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Magnetic Cities and Simple Lives

Having knocked at the entrance into Heaven, nihilists, anarchists, socialists, Fabians, Liberals – anyone with a Policy to advance, in other words – will find themselves turned away. This, at least, is the fate imagined by the persona of Ford’s superb poem ‘Süssmund’s Address to an Unknown God’ (1912), in which he describes a strange afterlife that welcomes ‘[a]dultery, foul murder, pleasant things, / A touch of incest, [and] theft’ but is critical of ‘Reformers’ (1912b, p. 66). The social revolutionaries and ameliorators Ford satirized so consistently, and so hilariously, throughout his career are shown here as ‘emasculated lil[ies]’ who declaim ‘propaganda about social wrongs’, a judgement that takes in anti-vivisectionists, pacifists, neo-psychics, Platonists, Whigs, Tories, nonconformists, and jail campaigners, among many others (p. 63). Ford’s attitude to the faddish idiosyncrasies of the politically avant-garde groupings this poem rejects was that of a sceptic who took pleasure in portraying the self-styled ‘Advanced’ members of his generation as such in name only. If in Ford’s mind they saw themselves as the conveyors of improved futures or of entirely new forms of communal life, he himself tended to approach such individuals in the spirit of a sincerely critical but self-aware trickster whose duty was to parody their activities and so spare a trusting public their dogmas. For Ford, Advanced politics of ‘coalition’ could all too easily descend into politics of disunity and conflict. Thus, in Ford’s *The Heart of the Country* (1906) a representatively Advanced Thinker – with a very capital ‘A’ – is little more than a sower of discord whose emphasis on the yet to come, in his eyes, gives him a debatably natural pre-eminence: “I stand for the future;
therefore I surely before all others have the right here to be heard”’ (1906, p. 216).

Ford’s bemusement at such individuals was inseparable from the fact that he was on intimate terms with a number of revolutionary circles, including those taken to task in Conrad’s The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes (1911). Although Conrad in his 1920 ‘Preface’ to The Secret Agent downplayed Ford’s knowledge of, and encounters with, turn-of-the-century anarchism – ‘I am sure that if he had seen once in his life the back of an anarchist that must have been the whole extent of his connection with the underworld’ (1920, p. 106), he wrote – Ford was familiar with numerous revolutionary philosophies. Indeed, Ford in his youth met several of their representatives, including: the journalist David Soskice, who married Ford’s sister; Prince Kropotkin; Auguste Vaillant, who bombed the French Chamber of Deputies in 1893; Sergius Stepniak, the assassin of the Russian police chief General Mesentzev; and the young Rossettis – Olivia, Arthur, and Helen – who ran the revolutionary anarchist journal The Torch in London (which is mentioned on the first page of The Secret Agent). As Ford noted, his connections with these individuals gave him the inside knowledge necessary to obtain the private details of the 1894 Greenwich bombing affair upon which The Secret Agent is based. Alongside this international cast of politicos Ford was also familiar with Britain’s ‘advanced’ fraternities, groupings fiercely lampooned in such books as The Benefactor (1905), An English Girl (1907), and The Panel (1912). The time Ford spent living among the Garnetts’ circle in Limpsfield in Surrey during the late 1890s exposed him to a hub of Fabianism and to the rather incongruous cultures of the London suburbs, which, in their curious mixture of industrial commuters and revolutionary communitarians, could at times veer into the ‘written comedy’ satirized by Chesterton in The Man Who was Thursday (1908, p. 10).

Ford’s time in Limpsfield was brief but significant. To begin with, it was here that Ford first met Conrad, who stayed with the Garnetts in September 1898 (Baynes, 1960, p. 215). Years later Ford recalled that this encounter was a fortuitous side-product of ‘a mistaken search after high thinking’ (1931, p. 31), a mode of enlightenment that was nowhere evident in the Kentish commons. As the ‘extra-urban headquarters of the Fabian Society’ (p. 31), Limpsfield was an important centre of influence within the earliest days of socialism