

Review: Mark A. Allison, *Imagining Socialism: Aesthetics, Anti-politics, and Literature in Britain, 1817-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) 288pp. ISBN 9780192896490, £70.00.

SOPHIE THOMPSON

IN *IMAGINING SOCIALISM*, Mark A. Allison takes as his subject the entanglement of nineteenth-century British socialism with artistic, literary, and other aesthetic endeavours. This is by no means a new project: Ian Britain, Ruth Livesey, Diana Maltz and Chris Waters, among others, have noted the central role aesthetics played in late nineteenth-century socialist circles.¹ What makes Allison's *Imagining Socialism* unique, however, is its association of the creative and artistic socialism that emerged towards the end of the century — well-known for its major figures like William Morris — with other, earlier proponents of nineteenth-century socialism in Britain, such as Robert Owen, the Chartists and the Christian Socialists. While the work of Britain, Livesey, Maltz, Waters and others focuses on the fin de siècle, Allison traces a socialist aestheticism throughout the century. Allison's connecting thread is the anti-governmental ideological underpinnings of these individuals and groups, which he terms 'anti-politics': a utopian, emancipatory and imaginative vision of decentralised communality that defined many early socialist movements.² *Imagining Socialism's* premise is itself boldly utopian, opening with Allison's claim that socialism 'is best understood as *a goal to be imagined*, rather than an ideological program to be instantiated'.³

Imagining Socialism strives to make new connections between what are traditionally read as distinct strands of socialism — Owenism, Chartism and

¹ See Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: A Study of British Socialism and the Arts 1884-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Ruth Livesey, *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

² Mark A. Allison, *Imagining Socialism: Aesthetics, Anti-Politics, and Literature in Britain, 1817-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2, emphasis in original.

Christian Socialism — by identifying their subtle and overlooked aesthetic qualities. Allison’s description of both Owenism and Christian Socialism — usually regarded as strictly utilitarian — as aesthetic is particularly novel. Allison also resists the distinction usually made by scholars of nineteenth-century socialist history between early socialism (defined as approximately 1817-1845) and the fin-de-siècle ‘socialist revival’ (beginning in the early 1880s). Instead, Allison proposes a ‘long socialism’ to trace an anti-political socialist aesthetic throughout the entire century.⁴ Bookended by two very specific moments in British socialist history, *Imagining Socialism* traces this anti-political line: beginning with the unveiling of Robert Owen’s ‘Plan’ for communitarian villages in the summer of 1817 and ending with the adoption of a constitution for the parliamentary Labour Party in 1918. For Allison, these defining moments mark a century of an idealistic, ‘imaginative’, anti-political socialist aesthetic.

Allison identifies Robert Owen’s radical blueprint for ‘Villages of Unity and Mutual Cooperation’ as ‘British socialism’s symbolic birth’.⁵ Owen’s plan was rejected by parliament in 1817 and so he ultimately enacted it himself in the village surrounding his cotton mill at New Lanark. Despite Owen’s reputation for utilitarianism, Allison identifies a latent aesthetic logic in Owen’s plan to create a model society of ‘universal harmony’, a logic of which Owen himself may not have been aware.⁶ Allison bases this argument principally on an examination of Owen’s radical curriculum at his New Lanark schools, which elevated the arts — particularly music, dancing and singing — over more traditional subjects. Allison persuasively argues for a fundamentally aesthetic basis to Owen’s urban planning, from the parallelogram shape of his villages to his ‘childlike fondness’ for visual demonstrations, such as drawings and three-dimensional models.⁷

Chapter two remains in the early nineteenth century, but turns to Chartism, with an exploration of Capel Lofft’s incendiary Chartist poem, ‘Ernest; or, Political Regeneration’ (1839). In the first analysis of the poem in English since the century

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶ Robert Owen, ‘Petition to Both Houses of Parliament’ in *A Supplementary Volume to the Life of Robert Owen* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1858), p. xxiv.

⁷ Allison, pp. 37, 59.

of its publication, Allison finds Lofft's narrative of agrarian insurrection intriguing, though not for its author's use of the aesthetic: the aesthetic character of Chartism is well-established, and scholars have already studied in detail 'the unity of politics and poetry' that underpins the 'Chartist imaginary'.⁸ Rather, Allison focuses on the poem's distinctive 'ideological extremism', which led to fears that the poem itself would incite revolution, making it too seditious at the time for publication in its original form.⁹ While this chapter is based on a more conventional literary analysis than the previous one, Allison's foregrounding of the poem's commitment to revolution and provocation of violence will certainly be of interest to scholars of Victorian radicalism and working-class culture.

In chapter three, Allison re-evaluates the mid-century Christian Socialists, arguing for the critical importance of the movement as 'a hinge' between early and late nineteenth-century socialism.¹⁰ Challenging criticisms that their political project was inauthentic and that Christian and Socialist values were incompatible, Allison contends that the Christian Socialists managed to reach 'a purposive, meaningful alignment for only the briefest of periods — when they made use of the resources of the aesthetic'.¹¹ To illustrate this, Allison undertakes an analysis of Charles Kingsley's influential novel, *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* (1850) and, more abstractly, shows that, despite their practical failure, Christian Socialist cooperative workshops or 'Working-Men's Associations' functioned as an aesthetic symbol.¹² As with the first chapter on Owen, Allison's most fruitful analysis is that which deals with aesthetic forms beyond literature, such as workshops and urban planning.

Allison finds more evidence of the interplay between anti-politics and aesthetics 'between the two major waves' of British socialism in chapter four,

⁸ See, for example, Margaret A. Loose, *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014) and Mike Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 6.

⁹ Allison, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

finding utopian socialist influence in an iconic text of the period: George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2).¹³ Allison's argument in this chapter — that socialist doctrine forms *Middlemarch's* principal structure, as Eliot exploits socialist discourse to narrate the utopian (and anti-political) possibilities of love and gender equality — gives a new perspective on this much-studied novel. Nevertheless, this chapter is substantively weaker than the rest: in the absence of any major movements in the period between the Chartists and the so-called 'socialist revival', Allison relies on a single literary text without further evidence and context to support his thesis.

It would be impossible to write a book about socialist, anti-political aesthetics without mention of William Morris, the subject of *Imagining Socialism's* final chapter. As such, this is the book's least revelatory chapter, although it does manage to cover some new ground. Here Allison investigates the conflict between Morris's simultaneous desire for radical material simplification and domesticity, and an aesthetic ideal of cooperative craft in *News from Nowhere* (1890). This conflict has been theorised by numerous critics, including the previously mentioned Ruth Livesey. Allison does, however, add fresh insight by identifying Morris's ideological struggle in the character of Ellen, whom he posits as the personification of utopian desire through which Morris repeatedly problematises the novel's utopian message.

Allison chooses to end his study at 1918, citing the advent of Bolshevism, the formation of the Labour Party and modernism's individualist aesthetic. As Allison himself admits, this is a somewhat arbitrary endpoint in his attempt to define a 'socialist century' in Britain.¹⁴ Allison addresses this temporal untidiness in the epilogue with a concluding analysis of H. G. Wells, who, for him, epitomises both the late-Victorian socialist and proto-modernist: not just an outlier ahead of his time but the beginning of a real shift in socialism towards a non-aesthetic statism. However, there are more fundamental issues that Allison does not address. For instance, Allison's argument that socialism transformed into a pragmatic, statist movement around 1918 overlooks the enduring influence of Owen, Morris and others' utopian aestheticism on modern political and anti-

¹³ Ibid., p. 6, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 223.

political thought. One can see the same aesthetic, anti-political bent in the utopian communities of the mid-twentieth century, such as Dartington Hall, and even in the recent resurgence of community initiatives to provide access to green spaces, such as community gardens and guerrilla gardening, based on both aesthetic and egalitarian principles.

Nonetheless, I applaud Allison's efforts to counter the imperfect periodisation that persists in studies of socialist history. *Imagining Socialism* considers the ambiguous, unexamined and latent aspects of socialist discourse in the long nineteenth century; its most exciting chapters are those on Owen, the Chartists and the Christian Socialists, which look not just at specific literary works but aesthetic logics, symbols and underpinnings. The text's greatest strength is the success with which Allison has drawn a line of anti-political aestheticism from Owenism through to Morris in ways not done previously. By illuminating the movement's commonalities and connections throughout the nineteenth century, Allison's move away from strict periodisation is a productive one. It opens up the possibility for more reappraisals of socialist lineage and further consideration of the significance of the middle of the nineteenth century, a period often forgotten in socialist histories.



BIOGRAPHY: Sophie Thompson is a CHASE-funded PhD researcher at the University of Kent. Her thesis examines the representation of childhood in British socialist literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how this intersects with emerging social and scientific concerns about the environment.

CONTACT: sct29@kent.ac.uk