann quotes, one of the clearest is the 1894 ASL's *Manifesto to the People of Australia* (p.58). This has quite a sharp edge, referring to "class antagonisms", "capitalist class", "wage-earning class", "class supremacy" and "robbery" but it finally merely calls for "the mode of production for profit" to be superseded by "national or collective production for use" (p.58).

**William Lane**

As Michael Wilding has rightly pointed out, there is at least one place in the contemporary literature where elements of a stronger marxist analysis can be found, namely in the much maligned William Lane's remarkable socialist novel *The Workingman's Paradise*, but Burgmann ignores these aspects of Lane's thinking (pp.20-24).

For the last fifteen or twenty years, especially, it has been fashionable to denigrate Lane, largely because of his terrible racist sentiments, which were not confined to the Chinese and blacks, but were anti-semitic, too. My intervention is not an attempt to whitewash this ghastly weakness, but to bring the debate closer to Robin Gollan's reasonably balanced judgment of twenty-five years ago, although Gollan did not recognise adequately the "Marxist" tendency in Lane.

Lane was not a Marxist but an eclectic thinker and writer with a complicated socialist outlook. Only twenty-four years old on his arrival in 1885, and in Australia for only eight years, he was more of a regional than a national influence. Nevertheless, Lane made a major impact on the Australian scene. Initially a devotee of Henry George, but probably influenced by an interest in labour questions in Canada and the United States, including the activity of the radical Knights of Labor, in 1887-8 he moved from a basically radical nationalist viewpoint to a well formulated socialism. At rock bottom, his views put him in the ethical/idealistic school but, for several years, he incorporated other tendencies - state socialist, communitarian, co-operative and Marxist.

There are two key points here that make this emphasis on Lane so important. Lane was not only a self-taught talented thinker and writer who embraced significant elements of Marxism. He was, for three or four crucial years, an organiser and leading force of the vanguard of the Queensland labour movement. With Albert Hinchcliffe, Charles Seymour, Matt Reid and others, he laid out the Maritime Strike and the Shearers' Strike of the first half of 1891, the same conjuncture that tipped the balance towards organised Labor parties. Between about the middle of 1891 and 1892, Lane's analyses have more of a Marxist flavour, although still mixed inescapably with his more basic views — views which, for a variety of reasons, got the upper hand in 1892-3, as Lane became disillusioned with his vision of Australia as a potentially ideal society.

**Other Features**

There are plenty of other features and qualities of first-wave Australian socialism which deserve a full examination, but that is hardly feasible. Some will say that I have not addressed the feminist issue and I regret that. Burgmann gives more prominence to active female socialists and the place of women in the socialist movement than any previous author on the topic but, for reasons I can only guess at, does not address the socialism/feminism issue head on.

Her study emphasises once again the special importance of the eastern seaboard but, within this broad geographical division, there were and are very important regional differences, something evident in the contemporary socialist scene. Although Burgmann does not bring it into really sharp focus, there is plenty of evidence of the importance of popular socialist culture, a subject that warrants separate study.

In the ten years before 1905, Victorian socialists sowed the seeds of the mass socialist party Tom Mann helped form in 1905-6. Between the socialist co-operative society behind the newspaper *Tocsin* and the *Tocsin* clubs, the Victorian Labour Federation, the Victorian Socialists' League and the Social Democratic Party of Victoria, there were important connections and the creation of a definite, characteristic political and cultural milieu which makes the VSP (Victorian Socialist Party) a much more intelligible phenomenon.

For two or three years before 1905-6, Tom Mann had conducted his unique political and industrial campaigns which were to last until his departure for England in 1909. The ultimate issue raised by Burgmann and not, in my opinion, really dealt with adequately, is the part first-wave socialism played in crystallising the idea of independent...
labour political representation and the emergence of Labor parties in each colony. Burgmann's book gives a much more solid factual basis to those who argue that experience of the social and political crisis of 1890-1 tipped the balance towards electoral and parliamentary struggle. Labor had to enter parliament as a united and disciplined political party if Labor's wrongs were to be righted. Labor had to mobilise to put pressure on within the parliamentary state.

Burgmann attributes the failure of first-wave socialism to the dominance of the state socialist school of thought. It was the influence of state socialist thinking, she argues, that led to the formation of the Labor parties, and this, she believes was a monumental error. The socialists got enveloped in parliamentary state activity and sucked into a morass from which they could not extricate themselves. But there is an alternative explanation which Burgmann does not seriously consider. From about 1884, the most tried and tested in the intercolonial trade union movement had begun to ponder deeply the establishment of a distinct political party of labour. The condition of this possibility was the existence of a popular parliamentary consciousness that went back more than two centuries in English-speaking societies. The growth and spread of this consciousness, especially in the 1890-1 crisis, determined the relative success of state socialist thinking among the more active workers. The trade unionists who were in the forefront in 1890-1 came to believe that independent action to pressure the parliamentary state directly through political campaigns, election and parliamentary struggle was the way to go. Nor were they entirely wrong.

Because of the problems that followed from this course of action, and still follow, Burgmann cannot concede the truthful part of state socialist thinking. Indubitably, no truly viable solutions to the problems yet exist. But sidestepping or evasion will do no good. There is no way out of the state, conceding all the limitations and sources of weakness in state action. Any viable socialist strategy in Australia is dependent on this realisation. Not ignoring any other avenue for campaigns, movement and pressure, modern socialist strategy needs to acknowledge that the majority of first-wave pioneer socialists and trade union militants grasped an important truth, despite their imperfect understanding.

Footnotes


2. William Lane, born in Bristol in 1861, arrived in Brisbane in 1885 after eight years in North America, bringing with him, allegedly, Henry George's Progress and Poverty: between 1885 and 1890, S.A. (Sam) Higgs, A.G. Yewen, Matthew Reid, all members of the SDF, arrived or returned to Australia. The radical doctor and early socialist, W.D. (Dr.) Maloney also returned to Melbourne in this period. He became the MP for West Melbourne in 1889.

3. This sentiment was, of course, often radical, anti-imperialist white chauvinist and anti-semitic, all at the same time. See C.J.H. Clark (ed.) Select Documents in Australian History 1851-1906 (Sydney 1955), pp. 564-5.


5. The Australian Socialist League (1887), Social Democratic League (1889), South Australian Fabian Society (1891), Social Democratic Federation of Australasia (1892), Queensland Social Democratic Federation (1892), Queensland Socialist League (1896), Victorian Socialists' League (1897) and the Victorian Social Democratic Party (1902) and so on. The odd cases were the Brisbane Belamony formed by William Lane in 1887 and the Socialist Labor Party (1900).

6. William Lane's socialism was a fairly typical mixture, with the ethical: idealistic strand tending to come uppermost, but he did not rule out state socialism. "An Act of Parliament may prevent wage-slaves from being worked sixteen hours a day. An Act of Parliament, granted that Parliament represented the dominant thought of the people could even enforce a change of the entire social system". John Miller (William Lane), The Workingman's Paradise (Brisbane, 1892).

7. Incidentally, Fred Paterson's ideological evolution testifies to the persistence of heterogeneous cross-currents into third-wave Australian socialism. See Red Pem Publications Sixty Years of Struggles (Sydney, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 8-14.


9. Higgs was editor of the official trade union paper Australian Worker, formerly secretary of the New South Wales Typographical Association (the printers' union), he was an early member of the ASL. Later he was ector of the Queensland Worker, a Senator, Minister of the Crown and a Labor rat.


17. See Ebbets, Labour Movement, pp. 165-6 for a strongly stated state socialist view.

18. Wilding, "Introduction", pp. [41-8].

19. Ebbets, Labour Movement, pp. 139-40. Lane, Workingman's Paradise, pp. 107-8. Another possible factor in this process may have been the presence of marxist militant A.G. Yewen who worked in Brisbane on the Worker in 1891-2 before returning to Sydney to work with Holman and Hughes on the New Order in 1894.