

A grassroots revolution and revived regionalism is required for Labour to appeal to the masses

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*The socialist tradition in Britain is diverse and multi-layered. Its pattern of development differed markedly across the great industrial centres where it first put down roots. In this new book, **Paul Salveson** re-asserts the strength and distinctiveness of the socialism which emerged in the mills, mines and railway yards of the North of England. The core of his argument is that popular socialism today needs to reconnect with its local and regional roots, and relocate power to the regions and localities. Reviewed by **John Callaghan**.*

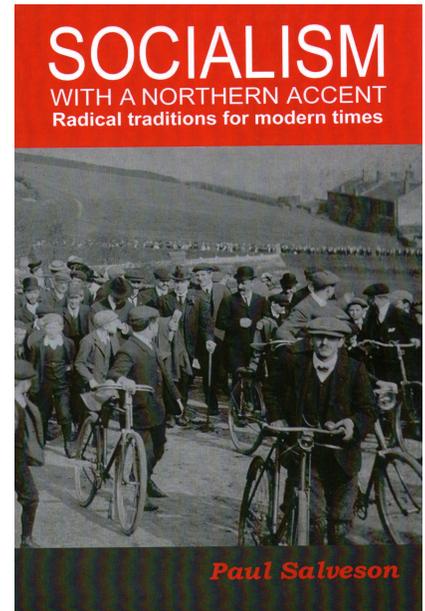
Socialism With A Northern Accent: Radical Traditions for Modern Times. Paul Salveson. Lawrence and Wishart. 2012

[Paul Salveson](#) is a Labour Party and trade union activist, a visiting Professor at the University of Huddersfield, the originator of the community rail concept, holder of an MBE and one of the founders of the Hannah Mitchell Foundation think-tank. In *Socialism With A Northern Accent*, he asks how Labour can retain the support of its traditional working class base while at the same time appealing to the broad range of groups that typify areas like his own Colne Valley, a former safe Labour seat that is no longer safe for anyone.

Salveson believes that the answer is a revived regionalism that learns from the radical currents of the past, “above all the Independent Labour Party (ILP) tradition of ethical socialism” (p.12).

Of course, elements of localism already exist and might even be growing, but Salveson realises that his vision depends on much stronger regional identities than exist at present in England. Labour’s future national role could be to help cultivate the existing patchwork of regional and national identities. Pride in regional identity needs to be built upon, he argues, as national identity has been built upon in Wales and Scotland. Social democracy, if it is to have any future, has to be decentralised, community-based and diverse. Unions can play a role in this by working with community organisations on a broad range of issues. Some of them are already involved in such activities.

But for Salveson, Labour has to go much further by strengthening local government and championing regional governments with real powers of economic development, education,



training, town and country planning, environment and transport. The party must also introduce proportional representation for general elections. Its leaders need to be more socially representative than they are now; they need to seek out and work with allies like the Greens, the Liberal Democrats, and the voluntary sector. The party also needs to gain many more members. It must create a vision of a more solidaristic society in which municipal and cooperative enterprises can play a part. In short, a revolution is required; a gradual, peaceful revolution, no doubt, but one based on high levels of grassroots activism and what amounts to a new 'labour movement'.

Most of the book is concerned to show that the old labour movement was based on local initiatives of great diversity and originality before Westminster centralism took over. The early activists drew on radical Liberalism and republicanism as well as varieties of socialism. They often looked abroad for inspiration and were conscious, and supporting of, progressive causes overseas – in Ireland, America, in Europe and Australasia. They produced their own newspapers and literature, community organisations, campaigns for social and political reform, forms of enterprise such as cooperatives, and many educational and cultural initiatives. They built on and reinforced a local civic culture. Much of this history – from Thomas Paine through to Chartism and the re-emergence of socialism in the 1880s – is little known and less honoured than it ought to be, even in its old heartlands. The North – defined here as Lancashire, Yorkshire and the North East – was the centre for much of this forgotten creativity.

A quasi-religious fervour for collective and self improvement drove it on from the 1890s. The guiding values were community and fairness, fraternity, equality, internationalism, independence and self-help. As the Labour Party developed into an 'electoral machine' the elements of this alternative culture weakened (p.135) but were not completely extinguished. Salveson's vision of its future revival is as appealing as any that has yet appeared as a basis for democratic renewal in England. Far more unrealistic, it might be thought, is maintenance over the next decade or two of the current arrangements. But that is what is expected.

John Callaghan is Professor of Politics and Contemporary History at the [University of Salford](#). His research has focused on twentieth century socialist and communist politics and history. But that has always involved broader developments such as the Cold War and particular fields such as party and ideology. [Read more reviews by John](#).

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