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Michael Savage

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Political practices and the social structure

1.1 The question of working-class consciousness

In 1922 Jeremiah Wooley, leading officer of Preston's largest union, the Weavers', and the town's first Labour mayor, spoke of his vision of socialism. He defined it as a situation in which 'a man should have work . . . he should be paid for his work . . . he should have a decent house . . . he should have sufficient leisure to enjoy life . . . he should have clothes fit to wear, and . . . he should have a little spending money in his pocket.'¹ This statement is a good example of the limited vision of the Labour movement, an instance of what many writers have seen as the characteristic of the Labour party in Britain: its embodiment in a defensive working-class consciousness. This interpretation owes much to the work of Ross McKibbin who argued that the party's rise was caused by 'an acutely developed class consciousness', but of a defensive and non-socialist kind.² For many writers, examination of the Labour party revolves around showing the relationship between this defensive consciousness and its political institutions.

A similar emphasis has informed many of the most important sociological accounts of political change in modern Britain. Perhaps the most influential of these was the debate around Lockwood's arguments showing how different types of occupational and community relations gave rise to particular kinds of 'images of society'.³ Lockwood distinguished three main types of class imagery, based on a reading of various English studies of workers between 1945 and the middle of the 1960s. Firstly there was 'traditional proletarian' imagery, whereby workers had very strongly defined conceptions of class based on a belief that social advantages were based on power. There was also, secondly, a 'traditional deferential' imagery, whereby workers recognised that a certain elite should rule by virtue of its status attributes; and finally there were 'instrumental' workers, who had less clear conceptions of class,

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seeing society as composed of differentiated groups with different amounts of money. These forms of imagery could be related to the environment surrounding the workers: in occupational communities and industries where workers exercised autonomy in the workplace the traditional proletarian imagery was most likely to develop; in situations where workers lived and worked near their employers, deference was likely to develop; whilst in the high-wage but tedious mass-production industries workers were most likely to be instrumental.

In order to understand the political propensities of the working class it was necessary to ascertain which of these types of imagery predominated. Clearly it seemed easy to relate the hold of the Labour party to the existence of occupational communities with their 'traditional proletarian' imagery, though Lockwood did emphasise that political behaviour could not simply be read off from these images of society and indeed, with Goldthorpe, argued that instrumentalism may be as likely to lead to support for the Labour party as is traditional proletarian imagery, at least in the short term.⁴ Nonetheless the general thrust of Lockwood and the sociological school was to examine the relationship between social structure and political partisanship through the mediation of these images.

One of the strengths of focusing on forms of class consciousness is that it allows political forms to be tied to people's everyday life. This approach takes people's beliefs about specific daily practices, such as work or 'community', and then relates them to political practices by emphasising an internal logical connection between the different belief elements. The *coherence* of belief systems is therefore an enduring feature of these accounts. Thus in Lockwood's typology a worker with personal experience of workplace conflict is likely to develop an image of society in which class hostility is pervasive in all matters. An explanation of politics can hence be provided which is firmly based in the social structure.

An interesting recent example of this is Patrick Joyce's account of working-class passivity in mid-Victorian textile Lancashire.⁵ Joyce wanted to explain why textile Lancashire, the first regional base of industrial capitalism, failed to give rise to a radical working class. He stressed the role of the local social structure, notably the dependence of workers on employers in the labour market, the significance of rejuvenated patriarchal relations, and the hold which employers could exert in small mill-town environments. The critical link between these specific features and political passivity, however, was provided by 'deference' which, while arising out of everyday work and neighbourhood relations, then carried over into the political realm. Joyce links

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together deferential relations in the workplace with deferential political attitudes, encapsulated in working-class Toryism, which were also linked to patriarchal values, patriotism, racism and Anglicanism, so that all are linked in a seamless web of 'deference'. Hence a certain principle is singled out which appears to act as a unifying axis for a range of more specific beliefs about work, the home and politics. It is this which is frequently referred to as 'culture', being understood, in Raymond Williams's definition, as 'a whole way of life'.⁶

The emphasis on working-class consciousness has therefore generally gone hand in hand with attempts to relate changes in the social structure with changes in political alignments. Consciousness or culture is the main link between the two. As such, analyses of popular politics tend to be collapsed into studies of working-class culture. This concentration on questions of culture has, I will contend, been profoundly unhelpful in advancing our analysis of the dynamics of working-class politics. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly there are almost insurmountable problems in ascertaining the precise nature of working-class consciousness in historical periods. Secondly, political practice and action are strongly related to questions of strategy and tactics rather than to moral issues or perceptions of the nature of society. As such the nature of working-class consciousness rarely explains why particular courses of political action are embarked upon. Finally recent work suggests that the category 'culture' simply will not stand the weight put upon it. People have a variety of beliefs about different elements of their lives, and there is no reason to suppose that there is any coherence about these beliefs.

In some ways the first point is relatively minor, but it is necessary to emphasise the practical difficulties in researching working-class consciousness in past times. There is a very strong temptation to concentrate on the articulate minority, the people most likely to leave historical records, and who were also most likely to be involved in political action. This line of reasoning is implicit in books such as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of The English Working Class*, in which analysis of working-class consciousness is primarily inferred from studies of radical texts and speakers. More recently the recognition of this problem has led historians to infer forms of consciousness from various practical activities. Stedman Jones, most notably, has deduced the existence of a defensive working-class consciousness from the content of music hall songs, while Joyce has deduced working-class deference from popular religious behaviour, voting patterns and popular leisure.⁷ Contemporary sociologists have emphasised, however, how difficult it is to undertake this sort of operation, since people performing the same activity may have different

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perceptions about it. There is no reason to suppose that this would have been any different for earlier periods.⁸ Finally, for more recent periods at least, oral history has been used. However the problem is that respondents' past beliefs are always interpreted by them through their present perceptions and values, and may not be a good guide to their previous consciousness.⁹

Put simply, it is enormously difficult actually to find out what people in the past believed. One alternative may be to examine popular practice in its own right, rather than use it to infer particular states of consciousness. This procedure has frequently been neglected, since the tendency has been to examine popular practices only in order to illuminate a common cultural framework held to underpin them. This forms the basis of my second reason for finding unhelpful the cultural approach to working-class politics. The precise form of popular action tends to be reduced to a common set of values, but (and this is the problem) the same set of beliefs can be held to underlie a number of different forms of political practice.

Williams offers an especially blatant example of this when he argues that working-class culture, in his terms 'the basic collectivist idea', has produced 'the basic democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the co-operative movement or a political party'. This implies that it is a matter of little importance which actual form 'the basic collectivist idea' takes, yet for the analysis of Labour politics it is precisely this which is of major importance.¹⁰

Consider the work of historians of the Labour party. Many have seen the party, in Winter's words, as 'infused with the spirit of a defensive and politically inert working class consciousness'. Stedman Jones's work is well known in this regard, with his observations that from the latter part of the nineteenth century a home-based lifestyle generated a defensive culture which culminated in the Labour party.¹¹ Yet this is still compatible with a 'proletarian' imagery. The working class recognises the existence of power-based divisions in society; yet is driven by this belief not into revolutionary politics, but into defensive struggles to gain what can be achieved within the existing system. The problem raised is that a certain set of beliefs appears able to generate different forms of political practice: revolutionary movements in some cases, social democratic politics in others, or simple apathy and hopelessness in others. If this is so, the precise nature of working-class consciousness is perhaps of relatively small importance in explaining political alignments.

Many writers are coming to recognise the complexities of this problem of relating forms of consciousness to forms of practice, yet argue that the way to proceed is further to conceptualise the nature of class conscious-

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ness. As Winter put it: 'Class consciousness points in more directions than simply towards apathy or militancy. Indeed in most periods it points in both directions at once.' Hence there is a need 'to look at multiple meanings of class consciousness'. The answer to the problem, then, is to look for yet more adequate theorisation of class consciousness, as Winter makes clear in his argument that labour history should be about 'questions of the nature of class consciousness and its political manifestations'. Stedman Jones's recent attempt to emphasise the significance of analysing 'languages of class' also exacerbates this tendency.¹² In fact this seems a most unpromising way to proceed – and this forms the basis of my third reason for finding unhelpful analyses of working-class politics which concentrate on questions of culture. Recent work indicates that people's day-to-day practices are only weakly affected by any wider cultural values. Some writers, drawing inspiration from Gramsci, have attempted to break down any necessary unity to cultural systems and stress the need to examine practical beliefs in much greater detail. Gramsci's distinction between common sense and philosophy stressed the closer connection of the former to the material world. 'In common sense', he wrote, 'it is the realistic, materialistic elements which are predominant, the immediate product of individual sensation.'¹³ Forms of common sense came into contact with more general 'philosophies' which attempted to latch on to forms of common sense. The essential point however is that the relationship between common sense and the material world is more significant than that between different elements of a culture. Gramsci's work has had considerable impact in this regard on Marxist conceptions of culture and ideology.¹⁴

A similar sort of distinction has been made more recently by Giddens in his separation of practical from discursive consciousness. The former Giddens defines as 'those things which actors know tacitly about how to go on in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression'.¹⁵ Giddens's point is that there is no necessary tie-up with discursive consciousness in which agents have to give an account of their activities. Whereas Lockwood saw solidarity in the workplace (practical consciousness) as leading to wider political and social awareness (a form of discursive consciousness), Giddens's distinction suggests that there is no necessary relationship. Therefore Joyce's argument, that the experience of worker dependence in the labour market led to a set of deferential belief systems with wide-ranging applications in all spheres of life, can be seen as conceptually misleading. Forms of practical consciousness associated with particular activities need not have any implication in other contexts.

These types of distinctions can be usefully applied to many of the

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concrete studies of worker consciousness and practice. Newby's account of deference among East Anglian farmworkers in the 1970s is a case in point. Newby stresses that deferential relationships between farmer and farmworker were established in the course of their everyday interaction and that deferential attitudes applied only in these contexts and need not be generalised into a more general deferential world view. The farmworker was in a position of powerlessness in the labour and housing markets and was hence forced to rely on the farmer for work and security, and this form of dependence was acknowledged by the farmworkers. Thus 73 % of them agreed that 'workers should always be loyal to their farmer, even if this means putting themselves out quite a lot'. These views, developed in the work situation, did not carry over into their wider political outlook. Only 36.9 % felt that 'the aristocracy are born to rule and workers should follow their lead; 28.6 % felt that 'public [fee-paying] schools are the best part of our education system'. The most striking finding was that 43 % of Newby's respondents failed to have a single image of society in Lockwood's sense, but instead had a set of conflicting images, whilst only 15 % evinced deferential imagery.¹⁶ Hence there are no clear connections between 'deference' as practical consciousness and deference as discursive consciousness.

Another good example of this point can be seen in Burawoy's study of a piece-rate machine shop in Illinois, USA, also in the 1970s.¹⁷ He argues that ideology should be conceived not as abstract thought autonomous from lived relations, but rather as firmly based on 'lived experience'. For Burawoy, the shopfloor 'lived experience' created the ideology of 'making out'. In order to impose meaning on dull and boring work, the operatives played 'games' to see if they could meet particular production targets they set themselves, and to see if they could take short cuts in their work. This ideology of making out was firmly linked to the nature of shopfloor life, and would have little relevance outside the workplace. Burawoy discusses this in relation to racism. Racist beliefs developed outside the workplace, mainly in education and housing, had no impact on shopfloor practices in the course of which black and white workers might co-operate in their aim of making out. Racist beliefs, whilst firmly held outside the workplace, held no purchase on activities on the shopfloor. It seems equally valid to reverse this argument and suggest that the practice of making out would not necessarily have any impact outside the working practices on which it was based.

This point is of major importance in analysing the development of the Labour party in Britain, in which many historians have attempted to make firm connections between work experience and political and social

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practices. Price, for instance, argues that there is an inherent conflict in the capitalist labour process between capital and labour over the question of control. Therefore rank and file workplace militancy have been an enduring feature of British industrial relations, and in specific periods (he cites the early nineteenth century, the period 1880–1920, and the period from 1960) will lead to a capitalist backlash as the employers attempt to restore profitability. ‘At these moments’, he writes, ‘resistance to subordination becomes the central problem to be solved and a battery of weapons – industrial, social, cultural, political and legal – are employed to attack formal subordination, and restore real subordination. Under these circumstances, resistance to subordination . . . moves out of its local workshop environment to enter the wider dynamic of labour’s history.’¹⁸ There are a number of studies which support the general argument that changes in work relations were of considerable significance in the growing politicisation of the skilled sector of the working class after 1900,¹⁹ yet the pivotal importance given to work in this account seems theoretically unwarranted; indeed comparative analysis of the American case, where far more intense changes in working practices were being introduced but where no working-class political movement emerged, shows that these connections are far from clear. Rather it is necessary to ground any examination of forms of working-class politics in a study of diverse social practices, with their attendant forms of practical consciousness. It is important to know how specific practices relate to each other, and in particular how forms of political practice are related to more mundane practices of work and leisure, given that it is unfruitful to see them as linked in a common culture, or as based in one experience alone.

1.2 Political practices and the autonomy of the political

One of the main needs of political analysis is to come to terms with the diversity and lack of connection between political and other practices. It is misleading to give them a spurious unity by connecting them to an over-arching belief system. Yet if without such a spurious unity all that is left is a whole range of social practices, it is unclear how political practices are to be defined, and how they can be distinguished from other social practices. One solution to this problem would be to define political practices as all those which further the interests of their participants. Furtherance of interests can also provide the mechanism by which the social structure generates political action. People engage in various forms of action because it is in their interests to do so. The use of some

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notion of interests to link social structure and political action lies at the heart of political sociology, yet the concept of interests is a hotly contested one and needs considerable discussion.

It was the American pluralists of the 1950s who used the concept of interests most clearly, and the legacy of their interpretation has affected other works. The pluralists argued that political movements could be classified into pragmatic interest-based politics (manifested most notably in social democratic parties) and moralistic mass politics (such as Fascism or Communism). They argued that the former was linked to the centrality of class politics, since class divisions provided basic economic interests around which people could organise, while the latter was linked to status politics in which people acted not pragmatically but for irrational reasons of status anxiety.

The sort of politics which these writers felt could best be related to interests were peaceful formal pressuring and party organisation. The significant effect of this interpretation was to link formal political alignments in liberal democracies to the class structure in a fairly mechanistic way. Lipset for instance stated that 'on a world scale the principal generalisation which can be made is that parties are primarily based on either the lower class or the middle and upper class'. Alford elaborated on this point: 'A relation between class position and voting is natural and expected . . . given the character of the stratification order and the way political parties act as representatives of class interest it would be remarkable if such a relationship were not found.' The rise of the Labour party in Britain could easily be interpreted in this way as the normal development of an interest-based party.²⁰

The problem with this definition of political practice as interest-based was that it could not come to terms with various forms of activity that did not appear to be pressing for the advancement of interests within the existing order. Class interests could be held to account in a fairly simple way for the existence of orthodox 'reformist' parties or moderate political alignments. Class interests were not however responsible for other 'mass' forms of political action, which were explained not in social terms at all, but in terms of the isolation of individuals from society. Where individuals were isolated from society their irrational unconscious impulses could emerge and would therefore produce moralistic 'mass politics'. Fascism was explained by reference to the authoritarian personality which could develop where there were large numbers of self-employed businessmen and farmers not integrated into industrial society.²¹

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Mass society theory has been heavily criticised²² largely because the distinction between interest-based and mass politics seems impossible to draw: on close inspection most 'mass' movements are concerned with basic economic issues which can be linked to various interests. Halebsky for instance stresses that many forms of mass politics, such as Nazism, are to be explained in the same terms as other more 'orthodox' political forms. Halebsky's critique of mass society theory argues that diverse forms of party political mobilisation are to be understood not in terms of the extent to which people are integrated into society, but are instead linked to 'political socialisation, group membership, historic loyalties, dominant themes in the national political culture, interest consciousness, class divisions, the lack of responsiveness by political elites, the nature of available alternatives and such other political influences that account for most political commitments, radical or otherwise'.²³

This passage indicates that the critique of mass society theory is in danger of ending up simply in descriptions of various political forms. The theoretical problem can be labelled 'the problem of the under-determination of politics by interests'. A wide variety of forms of political action can be seen as viable strategies to defend or advance interests, in which case the actual specification of these interests seems of relatively little importance in explaining the precise form of action undertaken. This problem is a precise analogue of that discussed earlier where it was seen that a particular form of culture could give rise to a number of political practices: in a like way a given set of interests can give rise to divergent political forms.

In recent years this problem has been approached from a new angle, with stress placed on the autonomy of the political. Since political actions appear under-determined by social interests greater emphasis is placed on how political structures such as the state and party systems may determine the precise nature of political action. This type of argument has been expressed forcibly by Berger. She emphasises that interest groups are not the spontaneous result of socio-economic cleavage but are produced by the political process itself. Attention should be placed on 'the specificities of national historical expansion, the role of the state, and the instabilities inherent in the operation of a representational system'.²⁴

The process of state formation is often given key importance in accounting for national variations in forms of political alignment. Interest is often centred on the period at which the franchise was extended to encompass a mass electorate, for the type of parties in existence at this period then have the opportunity to mobilise the new

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electorate, and maintain themselves in the longer term. Inspired by Lipset and Rokkan's seminal work, Schafter puts it thus: 'the circumstances under which a party first mobilises a mass following has enduring implications for its subsequent behaviour'.²⁵ The normal argument here is that if the state is slow to extend the franchise after the emergence of industrial or capitalist society, it is more likely that the excluded working class will form its own party to gain entry to the polity. If the franchise is extended early, however, it is more likely that the working class will be incorporated into existing political alignments. Thus the main differences between American and British politics, for instance, lie not in the different class structures or patterns of capitalist development, but rather in the patterns of state development.

This argument has been used to explain the fortunes of the Labour party in twentieth-century Britain by Cronin, who argues that the Labour party's rise between 1900 and 1920 was due to the exclusion of the working class from the existing polity, and that 'Labour became the vehicle of workers' entry into the polity'.²⁶ Since the Labour party predated the development of the mass franchise and was partly responsible for it, it stood to reap the electoral benefits, and has persisted. Within a similar line of argument Katznelson explains the lack of radical politics in the USA by reference to the early franchise and the autonomy of the states, which allowed local political parties to develop; these organised the new voters in a territorially based patronage system. 'In this politics, workers appeared in the political arena not as workers but as residents of a specific place or as members of a specific (non-class) group.'²⁷

The argument that formal political parties operate on the terrain created and structured by the state is a very powerful one, and in later chapters we shall see how the development of the Labour party did link with changes in the national polity. Yet there is a major problem in such state-centred accounts: the set of assumptions concerning people's relationship to the state is very simplistic. It is assumed that people will want to gain access to the state and use it to their own advantage: the way in which this occurs (whether through explicitly working-class parties or patronage-based ones) is deemed to be determined by the nature of the state. In capitalist society working-class relationships to the state are however much more complex than this. A large number of practices which advance one's interests may not involve the state, may involve it only indirectly, or may be actively hostile to it. For instance if working-class people are surviving by relying on money wages provided by capitalist enterprises they may be indifferent to the potential of