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Introduction

One of the great themes of nineteenth-century European history was the rise of labour, and this study looks at familiar elements in the process – trade unionism, political radicalism, co-operation, educational activities, and intellectual developments – in both Britain and France. But the period dealt with runs from the July Revolution in 1830 to the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, the period that preceded the rise of mass labour parties and trade unions, and the focus is on artisans, the male workers whose place in the formation of the modern European world is not always clear.

I am fully aware that the scope of such a large and ambitious topic runs the danger of superficial generality and cannot do justice to the complexity and detail of activities in every locality at every time. The aim, however, is not coverage but interpretation, and I have tried to explore what seem to me key general questions in relation to detailed instances. To avoid superficiality I have relied on my own primary research and not engaged in a distillation or reinterpretation of other secondary writings, but the unavoidable limits of this research mean that whole areas are not considered. The focus is primarily on some of the great cities, most of all the two capitals that were the main centres of labour politics in the period.

It is a defect of most historical research that it is confined to a single country, and as a Welshman living and working in England I am anxious to break free of such national limitations and parochialism, as well as being aware of the misleading nature of the title – Scotland is not considered, but some Welsh examples are drawn on, and Wales, of course, is not part of England. The transnational research-based character of this work is original and makes it an essay in comparative history, but I do not see the different countries as entities to be compared and contrasted, or find national character a helpful tool of analysis, even in its most plausible form of national political culture. While we might contrast the British and French 'economies' at a national level, we can also find great similarities in the structures,

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technologies, developments, and experiences of artisan trades. In general, I would argue for the greater importance of political than economic factors in explaining differences between radicalism in the two countries. For example, in France, there is the more centralised and authoritarian political system, the political instability and fluctuations, and the periods of severe repression, while English politics has a more open and participatory nature. But economy, society, state, or political culture are not usually helpful abstractions in looking at particular activities and movements, which were not all inter-connected, and the focus of my attention is at this more specific level. Instead of seeing England and France as two distinct and uniform blocks on which to construct national generalisations, I find similar differences and variations, and fluctuations according to circumstances, within each country. For me, the advantage of research on different countries lies not in arriving at a list of variables explaining the differences between their labour politics, but in the greater variety of instances I am forced to consider, the wider range of experience and frames of reference that have to be taken on board, and the way developments and interpretations in one case suggest ways of approaching and reinterpreting events and organisations in another.

While I do look at several different forms of labour activity, the main emphasis is on political radicalism, which was a very significant feature of this period. Artisans were always very prominent in 'popular' or 'plebeian' radicalism, but only alongside many other groups, especially other kinds of workers, such members of the lower middle class as shopkeepers, small dealers, and professionals, and what Max Weber called 'pariah intellectuals'.[1] While it is not difficult to show that artisans were a key, even dominant, element in urban radicalism and the movements this study is concerned with, artisan radical activity was not self-contained and was greatly influenced by potential or actual radical support elsewhere, just as growing politicisation and labour organisation among other workers, both urban and rural, was in the later nineteenth century to transform artisan labour politics.

The prominence of artisans in these movements justifies a focus on them, but it must be recognised that 'artisan' is an ambiguous term. Definitions are usually in terms of technology, expertise, and small-scale production, artisans being men working for wages in old specialised trades, and doing unmechanised, skilled work in workshops. These definitions do not completely fit: members of new trades, particularly working on iron, sometimes even in factories with power-driven machinery, can be regarded as artisans, engineers being the chief example; some units, such as shipyards and building yards, were big;

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and skill was very varied and often subjectively defined, with many workers in trades such as shoemaking, tailoring, and cabinet-making being no more than semi-skilled, often domestic, workers. But the definition is serviceable enough as a descriptive category, and it is dangerous to construct a false precision, more rigorous definitions being usually artificial and too restrictive.[2] I take pains in several chapters to underline how varied and complicated were the attributes of workmen who can be called artisans.

Consistently with this, my study of artisans who were radicals does not reflect a commitment to a notion of a distinctive 'artisan radicalism', and indeed my general argument is that this is not the case, there being no distinctive artisan mentality, tradition, or set of values, still less an ideology. There is a well-established historiographical tradition that focuses on artisans and skilled workers as the basis of formal working-class organisations and movements, with the changes they experienced in the nature of their work leading to resistance and politicisation. While there is justified criticism of treating this process as in itself constituting the making of the working class, not least because it focuses on male workers alone, there is none the less no serious questioning of artisan predominance in the activities dealt with here, or the causal importance of conflicts in production. But I do not see artisan radicalism as the direct product of relations at the workplace, of role in production, economic exploitation, growing conflict between employers and wage-earners, or of the imposition of a new work discipline. A study of work relations and organisations reveals divisions, hierarchies and antagonisms in the workforce, which were not natural bases for wider collective action. Craft particularity and labour solidarity cannot be treated as complementary. While capitalist economic developments did create pressures and problems, and therefore discontent and protest among artisans, this does not explain either why protest should take political forms or the nature of those political forms. People fervently supported political causes that were not related to their own interests, political ideologies cannot be tied to single socio-economic groups, and radical artisans were concerned with many things apart from work. Political movements were political movements and not reflections of socio-economic factors, and indeed operated precisely by transcending and ignoring work divisions and trade particularism. Political arguments had their own rationality, logic, and persuasiveness.

To say that radicalism did not stem from work is not original, although it is best demonstrated by studying both radicalism and work rather than by simple assertion and ignoring work in a self-justifying focus on politics. But the current stress on the 'autonomy of politics'

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and the view of political movements as dependent on politics and not material interests can have two unfortunate results. One is a self-contained study of political activity that ignores any links between political and social developments. The 'social' category is much wider than that of work, and indeed the workplace itself was not only where tasks were carried out but a social location, the site of social relations. My argument is that radicalism was not a wholly self-contained activity, and does need to be related to other aspects and concerns of artisan life, both material and non-material. Radicalism could articulate and fulfil individual needs and aspirations, and express and embody the daily efforts of people to cope with uncertainty, pursue their varied and often competing ambitions, endure hardship, gain respect and enjoy life.[3]

The second unfortunate result is to see politics just as ideas (even if they are called language) and, consequently, to confine the primary sources consulted largely to articles in newspapers and periodicals. A focus on radical ideas undoubtedly reveals a large degree of continuity during this period, but this is not helpful in explaining the fluctuations, forms, and divisions that characterised radical movements and campaigns. Ideas cannot be tied to particular movements or organisations, and do not in themselves explain their rise and fall. To show that Chartism was pervaded by certain enduring ideas is not to explain the Chartist movement, while its decline was the result neither of extensive socio-economic changes nor of a shift in ideas. Groups and individuals with the same ideas could support different and rival organisations, and engage in different or hostile activities and tactics.

A stress on the interrelation between aspects of social, political, and economic life, on identities that transcended the workplace and existed as much in the community, club, and pub, and were reinforced by political notions articulated by the radical press and popular cultural forms, can be seen as a cultural approach. But I do not see culture as shared values or treat radicalism as values, language, symbolism, and forms of communication. I do not deny the existence of underlying populist, liberal, or patriotic values shared by a variety of often antagonistic groups, but question their centrality as explanation or focus. It is no surprise that different and opposed groups, living at the same time in the same country and using the same language, shared and invoked certain ideas and conceptions, but a demonstration of what they had in common fails to explain the divisions and antagonisms among them, which seem to me far more important. A depiction of distinctive radical values can exaggerate the uniformity of radicalism, which was no more a simple reflection of values than it was of socio-economic relations, and both radicalism and liberalism were characterised by

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cultural diversity, not uniformity. Thus, in the activities I look at, I do not see a central, unilinear trend related to particular key developments such as mechanisation and factories, modernity, class formation, growth of party politics, commercialisation of leisure, separation of public and private, exclusion of women from the workplace, or rhetoric of domesticity. People's attitudes and behaviour fluctuated according to their readings of the situation.

My focus is on particular movements, activities, and organisations (all of which could contain a variety of cultural forms and practices), as well as on more specific questions: why certain forms of activity predominated at certain times, how and why organisation and action took the forms they did, and why certain strategic choices were made. These questions demand a constant attention to the context, and make it important to study what people did as well as what they said or wrote (as well as what they did not do or say). Of course action can only be studied through written documents, with all the problems of interpretation that historians have recognised for generations, but an excessive focus on the expression of ideas and values in written texts (which should not always be taken literally, for language is often used ironically or instrumentally, and its meaning is not fixed), carries the danger of privileging the role of the articulate who have left such traces, and in itself reveals nothing about their reception. An investigation of actions can thus both broaden the scope of the study and help uncover the reception of ideas, for as action is the product of thoughts, it is in itself potent evidence for thoughts. What people said, wrote, and did are all evidence for what they believed, and thus radical practice can help reveal differences in concerns, motivations, interests, cultural outlook, and perceptions of radicalism.

This book thus rests on the political importance of groups of artisans who were central to the development of the urban economies of the time and experienced problems that could lead them into radical political action, something for which they had the individual and collective capacities. Its main concern is with a range of benefit, trade, co-operative, credit, insurance, educational, and convivial clubs, of varying degrees of formality, and composed mostly of people connected with manufacturing industries. These clubs could, and many did, have strong political elements and orientations and were thus constituent elements of artisan radicalism, especially as they were unspecialised and multi-purpose, and radical clubs could meet the same needs and aspirations as they did. Nearly all of them promised material gains which were important motives for adhesion. The obstacles to commencing and continuing these organisations were severe and legion, and their form

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and operation depended on differing political circumstances, available organisational resources, and the organisational capacities and qualities of particular individuals, a source of tension lying in differences in outlook between ordinary members and the, usually more political, leaders. These institutions were of pivotal importance in nineteenth-century social developments and were foundations of political action. Such action led to political alliances that were not predetermined by economic or social strata, that depended very much on the overall political context, and that usually also included people from non-manual occupations. These alliances, with their usually slender material resources, were often temporary and fragile, and difficult to sustain. To understand artisan radicalism, therefore, we must consider not only the structure of work and workplace relations, and political ideas, but also the nature of politics, urban culture, strategic options, and the role of individuals.

While the different chapters deal in turn with different activities right through the whole period, there is a logic in their ordering. Chapter 1 looks at understandings and interpretations of artisans and their radicalism. Because the history of working-class agitation should not be separated from the cultural and intellectual history of the rest of the nation, and because artisan radicalism can be seen as derivative, the result of a 'trickling down', via 'culture-brokers', of ideas developed by higher and more educated groups, chapter 2 outlines the main themes within the common radicalism in which radical artisans shared, while at the same time stressing the variations and divisions within it that did not necessarily stem from intellectual principles. These first two chapters basically clear the ground for the more substantial ones that follow, although the latter part of the second chapter stresses the importance of the political context, a theme that runs through the book. The third chapter looks at trade unionism, and in arguing that even this did not directly reflect or develop from the workplace and work relations, indicates that the same was true of radicalism. The next chapter nevertheless argues that there were important ways in which radicalism was related to work, in practice if not in ideas. Chapter 5 argues that radicalism was not displaced by a new socialist ideology appropriate to new economic relations and the situation of workers, and this argument is continued in the next chapter, on co-operation, often seen as the chief application of socialism in the period. Chapter 7 draws these chapters together in a discussion of the possible class character of this radicalism.

Chapter 8 then looks at the main forms of political action, and argues that formal organisation was relatively unimportant, radical mobilisation depending on other, more informal bases, including, as was shown in

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chapter 4, work groups and trade societies. Some of the other bases are looked at in the remaining chapters, which also discuss more generally the importance in radicalism of education, religion, and various locations and institutions of popular culture.

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1 Artisans

> We are on the eve of great changes. The present system is worn out, and must give way. Every reasoning man admits this. Ask any one whose station or experience gives him the means of knowing what is going on in society, and he will tell you, that the present order of things cannot continue.[1]

Radicalism at the start of our period was characterised both by the confidence aroused by two epoch-making events, the July Revolution in France in 1830 and the Reform Crisis in Britain in 1831–2, and by bitter disappointment at the outcome, when the looked-for reforms had not occurred, and the people, whose action had made the changes possible, had been betrayed. Self-seeking politicians had used them to gain power and then turned against them.

> I saw a man pretend to be
> The advocate of Liberty –
> I see him, in his power elate,
> Uphold the evils of the State.[2]

Both the National Union of the Working Classes and Others in London (1831–5) and the Society of the Rights of Man in Paris (1832–4), fully expressed these feelings, and announced the appearance of labour, of the working classes, in politics and society. The sense of combining political action and popular grievances was conveyed at an early meeting of the National Union of the Working Classes by the respected veteran radical and trade union organiser, the shipwright John Gast:

> Adverting to the destitute and hopeless condition of the working classes, he enquired, how it could be otherwise, seeing they were in no way represented in Parliament? There every measure adopted went directly to favour monopolists and capitalists, while it robbed the honest and industrious labourer of the fruits of his exertions; and it would be found, and, indeed, he defied contradiction when he asserted, that though there were hundreds of laws against the interests of the working classes, not a single law could be found on the statute book affording them the least protection. The people were beginning now to be aware of the power they would possess if they were intelligent and united – they saw

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clearly that by UNION their efforts to improve their condition would be successful, because it would enable them to enjoy the produce of their own labour instead of leaving that produce to be devoured, as it now is, by an unfeeling and rapacious aristocracy. By a union of their physical and moral energies, they would soon be able to command the repeal of all such laws as, at present, prevented them from enjoying the fruits of their labour.[3]

This popular democratic radicalism continued for the rest of our period, at times gaining widespread and mass support, but subject to great fluctuations, continuous activity being the work of minorities. 'We are', said the chief French workers' paper of the 1840s, 'the forlorn hope of the workers.'[4] It exhibited continuity in personnel and in ideas, as well as in the combination of an awareness of change, a conviction of the inevitability of reform, with a disappointment at the outcome of all the efforts made. The radical experience was recurrent defeat and, except for a brief spell in 1848 in France, radicalism was an ideology of opposition. No-one felt this more deeply than Auguste Blanqui, who spent forty of his seventy-six years in prison:

as for us, our destiny was to live in an age of change, one foot still on the ladder, and not belonging either to the world of the past or that of the future. It is a life full of hardship, of sorrow and bitterness; that of the Hebrews in the desert between Egypt and the Promised Land.[5]

The rise of popular radicalism was not a uniform process, or a simultaneous one, for it was well established in Britain by 1830, but was yet to develop in France, though soon to grow rapidly in Paris and Lyons. The two periods of the most dramatic extension of such radicalism were at different times, in England during and just after the Napoleonic wars, and in France during the Second Republic of 1848–52. Three factors are usually picked out to explain these expansions of radicalism: the 'trickling down' of radical ideas from higher social groups, through written and oral propaganda and participation in political and electoral campaigns; the generation of discontent by economic hardship, particularly in the cotton, woollen, and hosiery industries in England, and in the wine- and olive-producing areas of southern France; and the repression of popular activities, inspired by fears of popular sedition, a repression that often proved counter-productive and created political alienation and disaffection.[6] All these are relevant, but we must avoid the danger of looking for ideas coming only from above, and material motivations from below. It was a constant tendency among observers to see labour activity and popular radicalism as purely materialist in motivation, an example of how contemporary views have misled historical study of the poor.

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Yet the people affected by these sudden extensions of radicalism lived mainly in villages, where industrial and agricultural activities were intermixed and combined, whilst it was urban artisans, more specialised and full-time handicraft workers, who seem the most continuous and persistent elements in popular radicalism. In 1833 'these Unions are now fast extending to all *crafts* in the kingdom'.[7] It was the artisans that were the mainstay of trade unionism and radicalism and predominated in the July Revolution, the Society of the Rights of Man, the National Charter Association, the Icarian movement, the June Days in Paris in 1848, the 1851 rising, the Reform League, and even in rural radicalism.

Three reasons are usually given for the predominance of artisans in collective action and protest, including political radicalism.[8] The first is their importance in the economy and workforce, for France and Britain were the first two industrial nations, with steadily growing manufacturing sectors. There were important differences between the two. France had slower population growth, a larger and more impoverished rural population with more peasant agriculture and rural industry, and a more restricted and less unified domestic market characterised by greater regional variations. She did not rely on imported food, and, having lost her colonies in the wars, exported far less. Britain had greater economic unity, a much larger and more uniform middle-class market, and was very dependent on overseas trade, importing between a quarter and a sixth of food needs, and relying on the production and export of a very limited range of staple manufactured items, especially cottons. France had higher industrial productivity, produced higher-quality manufactured commodities using traditional supplies of skilled labour, which formed a greater element in costs. Even the factory-made cottons of Alsace and woollens of Roubaix were of higher quality than British ones, and in exports France relied more than Britain on quality goods such as silks, gloves, or porcelain. Britain produced for a lower-quality market at home and abroad, and concentrated on intermediate goods, basic manufactures, and common, mass-consumption articles, especially textiles, using more unskilled labour and intensive production. Britain also provided a number of services to the rest of the world – shipping, banking, and commercial – which financed a surplus of imported commodities and, therefore, higher consumption. It was mainly in British towns and colonies that there were mass markets for cheap consumer goods, which led to some mass-production industries, such as cotton spinning and weaving, food processing, brewing, soap-making (Marseilles likewise produced 60 per cent of France's soap), and publishing. It was in these fields that most mechanisation occurred in Britain and France, with carding, spinning, shearing, combing, weaving,

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