



## THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASS

E. P. Thompson was born in 1924, and read history at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, graduating in 1946. His time there was interrupted by war service in Italy. From 1948 until 1965 he was extra-mural Lecturer at Leeds University in the West Riding and he was also Reader at the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick. A freelance writer and admired historian, he was also a founder of END and a Vice-President of CND. E. P. Thompson was made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1992, and was a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. After his time at Warwick University, E. P. Thompson held no permanent academic posts, but was a visiting professor at several American universities. He died in 1993, survived by his wife and two sons.

Thompson's first major work was his biography, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, which first appeared in 1955 (revised edition, 1977). *The Making of the English Working Class* was instantly recognized as a classic on its publication in 1963 and secured his position as one of the leading social historians of his time. Other books include *Whigs and Hunters* and *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. His last book, *Customs in Common* (1991), is a study of eighteenth-century popular beliefs and behaviour. An active campaigner on the left and a key figure in the ending of the Cold War, his writings on public issues include *Writing by Candlelight*, *Beyond the Cold War*, *The Heavy Dancers* and *Double Exposure*. In 1988 he published his first novel, a political allegory entitled *The Sykaos Papers*. Several of his books are published in Penguin.

In a tribute to Thompson in the *Independent*, E. J. Hobsbawm declared that he had 'not just talent, brilliance, erudition and the gift of writing but the capacity to produce something qualitatively different from the rest of us, not to be measured on the same scale. Let us simply call it genius, in the traditional sense of the word.'

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E.P. THOMPSON



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TO DOROTHY AND  
JOSEPH GREENALD

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## Preface

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THIS book has a clumsy title, but it is one which meets its purpose. *Making*, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.

*Class*, rather than classes, for reasons which it is one purpose of this book to examine. There is, of course, a difference. 'Working classes' is a descriptive term, which evades as much as it defines. It ties loosely together a bundle of discrete phenomena. There were tailors here and weavers there, and together they make up the working classes.

By class I understand a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasize that it is a *historical* phenomenon. I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.

More than this, the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure. The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context. Moreover, we cannot have two distinct classes, each with an independent being, and then bring them *into* relationship with each other. We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers. And class happens when some men, as a result of common experience (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.

There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx's meaning, in his own historical writing, yet the error vitiates much latter-day 'Marxist' writing. 'It', the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically – so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which 'it' ought to have (but seldom does have) if 'it' was properly aware of its own position and real interests. There is a cultural superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural 'lags' and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be.

But a similar error is committed daily on the other side of the ideological divide. In one form, this is a plain negative. Since the crude notion of class attributed to Marx can be faulted



without difficulty, it is assumed that any notion of class is a pejorative theoretical construct, imposed upon the evidence. It is denied that class has happened at all. In another form, and by a curious inversion, it is possible to pass from a dynamic to a static view of class. 'It' – the working class – exists, and can be defined with some accuracy as a component of the social structure. Class-consciousness, however, is a bad thing, invented by displaced intellectuals, since everything which disturbs the harmonious coexistence of groups performing different 'social rôles' (and which thereby retards economic growth) is to be deplored as an 'unjustified disturbance-symptom'.<sup>1</sup> The problem is to determine how best 'it' can be conditioned to accept its social rôle, and how its grievances may best be 'handled and channelled'.

If we remember that class is a relationship, and not a thing, we cannot think in this way. 'It' does not exist, either to have an ideal interest or consciousness, or to lie as a patient on the Adjustor's table. Nor can we turn matters upon their heads, as has been done by one authority who (in a study of class obsessively concerned with methodology, to the exclusion of the examination of a single real class situation in a real historical context) has informed us

Classes are based on the differences in legitimate power associated with certain positions, i.e. on the structure of social rôles with respect to their authority expectations.... An individual becomes a member of a class by playing a social rôle relevant from the point of view of authority.... He belongs to a class because he occupies a position in a social organization; i.e. class membership is derived from the incumbency of a social rôle.<sup>2</sup>

The question, of course, is how the individual got to be in this 'social rôle', and how the particular social organization (with its property-rights and structure of authority) got to be there. And these are historical questions. If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.

If I have shown insufficient understanding of the methodological preoccupations of certain sociologists, nevertheless I hope this book will be seen as a contribution to the understanding of class. For I am convinced that we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period. In the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers. This ruling class was itself much divided, and in fact only gained in cohesion over the same years because certain antagonisms were resolved (or faded into relative insignificance) in the face of an insurgent working class. Thus the working-class presence was, in 1832, the most significant factor in British political life.

The book is written in this way. In [Part One](#) I consider the continuing popular traditions in the eighteenth century which influenced the crucial Jacobin agitation of the 1790s. In [Part Two](#) I move from subjective to objective influences – the experiences of groups of workers during the Industrial Revolution which seem to me to be of especial significance. I also attempt an estimate of the character of the new industrial work-discipline, and the bearing upon this of the Methodist Church. In [Part Three](#) I pick up the story of plebeian Radicalism, and carry it through Luddism to the heroic age at the close of the Napoleonic Wars. Finally, I discuss some aspects of political theory and of the consciousness of class in the 1820s and

This is a group of studies, on related themes, rather than a consecutive narrative. In selecting these themes I have been conscious, at times, of writing against the weight of prevailing orthodoxies. There is the Fabian orthodoxy, in which the great majority of working people are seen as passive victims of *laissez faire*, with the exception of a handful of far-sighted organizers (notably, Francis Place). There is the orthodoxy of the empirical economic historians, in which working people are seen as a labour force, as migrants, or as the data for statistical series. There is the 'Pilgrim's Progress' orthodoxy, in which the period is ransacked for forerunners-pioneers of the Welfare State, progenitors of a Socialist Commonwealth, or (more recently) early exemplars of rational industrial relations. Each of these orthodoxies has a certain validity. All have added to our knowledge. My quarrel with the first and second is that they tend to obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts, to the making of history. My quarrel with the third is that it reads history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as in fact it occurred. Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten.

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.

Our only criterion of judgement should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure. Moreover, the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialization, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.

Finally, a note of apology to Scottish and Welsh readers. I have neglected these histories, not out of chauvinism, but out of respect. It is because class is a cultural as much as an economic formation that I have been cautious as to generalizing beyond English experience. (I have considered the Irish, not in Ireland, but as immigrants to England.) The Scottish record, in particular, is quite as dramatic, and as tormented, as our own. The Scottish Jacobin agitation was more intense and more heroic. But the Scottish story is significantly different. Calvinism was not the same thing as Methodism, although it is difficult to say which, in the early nineteenth century, was worse. We had no peasantry in England comparable to the Highland migrants. And the popular culture was very different. It is possible, at least until the 1820s, to regard the English and Scottish experiences as distinct, since trade union and political links were impermanent and immature.

This book was written in Yorkshire, and is coloured at times by West Riding sources. My

grateful acknowledgements are due to the University of Leeds and to Professor S. G. Raybould for enabling me, some years ago, to commence the research which led to this book and to the Leverhulme Trustees for the award of a Research Fellowship, which has enabled me to complete the work. I have also learned a great deal from members of my tutorial classes, with whom I have discussed many of the themes treated here. Acknowledgements are due also to the authorities who have allowed me to quote from manuscript and copyright sources: particular acknowledgements will be found at the end of the first edition.

I have also to thank many others. Mr Christopher Hill, Professor Asa Briggs, and Mr John Saville criticized parts of the book in draft, although they are in no sense responsible for my judgements. Mr R. W. Harris showed great editorial patience, when the book burst the bounds of a series for which it was first commissioned. Mr Perry Anderson, Mr Denis Butt, Mr Richard Cobb, Mr Henry Collins, Mr Derrick Crossley, Mr Tim Enright, Dr E. P. Hennock, Mr Rex Russell, Dr John Rex, Dr E. Sigsworth, and Mr H. O. E. Swift, have helped me at different points. I have also to thank Mrs Dorothy Thompson, an historian to whom I am related by the accident of marriage. Each chapter has been discussed with her, and I have been well placed to borrow not only her ideas but material from her notebooks. Her collaboration is to be found, not in this or that particular, but in the way the whole problem is seen.

*Halifax, August 1960*

## Preface to 1980 edition

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When a contract was signed between myself and Victor Gollancz Ltd, in August 1959, it was for a book on 'Working-Class Politics, 1790–1921', to be 'approximately 60,000 words in length'. This is, I suppose, the first chapter of such a book, and I am grateful to the publisher for the good-humoured and encouraging way in which they received my large and untidy manuscript. Looking back, I am puzzled to know when and how the book got itself written, since in 1959–62 I was also heavily engaged in the work of the first New Left, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and so on. The writing was only possible because some part of the research had already been laid down during the previous ten years in the course of my work as a tutor in extra-mural classes in the West Riding. Discussion in these classes, as well as practical political activity of several kinds, undoubtedly prompted me to see the problems of political consciousness and organization in certain ways.

Many readers have noted that the book is structured by a double-sided critique: on the one hand, of the positivist orthodoxies then dominant in the more conservative academic schools of economic history – orthodoxies more recently marketed under the name of 'modernization theory'; on the other hand, of a certain 'Marxist' orthodoxy (then waning in influence in this country), which supposed that the working class was the more-or-less spontaneous generator of new productive forces and relations. Some critics of the first persuasion found the book to be a matter of scandal, and I replied to certain of their criticisms in a postscript to the Pelican edition of 1968 (reprinted here), not because I suppose that my work should be beyond criticism but because important matters of principle are involved. As regards critics of the second persuasion, I have been engaged in a running argument of a more theoretical kind for some years, culminating in *The Poverty of Theory* (Merlin Press, 1978).

I do not intend to write a further postscript, reviewing the new work of the past decade. This book has been generously received and has passed into historical discourse, and it would be self-important to try and adjudicate between other scholars in the light of my own findings. However, my own research was continuing while this book went through the press as the galley-proofs testified – and in work on the crowd and customary consciousness in the eighteenth century I have myself extended and revised some of the material in the first four chapters. Meanwhile much new and important work has been published, and more lies in theses or is forthcoming. Work on the 1790s has been reopened, as can be seen from the bibliography to Professor Albert Goodwin's weighty study, *The Friends of Liberty* (Hutchinson, 1979). The prophetic roles of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott have now been fully examined in J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979). Most important revisions and additions to my account of London artisans, London radical politics, and the Queen Caroline affair, are made in Dr Iorwerth Prothero's study of John Gast, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London* (Dawsons, 1979). I am happy to say that my note that the struggle of the unstamped press 'has not yet found its historian' has now been overtaken by two admirable studies: Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (Oxford University Press, 1970) and Joel H. Wiener, *The War of the Unstamped* (Cornell University Press, 1969).

Other areas remain more controversial. I should, perhaps, briefly indicate that I remain

unrepentant as to my treatment of Methodism; that, despite criticisms, I maintain my view as to a small 'underground' Jacobin presence in the war years; that several works by Dr Malcolm Thomis on the Luddite movement have not led me to alter my own interpretation; and that Dr Duncan Bythell's study of *The Handloom Weavers* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), some part of which is structured around a critique of my [Chapter 9](#), seems to me to be at fault in general arguments and in matters of detail. But to follow up any one of these questions would require close and prolonged attention to evidence.

The work of research and of critique will continue, and if I have passed by important works without mention, this is only for fear of being drawn into a bibliography. I wish only to indicate that, for its author, the major theses of this book still stand as hypotheses which, in their turn, must never be petrified into orthodoxies.

*Worcester, October 1977*

# Part One

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## THE LIBERTY TREE



'You are wrestling with the Enemies of the human Race, not for yourself merely, for you may not see the full Day of Liberty, but for the Child hanging at the Breast.'

*Instructions of the London Corresponding Society to its travelling delegates, 1796*

'The Beast & the Whore rule without control.'

WILLIAM BLAKE, 1798

## Members Unlimited

‘THAT the number of our Members be unlimited.’ This is the first of the ‘leading rules’ of the London Corresponding Society, as cited by its Secretary when he began to correspond with a similar society in Sheffield in March 1792.<sup>1</sup> The first meeting of the London society had been held two months before in a tavern off the Strand (‘The Bell’ in Exeter Street) and nine ‘well-meaning, sober and industrious men’ were present. The founder and first Secretary, Thomas Hardy, later recalled this meeting:

After having had their bread and cheese and porter for supper, as usual, and their pipes afterwards, with some conversation on the hardness of the times and the dearness of all the necessaries of life... the business for which they had met was brought forward – *Parliamentary Reform* – an important subject to be deliberated upon and dealt with by such a class of men.

Eight of the nine present became founder-members that night (the ninth thought it over and joined the next week) and paid their first weekly subscription of one penny. Hardy (who was also Treasurer) went back to his home at No. 9 Piccadilly with the entire funds of the organization in his pocket: 8d. towards paper for the purpose of corresponding with like-minded groups in the country.

Within a fortnight twenty-five members were enrolled and the sum in the Treasurer’s hands was 4s. 1d. (Six months later more than 2,000 members were claimed.) Admission to membership was simple, the test being an affirmative reply to three questions, of which the most important was:

Are you thoroughly persuaded that the welfare of these kingdoms require that every adult person, in possession of his reason and not incapacitated by crimes, should have a vote for a Member of Parliament?

In the first month of its existence the society debated for five nights in succession the question – ‘Have we, who are Tradesmen, Shopkeepers, and Mechanics, any right to obtain a Parliamentary Reform?’ – turning it over ‘in every point of view in which we were capable of presenting the subject to our minds’. They decided that they had.

Two years later, on 12 May 1794, the King’s Messenger, two Bow Street Runners, the private secretary to Home Secretary Dundas, and other dignitaries arrived at No. 9 Piccadilly to arrest Thomas Hardy, shoemaker, on a charge of high treason. The Hardys watched while the officers ransacked the room, broke open a bureau, rummaged among Mrs Hardy’s clothes (she was pregnant and remained in bed), filled four large silk handkerchiefs with letters and a corn-sack with pamphlets, books and manuscripts. On the same day a special message from the King was brought to the House of Commons, concerning the seditious practices of the Corresponding Societies; and two days later a Committee of Secrecy of the House was appointed to examine the shoemaker’s papers.

The shoemaker was examined several times by the Privy Council itself. Hardy left little record of these encounters; but one of his fellow prisoners entertained his readers with a dramatic reconstruction of his own interrogation by the highest council in the land. ‘I was called in,’ related John Thelwall, ‘and beheld the whole *Dramatis Personae* intrenched chin deep in Lectures and manuscripts... all scattered about in the utmost confusion.’ The Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary, and the Prime Minister (Pitt) were all present:

ATTORNEY-GENERAL [*piano*]. Mr Thelwall, what is your Christian name?

T. [*somewhat sullenly*]. John.

ATT. GEN. [*piano still*]... With two l's at the end or with one?

T. With two – but it does not signify. [*Carelessly, but rather sullen, or so.*] You need not give yourself any trouble. I do not intend to answer any questions.

PITT. What does he say? [*Darting round, very fiercely, from the other side of the room, and seating himself by the side of the CHANCELLOR.*]

LORD CHANCELLOR [*with silver softness, almost melting to a whisper*]. He does not mean to answer any questions.

PITT. What is it? – What is it? – What? [*fiercely*]...<sup>1</sup>

John Thelwall then turned his back on the august company and ‘began to contemplate a drawing in water-colours’. The Prime Minister dismissed him and summoned for interrogation a fourteen-year-old lad, Henry Eaton, who had been living with the Thelwalls. But the boy stood his ground and ‘entered into a political harangue, in which he used very harsh language against Mr Pitt; upbraiding him with having taxed the people to an enormous extent...’<sup>2</sup>

By the standards of the next 100 years the antagonists appear to be strangely amateurish and uncertain of their rôles, rehearsing in curiously personal encounters the massive impersonal encounters of the future.<sup>3</sup> Civility and venom are mixed together; there is still room for acts of personal kindness alongside the malice of class hatred. Thelwall, Hardy, and ten other prisoners were committed to the Tower and later to Newgate. While there, Thelwall was for a time confined in the charnel-house; and Mrs Hardy died in childbirth as a result of shock sustained when her home was besieged by a ‘Church and King’ mob. The Privy Council determined to press through with the charge of high treason: and the full penalty for a traitor was that he should be hanged by the neck, cut down while still alive, disembowelled (and his entrails burned before his face) and then beheaded and quartered. A Grand Jury of respectable citizens had no stomach for this. After a nine-day trial. Hardy was acquitted (on Guy Fawkes Day, 1794). The Foreman of the Jury fainted after delivering his ‘Not Guilty’, while the London crowd went wild with enthusiasm and dragged Hardy in triumph through the streets. Acquittals for Home Tooke and Thelwall (and the dismissal of the other cases) followed. But the celebrations of the crowd were premature. For in the next year the steady repression of reformers – or ‘Jacobins’ – was renewed. And by the end of the decade it seemed as if the entire agitation had been dispersed. The London Corresponding Society had been outlawed. Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* was banned. Meetings were prohibited. Hardy was running a shoe-shop near Covent Garden, appealing to old reformers to patronize him in tribute to his past services. John Thelwall had retired to an isolated farm in South Wales. It seemed, after all, that ‘tradesmen, shopkeepers, and mechanics’ had no right to obtain a Parliamentary Reform.

The London Corresponding Society has often been claimed as the first definitely working-class political organization formed in Britain. Pedantry apart (the Sheffield, Derby and Manchester societies were formed before the Society in London) this judgement requires definition. On the one hand, debating societies in which working men took part existed sporadically in London from the time of the American War. On the other hand, it may be more accurate to think of the L.C.S. as a ‘popular Radical’ society than as ‘working-class’.

Hardy was certainly an artisan. Born in 1752, he had been apprenticed as a shoemaker in Stirlingshire: had seen something of the new industrialism as a bricklayer at the Carron Iron



Works (he was nearly killed when the scaffolding collapsed when he was at work on ironmaster Roebuck's house); and had come to London as a young man, shortly before the American War. Here he worked in one of those numerous trades where a journeyman looked forward to becoming independent, with luck to becoming a master himself – as Hardy eventually became. He married the daughter of a carpenter and builder. One of his colleagues, a Chairman of the L.C.S., was Francis Place, on his way to becoming a master-tailor. The line between the journeymen and the small masters was often crossed – the Journeymen Boot and Shoemakers struck against Hardy in his new rôle as a small employer in 1795, while Francis Place, before becoming a master-tailor, helped to organize a strike of Journeymen Breeches-makers in 1793. And the line between the artisan of independent status (whose workroom was also his 'shop') and the small shopkeeper or tradesmen was even fainter. From here it was another step to the world of self-employed engravers, like William Sharp and William Blake, of printers and apothecaries, teachers and journalists, surgeons and Dissenting clergy.

At one end, then, the London Corresponding Society reached out to the coffee-houses, taverns and dissenting churches off Piccadilly, Fleet Street and the Strand, where the self-educated journeyman might rub shoulders with the printer, the shopkeeper, the engraver or the young attorney. At the other end, to the east, and south of the river, it touched those older working-class communities – the waterside workers of Wapping, the silk-weavers of Spitalfields, the old dissenting stronghold of Southwark. For 200 years 'Radical London' has always been more heterogeneous and fluid in its social and occupational definition than the Midlands or Northern centres grouped around two or three staple industries. Popular movements in London have often lacked the coherence and stamina which results from the involvement of an entire community in common occupational and social tensions. On the other hand, they have generally been more subject to intellectual and 'ideal' motivations. A propaganda of ideas has had a larger audience than in the North. London Radicalism early acquired a greater sophistication from the need to knit diverse agitations into a common movement. New theories, new arguments, have generally first effected a junction with the popular movement in London, and travelled outwards from London to the provincial centres.

The L.C.S. was a junction-point of this sort. And we must remember that its first organizer lived in Piccadilly, not in Wapping or in Southwark. But there are features, in even the brief description of its first meetings, which indicate that a new kind of organization had come into being – features which help us to define (in the context of 1790–1850) the nature of a 'working-class organization'. There is the working man as Secretary. There is the low weekly subscription. There is the intermingling of economic and political themes – 'the hardness of the times' and Parliamentary Reform. There is the function of the meeting, both as a social occasion and as a centre for political activity. There is the realistic attention to procedural formalities. Above all, there is the determination to propagate opinions and to organize the converted, embodied in the leading rule: 'That the number of our Members be unlimited.'

Today we might pass over such a rule as a commonplace: and yet it is one of the hinges upon which history turns. It signified the end to any notion of exclusiveness, of politics as the preserve of any hereditary élite or property group. Assent to this rule meant that the L.C.S. was turning its back upon the century-old identification of political with property-rights – turning its back also upon the Radicalism of the days of 'Wilkes and Liberty', when 'the Mob

did not organize *itself* in pursuance of its own ends but was called into spasmodic action by a faction – even a Radical faction – to strengthen its hand and frighten the authorities. To throw open the doors to propaganda and agitation in this ‘unlimited’ way implied a new notion of democracy, which cast aside ancient inhibitions and trusted to self-activating and self-organizing processes among the common people. Such a revolutionary challenge was bound to lead on to the charge of high treason.

The challenge had, of course, been voiced before – by the seventeenth-century Levellers. And the matter had been argued out between Cromwell’s officers and the Army agitators in terms which look forward to the conflicts of the 1790s. In the crucial debate, at Putney,<sup>1</sup> the representatives of the soldiers argued that since they had won the victory they should benefit by being admitted to a greatly extended popular franchise. The claim of the Leveller Colonel Rainborough is well known:

For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it’s clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government.... I should doubt whether he was an Englishman or no, that should doubt of these things.

The reply of Cromwell’s son-in-law, General Ireton – the spokesman of the ‘Grandeers’ – was that ‘no person hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom... that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom’. When Rainborough pressed him, Ireton grew warm in return:

All the main thing that I speak for, is because I would have an eye to property. I hope we do not come to contend for victory but let every man consider with himself that he do not go that way to take away all property. For here is the case of the most fundamental part of the constitution of the kingdom, which if you take away, you take all by that.

‘If you admit any man that hath a breath and being,’ he continued, a majority of the Commons might be elected who had no ‘local and permanent interest’. ‘Why may not those men vote against all property?... Show me what you will stop at; wherein you will fence any man in a property by this rule.’

This unqualified identification of political and property rights brought angry expostulation from Sexby –

There are many thousands of us soldiers that have ventured our lives; we have had little propriety in the kingdom as to our estates, yet we have had a birthright. But it seems now, except a man hath a fixed estate in this kingdom, he hath no right... wonder we were so much deceived.

And Rainborough broke in ironically:

Sir, I see that it is impossible to have liberty but all property must be taken away. If it be laid down for a rule... it must be so. But I would fain know what the soldier hath fought for all this while? He hath fought to enslave himself, to give power to men of riches, men of estates, to make him a perpetual slave.

To which Ireton and Cromwell replied with arguments which seem like prescient apologetics for the compromise of 1688. The common soldier had fought for three things: the limitation of the prerogative of the Crown to infringe his personal rights and liberty of conscience: the right to be governed by representatives, even though he had no part in choosing them: and the ‘freedom of trading to get money, to get estates by’ – and of entering upon political rights in this way. On such terms, ‘Liberty may be had and property not be destroyed.’

For 100 years after 1688 this compromise – the oligarchy of landed and commercial property – remained unchallenged, although with a thickening texture of corruption,

purchase, and interest whose complexities have been lovingly chronicled by Sir Lewis Namier and his school. The Leveller challenge was altogether dispersed – although the spectre of a Leveller revival was often conjured up, as the Scylla to the Charybdis of Papists and Jacobites between which the good ship Constitution must steer her course. But until the last quarter of the eighteenth century the temperate republican and libertarian impulses of the ‘Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthsman’ seem to be transfixed within the limits of Ireton’s definition.<sup>1</sup> To read the controversies between reformers and authority, and between different reforming groups, in the 1790s is to see the Putney Debates come to life once again. The ‘poorest he’ in England, the man with a ‘birthright’, becomes the *Rights of Man*: while the agitation of ‘unlimited’ members was seen by Burke as the threat of the ‘swinish multitude’. The great semi-official agency for the intimidation of reformers was called the Association for ‘Protecting Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers’. The moderate Yorkshire reformer, the Reverend Christopher Wyvill, as to whose devotion there can be no question, nevertheless believed that a reform on the principle of universal suffrage ‘could not be effected without a Civil War’:

In times of warm political debate, the Right of Suffrage communicated to an ignorant and ferocious Populace would lead to tumult and confusion.... After a series of Elections disgraced by the most shameful corruption, or disturbed by the most furious commotion, we expect that the turbulence or venality of the English Populace would at last disgust the Nation so greatly, that to get rid of the intolerable evils of a profligate Democracy, they would take refuge... under the protection of Despotic Power.<sup>2</sup>

‘If Mr Paine should be able to rouze up the lower classes,’ he wrote in 1792, ‘their interference will probably be marked by wild work, and all we now possess, whether in private property or public liberty, will be at the mercy of a lawless and furious rabble.’<sup>1</sup>

It is the old debate continued. The same aspirations, fears, and tensions are there: but they arise in a new context, with new language and arguments, and a changed balance of forces. We have to try to understand both things – the continuing traditions and the context that has changed. Too often, since every account must start somewhere, we see only the things which are new. We start at 1789, and English Jacobinism appears as a byproduct of the French Revolution. Or we start in 1819 and with Peterloo, and English Radicalism appears to be a spontaneous generation of the Industrial Revolution. Certainly the French Revolution precipitated a new agitation, and certainly this agitation took root among working people, shaped by new experiences, in the growing manufacturing districts. But the question remains – what were the elements precipitated so swiftly by these events? And we find at once the long traditions of the urban artisans and tradesmen, so similar to the *menu peuple* whom George Rudé has shown to be the most volatile revolutionary element in the Parisian crowd. We may see something of the complexities of these continuing traditions if we isolate three problems: the tradition of Dissent, and its modification by the Methodist revival: the tradition made up of all those loose popular notions which combine in the idea of the Englishman’s ‘birthright’; and the ambiguous tradition of the eighteenth-century ‘mob’, of which Wyvill was afraid and which Hardy was trying to organize into committees, divisions, and responsible demonstrations.

## Christian and Apollyon

DISSENT is a misleading term. It covers so many sects, so many conflicting intellectual and theological tendencies, finds so many different forms in differing social milieux. The old dissenting groups, Quakers, and Baptists – show certain similarities of development after the Glorious Revolution. As persecution gave way to greater toleration, the congregations became less zealous and more prosperous. Where the clothiers and farmers of the Spenn Valley had met, in 1670, in secret and at night, in a farmhouse called ‘Ye Closes’ or ‘in the barn near Chapel Fold’, 100 years later we find a sturdy church with a prosperous deacon, Joseph Priestley, who confided in his devotional diary such entries as this:

The world smiles. I had some agreeable engagements by this post. What shall I render my Lord, was my language when I went to Leeds. I determined to give four or five loads of wheat to Christ’s poor. Had much reason to complain this day that I did not set God before me in all my thoughts. Find it difficult in the hurry of business...

And the next week:

This morning I... dined with a company of officers who all appeared to be ignorant of the way of salvation. I had some pleasure in reading 45th Isaiah.... Ordered brother Obadiah to give a load of wheat among Christ’s poor.<sup>1</sup>

This Priestley was still a Calvinist, albeit a somewhat guilt-stricken one. (No doubt ‘brother Obadiah’ was a Calvinist too.) But his younger cousin, also a Joseph Priestley, was at this time studying at the Daventry Academy, where he sadly disappointed his kinsmen and church by being touched by the spirit of the rational enlightenment, becoming a Unitarian, a scientist, and a political reformer. It was this Dr Priestley whose books and laboratory were destroyed by a ‘Church and King’ mob in Birmingham in 1791.

That is a thumb-nail sketch of one part of the Dissenting tradition. Their liberty of conscience tolerated, but still disabled in public life by the Test and Corporations Acts, the Dissenters continued throughout the century to work for civil and religious liberties. By the mid-century many of the younger educated ministers prided themselves on their broad-minded rational theology. The Calvinist self-righteousness of the persecuted sect was left behind, and they gravitated through Arian and Socinian ‘heresy’ towards Unitarianism. From Unitarianism it was only a further step to Deism, although few took this step until the 1790s and even fewer in the second half of the eighteenth century wished or dared to make a public avowal of scepticism – in 1763 the seventy-year-old schoolmaster, Peter Annet, was imprisoned and stocked for translating Voltaire and for publishing ‘free-thinking’ tracts in popular form, while shortly afterwards the sceptical Robin Hood debating society was closed down. It was from Socinian or Unitarian positions that liberal principles were argued: the famous figures are Dr Price, whose *Observations on Civil Liberty* (1776) at the time of the American War achieved the remarkable sale of 60,000 within a few months, and who lived to encourage Burke by his sermon in welcome to the French Revolution; Dr Priestley himself; and a score of lesser figures, several of whom – Thomas Cooper of Bolton and William Frend of Cambridge – took an active part in the reform agitation of the 1790s.<sup>1</sup>

So far the story seems clear. But this is deceptive. These liberal notions prevailed widely among dissenting clergy, teachers, and educated city communities. But many of the ministers had left their congregations behind. It was the Presbyterian Church, in which the impulse to

Unitarianism was most strongly felt, which was declining in strength most markedly in relation to other dissenting groups. In the mid-eighteenth century the Presbyterians and the Independents (taken together) were strongest in the south-west (Devonshire, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Somerset, Wiltshire), in the industrial north (notably Lancashire, Northumberland and Yorkshire), in London, and in East Anglia (notably Essex and Suffolk). The Baptists contested some of these strongholds, and were also well-rooted in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire. Thus the Presbyterians and Independents would appear to have been strongest in the commercial and wool manufacturing centres, while the Baptists held ground in areas where petty tradesmen, small farmers and rural labourers must have made up a part of their congregations.<sup>1</sup> It was in the greatest of the older woollen centres, the West Country, that the broad-minded, 'rational' religion which tended towards the denial of Christ's divinity and to Unitarianism both made its most rapid advances and lost it the allegiance of its congregations. In Devonshire, by the end of the eighteenth century, more than twenty Presbyterian meeting-houses had been closed, and the historians of Dissent, writing in 1809, declared:

Devonshire, the cradle of arianism, has been the grave of the arian dissenters; and there is not left in that populous county a twentieth part of the presbyterians who were to be found at the time of her birth.<sup>2</sup>

But elsewhere the story was different. In matters of church organization the dissenting sects often carried the principles of self-government and of local autonomy to the borders of anarchy. Any centralized authority – even consultation and association between churches – was seen as 'productive of the great anti-christian apostasy',

An apostasy so fatal to the civil and religious liberties of mankind, and particularly to those of the brave old puritans and nonconformists, that the very words synod and session, council and canon, yet make both the ears of a sound Protestant Dissenter to tingle.<sup>1</sup>

Where the Calvinist tradition was strong, as in parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, the congregations fought back against the drift towards Unitarianism; and stubborn deacons, trustees and Obadiah's tormented the lives of their ministers, investigating their heresies, expelling them or breaking away to form more righteous sects. (Thomas Hardy gained some of his first experiences of organization in the factional struggles of the Presbyterian congregation in Crown Court, off Russell Street.) But what of 'Christ's poor', to whom Dr Price offered enlightenment and Deacon Priestley loads of wheat? The Spenn Valley lay at the centre of a thickly populated and expanding manufacturing district – here one might have expected the dissenting churches to have reaped at last the reward for their endurance in the years of persecution. And yet 'Christ's poor' seemed little touched by either the Established Church or old Dissent. 'A wilder people I never saw in England.' John Wesley noted in his *Journal*, when he rode through near-by Huddersfield in 1757; 'the men, women, and children filled the street as we rode along, and appeared just ready to devour us.'

The rational Christianity of the Unitarians, with its preference for 'candour' and its distrust of 'enthusiasm', appealed to some of the tradesmen and shopkeepers of London, and to similar groups in the large cities. But it seemed too cold, too distant, too polite, and too much associated with the comfortable values of a prospering class to appeal to the city or village poor. Its very language and tone served as a barrier: 'No other preaching will do for Yorkshire,' John Nelson told Wesley, 'but the old sort that comes like a thunderclap upon the

conscience. Fine preaching does more harm than good here.’ And yet old Calvinism had erected its own barriers which inhibited any evangelistic zeal. The persecuted sect only too easily made a virtue of its own exclusiveness, and this in turn reinforced the hardest tenets of Calvinist dogma. ‘Election,’ ran one article of the Savoy Confession (1658), ‘was not out of the corrupt lump or mass of mankind foreseen.’ ‘Christ’s poor’ and the ‘corrupt lump’ were of course the same people: from another aspect the ‘wildness’ of the poor was a sign that they lived outwith the bounds of grace. The Calvinist elect tended to narrow into a kinship group

And there were other reasons for this process. Some go right back to the defeat of the Levellers in the Commonwealth. When the millennial hopes for a rule of the Saints were dashed to the ground, there followed a sharp dissociation between the temporal and spiritual aspirations of the poor man’s Puritanism. Already in 1654, before the Restoration, the General Association of the General Baptists issued a manifesto (aimed at the Fifth Monarchy men in their midst) declaring that they did not ‘know any ground for the saints, as such, to expect that the Rule and Government of the World should be put into their hands’ until the Last Judgement. Until such time it was their portion ‘patiently to suffer from the world... than anywhere to attain the Rule of Government thereof’.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the Commonwealth the rebellious tradition of Antinomianism ‘curved back from all its claims’. Where the ardent sectaries had been zealous – indeed, ruthless – social gardeners, they were now content to say: ‘let the tares (if tares) alone with the wheat...’<sup>2</sup> Gerrard Winstanley, the Digger, helps us to understand the movement of feeling, turning away from the ‘kingdom without’ to the ‘kingdom within’:

The living soul and the creating spirit are not one, but divided, the one looking after a kingdom without him, the other drawing him to look and wait for a kingdom within him, which moth and rust doth not corrupt and thieves cannot break through and steal. This is a kingdom that will abide, the outward kingdom must be taken from you.<sup>3</sup>

An understanding of this withdrawal – and of what was preserved despite the withdrawal – is crucial to an understanding of the eighteenth century and of a continuing element in later working-class politics. In one sense, the change can be seen in the different associations called up by two words: the positive energy of *Puritanism*, the self-preserving retreat of *Dissent*. But we must also see the way in which the resolution of the sects to ‘patiently suffer from the world’ while abstaining from the hope of attaining to its ‘Rule and Government’ enabled them to combine political quietism with a kind of slumbering Radicalism – preserved in the imagery of sermons and tracts and in democratic form of organization – which might, in any more hopeful context, break into fire once more. We might expect to find this most marked among the Quakers and the Baptists. By the 1790s, however, the Quakers – who numbered fewer than 20,000 in the United Kingdom – seem little like a sect which once contained such men as Lilbourne, Fox and Penn. They had prospered too much: had lost some of their most energetic spirits in successive emigrations to America: their hostility to State, and authority had diminished to formal symbols – the refusal to swear oath or to bare the head: the continuing tradition, at its best, gave more to the social conscience of the middle class than to the popular movement. In the mid-century there were still humble congregations like that which met in the meeting-house in Cage Lane, Thetford – adjoining the gaol, with its pillory and stocks – where young Tom Paine received (by his own avowal) ‘an exceeding good moral education’. But few Quakers seem to have come forward when Paine, in 1791, combined some of their own notions of service to humanity with the intransigent tone of *Rights of Man*

In 1792 the Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting of Friends urged on its members ‘true quietude of mind’ in the ‘state of unsettlement which at present exists in our nation’. They should not unite in political associations, nor should they promote ‘a spirit of disaffection to the King and to the Government under which we live and enjoy many privileges and favours which merit our grateful subjection thereto’.<sup>1</sup>

Their forebears had not accepted *subjection*, nor would they have admitted the word *grateful*. The tension between the kingdoms ‘without’ and ‘within’ implied a *rejection* of the ruling powers except at points where coexistence was inevitable: and much nice argument had once turned on what was ‘lawful’ to the conscience and what was not. The Baptists, perhaps, showed the greatest consistency: and they remained most Calvinist in their theology and most plebeian in their following. And it is above all in Bunyan that we find the slumbering Radicalism which was preserved through the eighteenth century and which breaks out again and again in the nineteenth. *Pilgrim’s Progress* is, with *Rights of Man*, one of the two foundation texts of the English working-class movement: Bunyan and Paine, with Cobbett and Owen, contributed most to the stock of ideas and attitudes which make up the raw material of the movement from 1790–1850. Many thousands of youths found in *Pilgrim’s Progress* their first adventure story, and would have agreed with Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, that it was their ‘book of books’.<sup>1</sup>

‘I seek an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away... laid up in heaven, and safe there... to be bestowed, at the time appointed, on them that diligently seek it. Read it so, if you will, in my book.’ Here is Winstanley’s kingdom which ‘moth and rust doth not corrupt’, here is the other-worldly millennium of the Saints, who must ‘patiently suffer from’ this world. Here is the ‘lamentable cry’ – ‘What shall I do?’ – of those who lost a Putney, and who had no share in the settlement of 1688. Here is Old Man P O P E, whom Christian feels that *his* forebears have tamed, and who has now ‘grown so crazy and stiff in his joints’, that he can do little but sit in his cave’s mouth, saying to the pilgrims – ‘You will never mend till more of you be burned’ – ‘grinning... as they go by, and biting his nails because he cannot come at them.’ Here is the inner spiritual landscape of the poor man’s Dissent – of the ‘tailors, leather-sellers, soap-boilers, brewers, weavers and tinkers’ who were among Baptist preachers<sup>2</sup> – a landscape seeming all the more lurid, suffused with passionate energy and conflict, from the frustration of these passions in the outer world: Beelzebub’s Castle, the giants Bloody-man, Maul, and Slay-good, the Hill Difficulty, Doubting Castle, Vanity Fair, the Enchanted Ground; a way ‘full of snares, pits, traps, and gins’. Here are Christian’s aristocratic enemies – ‘the Lord Carnal Delight, the Lord Luxurious, the Lord Desire of Vain Glory, my old Lord Lechery, Sir Having Greedy, with all the rest of our nobility’. And here is the Valley of Humiliation in which Bunyan’s readers were to be found: ‘a Valley that nobody walks in, but those that love a pilgrim’s life’. It is MERCY who says:

I love to be in such places where there is no rattling with coaches, nor rumbling with wheels; methinks, here one may, without much molestation, be thinking what he is, whence he came, what he has done... here one may think, and break at heart, and melt in one’s spirit, until one’s eyes become like ‘the fishpools of Heshbon’.

And it is GREAT-HEART who replies, with the spiritual pride of the persecuted and unsuccessful ‘It is true... I have gone through this Valley many a time, and never was better than when here.’

But the world of the spirit – of righteousness and spiritual liberty – is constantly under threat from the other world. First, it is threatened by the powers of the State: when we encounter APOLLYON we seem to be in a world of fantasy:

He was clothed with scales, like a fish (and they are his pride), he had wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke...

But when this monster turns upon CHRISTIAN ('with a disdainful countenance') he turns out to be very like the perplexed country magistrates who tried, with alternating arguments and threats, to make Bunyan promise to desist from field-preaching. APOLLYON, opens his mouth – which was 'as the mouth of a lion' – for a very muted roar: 'I am willing to pass by all, if no thou wilt yet turn again and go back.' Only when persuasion has failed does he straddle 'over the whole breadth of the way' and declare: 'I swear by my infernal den, that thou shalt go no further.' And it is APOLLYON'S subtlety which enables him to find allies among CHRISTIAN'S OWN company and fellow pilgrims. These – and they are by far the most numerous and deceptive – are the second source of threat to CHRISTIAN'S incorruptible inheritance; one by one, Bunyan brings forward all the slippery arguments of comfort and compromise preparing the way for an accommodation between APOLLYON and Dissent. There is Mr By-ends of Fair-Speech: and Mr Hold-the-world, Mr Money-love, and Mr Save-all, all pupils of 'a schoolmaster in Love-gain, which is a market town in the county of Coveting, in the north'. It is Mr By-ends who condemns those 'that are righteous overmuch':

BY-ENDS: Why, they... rush on their journey all weathers; and I am for waiting for wind and tide. They are for hazarding a for God at a clap; and I am for taking all advantages to secure my life and estate. They are for holding their notions, though all other men are against them; but I am for religion in what, and so far as the times, and my safety will bear it. They are for religion when in rags and contempt; but I am for him when he walks in his golden slippers, in the sunshine with applause.

MR HOLD-THE-WORLD: Aye, and hold you there still, good Mr By-Ends.... Let us be wise as serpents; it is best to make hay when the sun shines...

MR SAVE-ALL: I think that we are all agreed in this matter, and therefore there needs no more words about it

MR MONEY-LOVE: No, there needs no more words about this matter, indeed; for he that believes neither Scripture nor reason (and you see we have both on our side), neither knows his own liberty, nor seeks his own safety.

It is a splendid passage, foreshadowing so much in the development of eighteenth-century Dissent. Bunyan knew that in a sense Mr By-end's friends *did* have both Scripture and reason on their side: he worked into his apologia the arguments of security, comfort, enlightenment and liberty. What they have lost is their moral integrity and their compassion; the incorruptible inheritance of the spirit, it seems, could not be preserved if the inheritance of struggle was forgotten.

This is not all that *Pilgrim's Progress* is about. As Weber noted, the 'basic atmosphere' of the book is one in which 'the after-life was not only more important, but in many ways also more certain, than all the interests of life in this world'.<sup>1</sup> And this reminds us that faith in a life to come served not only as a consolation to the poor but also as some emotional compensation for present sufferings and grievances: it was possible not only to imagine the 'reward' of the humble but also to enjoy some revenge upon their oppressors, by imagining their torments to come. Moreover, in stressing the positives in Bunyan's imagery we have said little of the obvious negatives – the unction, the temporal submissiveness, the egocentric pursuit of personal salvation – with which they are inseparably intermingled; and this ambivalence



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