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1848-1914

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

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Introduction: beyond class?

Until relatively recently, ‘class’ in British history was a settled matter. The periodisation given to the ‘class consciousness’ of workers had assumed fairly distinct lines. Despite the large amount of subsequent scholarship, the work of E. P. Thompson and E. J. Hobsbawm remained, and remains, central, fixing the historical sequence of class development. Thompson’s enormously influential *The Making of the English Working Class* presents a picture of class consciousness as substantially ‘made’ by around 1830, the outcome of the effect of early industrialisation and political change upon the plebeity or common people of late eighteenth-century England.¹ Hobsbawm looks to the consolidation of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century, rather than to its inception.² Whatever the differences, class is seen as probably the major cultural and political expression of the prolonged sequence of nineteenth-century industrial change, if not determined by such change then developing roughly in step with it.

This has now taken the form of received wisdom. However, while there is no denying that class was a child of the nineteenth century, when it comes to how the social order was represented and understood, there were other children too who were every bit as lusty as class – indeed, in many respects stronger and more fully part of their time. Received wisdom has in fact become a dead weight, the fixation with class denying us sight of these other visions of the social order. This fixation has recently come under direct fire, significantly from the left rather than from the right: both empirically and analytically, the concept of class has been attacked as inappropriate and inadequate.³ This scepticism is to be applauded. It informs the present work, though the fire here is less direct. Class will not go away. It has its place, and an important one, though it does from time to time need to be put in it. A good part of this disciplining of the class concept involves attention to the actual terms in which contemporaries talked about the social order, and to the means through which they communicated their perceptions. In short, it involves attention to language, to the means and content of human communication. This, therefore, is as much a book about language as about class. At least in part it is a product of its post-structuralist

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times. It is necessary, however, to begin with the concept of class. And here, of course, it all depends upon how one defines class.

It also depends on how one conceives of industrialisation, and before coming to the question of definitions something needs to be said about this. Anglo-American scholarship on class has emphasised cultural and political factors so strongly that the last thing one may call it is economically determinist. Indeed, it can be accused of neglecting the dimension of economic change. Nonetheless, industrial change implicitly informs many such accounts: for instance, there is a telling analogy between metaphors of class development and economic change, ideas of biological growth informing both, with classes and industrial capitalism alike growing to 'maturity'. Now, this is not a book about industrial change and its effect on class formation. Nonetheless, because prevailing ideas about the industrial revolution have been influential, they need to be questioned. This can be done only briefly here.⁴

Britain was the seat of the 'industrial revolution', and continues to be widely seen as the epitome of new systems of production, and hence of a new consciousness of class to which these systems gave rise. Recent notions of economic development serve to question accepted ideas of a convergence of economic organisation around large-scale factory production and an attendant homogenisation of condition and outlook among the workforce. The picture of capitalist industrialism that has emerged in recent years is fairly familiar, though the ramifications of this view and its implications for the social outlook of workers have not been explored. Very briefly, what has been termed 'combined and uneven development' can be seen as involving the incorporation rather than the supersession of earlier forms of industrial organisation. For instance, outwork and small workshop production continued to be of great importance at least as late as the 1914-18 war. In supposedly 'modern' forms of organisation (for example in engineering, shipbuilding and even textiles), it is the 'archaism' of organisation that is evident, especially the reliance of employers on the strength, skill and authority of the workforce. The labour process is seen to involve not a linear process of 'de-skilling', and an homogeneous working class, but a multiplicity of outcomes, including continuity in the worker's experience and outlook. Explorations of capital reveal the paternalist values and strategies of employers, the force of inter-capitalist competition, and the relatively small-scale and fragmented pattern of industrial ownership. The Victorian and indeed the Edwardian economy in many respects was irregular and diverse. So too was the nature of the individual occupation and the pattern of the individual's work life.

The consequences of all this are evident in the revelation of a very

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diverse and fragmented labour force, one to which the term 'proletarian' applies with only a good deal of qualification. By that term one denotes, among other attributes, work for wages, usually life long, and usually manual. Workers are subject to contract rather than to extra-economic compulsions and traditions. Above all, ownership and control over the means of production are lost. However, the great variety of forms of industrial organisation, and in particular the complex permeation of authority within industry, involved a multiplicity of situations in which the worker had more to lose than his or her chains. As well as a stake in the ownership and control of production (sometimes vestigial to us but not for the workers involved), he (rarely she) also often had a stake in how production should be governed. The term 'proletarian' does not do justice to the range of experience involved, or to the great array of skills and statuses so clearly evident in what, in the singular, is clearly a distinctly tenuous 'working class'. This questioning of the idea of the proletariat is furthered by new considerations of the relationship between labour and capital.⁵ Instead of an overmastering, trans-historical tendency towards conflict – along classical Marxist lines – what is evident is the inter-dependence of capital and labour, alongside the dependence and independence of labour which also mark the employment relationship at other times. Relations depend upon historical circumstances. Capitalists need to secure consent. The vested interest workers and employers have in co-operation is at least as great as any tendency towards conflict.

The upshot of all this for many received ideas about class is evident enough. Just as linear notions of economic development seem untenable, so too do linear notions of class development. Indeed, socio-economic class position or situation emerges as so fractured and ambiguous that the very notion of class may itself be questioned. This questioning becomes even more urgent when proletarianisation is set in its broader contexts.⁶ The experience of residential community is often taken to complement the shared experience of work in cementing class solidarity. Yet when the British case is looked at it is the lateness and the ambiguous form of developments that are evident. For instance, the great coalfields, supposed bastions of 'traditional' working-class consciousness, did not emerge as fully coherent social and cultural entities until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly in the case of south Wales. In earlier forms of urban industry, above all in textiles,⁷ the intimate relationship of work and community produced attitudes of mind often far removed from those of class. One could go on to detail other areas beyond labour mobility and urban morphology, looking for instance in the socio-economic sphere at patterns of

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immigration (particularly of the Irish), or at the very late development of the uniform working day, week and year, a late emergence of a uniform work experience paralleling the late emergence of uniform occupational communities.⁸

However, aspects of this kind of revisionism may suggest that all things being equal, and the conditions enabling the development of class consciousness emerging earlier, then a class outcome would have been evident earlier. There is a sense in which the answer to questions about the periodisation of class may be that everything (proletarianisation, consciousness) merely happened later and more gradually than was thought. However, one is still left with the evident anachronism of imagining that given the 'correct' combination of conditions class would be the outcome. Alternatives to class are left out of the account and historical situations are correspondingly misread.

In fact, once the question of proletarianisation is put in a radical manner then the concept of class comes under heavy fire. If we postpone class to the twentieth century this still leaves a rather large question mark over the nineteenth century. For, in order for the concept of class as usually understood to have a purchase, it surely must in some sense be anchored in the socio-economic condition of workers. The 'in some sense' is of course the rub. The emphasis on the study of class in Britain has strongly emphasised struggle, and the cultural agency of the individuals involved. Certainly, class needs to be seen in cultural and political terms of the playing out of values and traditions in changing circumstances. This, indeed, is one of the main arguments of this book. But before entering into the great array of questions and difficulties evident in this area, it is as well to maintain, without of course being in any sense determinist or production centred, that for the notion of class to hold then something other than cultural or political factors needs to be in play. That is to say, if class 'position' is not considered in the light of the very problematic nature of proletarianisation, then one is led to ask in what respect is the phenomenon to hand a matter of 'working-class consciousness' (presumably an outlook based on the perception of workers' shared experience as manual proletarians), rather than cultural and political traditions *per se*, or extra-proletarian identifications such as 'the people', or the primary producers. Of course, we can define class as we like, in terms as cultural as we wish, but we should be aware that we are doing this, and that this will change one of the major meanings of class, both within Marxism and beyond it.

Of course, the 'in some sense' comes into play here, too, and it is in practice impossible to dissociate the representations and beliefs of people from their experience of nineteenth-century industrial

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capitalism. The condition of the proletarian at the time was indeed complex and ambiguous, though there were important respects in which it *was* a shared condition of powerlessness. So, the matter is perhaps one of degree, and in other work I pull back from the verge of denying class, arguing the need to balance tendencies towards fragmentation in work experience with those towards unity.⁹ One simple instance would be the strike in pursuit of the sectionalist interests of workers, an activity self-interested in character but at the same time directed against employers and so capable of various meanings and results. The main significance of trade unions would in this argument be not that they were sectionalist in character but that they existed at all.

Tendencies towards a unity of labour experience and a resulting unity of class sentiment can be geographically and industrially localised, or emergent and declining at different times and under different conditions. To admit this, and to recognise the formative role of periods of economic and political crisis, is not to disallow the notion of class consciousness, unless we wish to apply hopelessly idealised criteria. At the same time, there were elements of continuing force and moment in workers' conceptions of themselves which imply the persistence of a consciousness of being workers. Such a notion, considered in chapters 4 and 5, was that of the trade, allied to the concept of the 'artisan' or 'craftsman', which conveyed important distinctions of honour and worth often far beyond the ranks of craft workers alone. Therefore, tendencies towards unity and fragmentation in socio-economic position and in values cannot be resolved arbitrarily in one direction or the other. So, in pulling back from the brink one is not doing so in order to retain the fig-leaf of Marxist decencies. There is life after class. The reasons are mundane. Simply, class mattered.

However, in pushing home the implications of revisionist notions of the development of industrial capitalism, one recognises not only that there is life after class, but that this life is vastly more important and colourful than has been thought. Before considering the nature of popular conceptions of the social order other than those of class, I shall complete this genuflection to the economy by posing the question: if the greatly ambiguous nature of work experience often has negative implications for both the concept and the consciousness of class, does it perhaps have more positive implications for alternative popular understandings? I have spoken briefly of cultural and political traditions cutting across identifications based on the experience of proletarian labour, of extra-proletarian identifications such as 'the people'. When we come to the matter of definitions, it will be seen that if class has a rival it is perhaps that of 'populism',

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of 'the people'. Now, as I argue below for the need to take seriously the formative role of language and ideas in the formation of attitudes to the social order, I can hardly regress by treading again the path of 'economism' by explaining a populist vision in terms of the heterogeneous, ambiguous nature of so much labour experience. In fact, except in chapter 5, I have little to say about the character of the economy in relation to non-class models of the social. Perhaps too little. Certainly, the temptation is too great to resist here: the very ambiguity of many people's experience as labour – of being a worker by hand and for wages yet having a great deal in common with others who were not – surely made for the successful appeal of notions like 'the people' which often depended upon just such sorts of ambiguity. At the same time, the logic of ambiguous 'class position' certainly lent itself well to the many models of harmonic class relationships evident at the time.

So, this discussion clears some of the ground for a consideration of alternatives to class before 1914. More can be cleared by looking at the revised but still orthodox argument that class did come but came late and gradually, after 1880, say, or 1900 or 1918. With this one has some sympathy, particularly with the somewhat less orthodox notion that it was the years after 1910, and especially after 1914 and the war that mattered most here. If the 'same but later' argument holds, this inevitably colours our idea of the Victorian and Edwardian years: events and values may be seen as precursors of class, and their real character and effect may be lost. So, even though this means trespassing on what may be regarded as the matter of a conclusion rather than an introduction, I shall briefly look at aspects of change after the 1880s, so that these may be registered without driving an alternative narrative from our minds. The period between 1880 and 1920 certainly did see considerable changes, but more perhaps at its end than at its beginning.

Increasingly, if slowly, the Victorian and the Edwardian economies lost much of their heterogeneity over this period. If the experience of labour did not become more intensive in the sense of the erosion of the place of the skilled worker, then it seems to have become in a sense more 'extensive', a term employed by Mann in one of the best accounts of 'class formation' in Britain.¹⁰ Semi-skilled work increased, and with it a uniformity of experience at that level. This was in turn related to changes in the organisational sphere which helped produce a clearer perception of being a manual proletarian; it also changed perceptions of the relationship of capital and labour as one more marked by conflict than was hitherto felt to be the case. In the form of mass organisations working on a national level the role of institutions was greatly important in bringing about

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changes in outlook. Political parties, particularly the Labour Party, employer organisations and above all trade unions, which increased in membership to a quite staggering extent between 1910 and 1920, were greatly important here.¹¹ Again, the decade from 1910 seems to have been most significant, obviously in terms of war, but also in terms of the growth of the Labour Party and the unions.

Nonetheless, the growing national integration and concentration of the economy had made itself evident earlier in organisational changes which made it possible and indeed necessary for workers to have a view larger than that of their immediate *milieu*.¹² It was from the 1890s that strikes and lock-outs on a *national* scale developed, and only between 1890 and 1920 that negotiated, nationwide collective industrial agreements were arrived at (though the Labour Department of the Board of Trade had been set up early in this period, in 1893). The emphasis on the role of organisations is of historiographical interest in its own right, and will be returned to: contrary to the drift of the social history of only a short time ago, changes in outlook now tend to be seen as the outcome of changes in organisation rather than the other way round.

This is not to suggest that broader social and cultural changes were not important, nor effective over the long term. Historians have pointed to changed patterns of consumption, which were perhaps as important as changes in production. Changes in the buying power of workers and in the organisation of retailing meant a more uniform pattern of behaviour, something also seen in the use of leisure time, such as the increasing popularity of organised sport and the seaside holiday. All this in turn involved a culture that was more uniform than hitherto, and was highly specific to workers.¹³ More uniform kinds of housing and more segregated forms of residential settlement were evident within towns, a process going a long way towards breaking down the employer controls evident in earlier manifestations of the symbiosis of work and community. One could go on to list other changes which point to the plausibility of the argument that a more firmly delineated class consciousness emerged before 1914; for example mass, compulsory elementary education, and the mass literacy that resulted. Less frequently noted aspects would include the re-formation of the late Victorian middle-classes, a process we know very little about, but one surely closely linked to the structural re-formation of the labouring population.¹⁴

Plausible as the argument might seem, what few half-way systematic accounts we have of the 'class' outlook and values of workers do in fact suggest that it was the First World War and its immediate aftermath that was most crucial in re-forming attitudes. Waites' work is by far the best available.¹⁵ This makes obeisance to

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pre-war developments, yet it is pretty clear that the war saw striking developments: it greatly hastened structural changes, such as a narrowing of wage differentials within manual labour, but most of all it saw the growth of dichotomous images of society turning upon the opposition of labour and capital. These replaced the old three-tier, and very fluid, pre-war system of an 'upper', a 'middle' and a 'lower' or 'working' class or classes.¹⁶

This evidence is striking not only because of its systematic attention to languages of social classification, but also because its very rigour throws into contrast the tenuous nature of much of the evidence for a changed 'consciousness' of class before 1914. The question is nothing if not an open one, but it must be said that the evidence presented for a change of this character is often thin. Many of the changes so far considered were of a structural or cultural sort, and while they may have been predisposing factors they are not evidence of the realisation of class consciousness. The evidence is stronger in some places than in others, for instance as regards the effect of organisational changes (though it must be said that these are often easier to track than other changes). In fact, our understanding of change over this period still rests heavily on Hobsbawm's work: suggestive as this is, it deals mostly with the emergence of what can be described as a 'working class culture', but this is not the same as the emergence of a working-class consciousness of class. Because manual workers chose to wear cloth caps and support football teams it does not follow that they saw the social order in terms of class. As chapter 6 below suggest, it is perfectly possible to have a culture which can be defined as 'working class' but yet for the consciousness associated with this culture to have little or nothing to do with class. As so often, the category of class has tended to drive other possibilities out of the account. Again, the teleological assumptions behind many accounts are not hard to find.

Waites' work is useful in countering these too. An emphasis on the onward march of class, or class as the only or the main outcome of historical change, obscures the fact that ideological versions of 'classlessness' constantly reproduce themselves. If class waxed so too did responses that denied it. Even if the latter were stronger in an earlier period than in early twentieth-century Britain, as Waites shows, governments, unions and employers, also intellectuals, both in war-time and in its immediate aftermath were influential in promoting notions either of the harmony of labour and capital or the essential classlessness of the nation.¹⁷ New as these were, they had a strong relationship with pre-war politics and culture. This emphasis on continuity is in fact an important one, and applies more widely to the entire nature of British society. As this book will suggest, the

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mental universe of workers and others in the 1920s, 30s and later was shaped by the legacy of the Victorian and Edwardian years. Even if class was the outcome of the inter-war years, it was itself still powerfully shaped by that experience. In order to understand how that experience gave rise to popular conceptions of the social order it is necessary first to consider what our terms mean, particularly the term 'class consciousness'.

The term has indeed an antiquated ring to it, one redolent of a time, not so long ago, when class was seen in terms of patterns of belief and action of a uniform, indeed, cut-and-dried kind. Actual values and behaviour were understood in terms of what were in fact hopelessly idealised categories such as 'revolutionary' or 'labour' consciousness, notions emanating from an earlier Marxism but not at all its exclusive preserve.¹⁸ The reason why such notions of consciousness have become superannuated is above all the effect of the new historical interest in theories of language and ideology. Instead of monolithic types of 'consciousness', the latter is resolved into a series of different, overlapping and often competing 'discourses'. This new interest in language is considered more fully in parts I and II, where it is related to the political and economic conditions of Victorian England. But it is worth emphasising here something of what is at issue.

Above all, what has become evident is the dissolution of the old assurance of a formative link between social structure and culture. Class is therefore increasingly, and rightly, seen less as objective reality than as a social construct, created differently by different historical actors. The seemingly simple recognition that the category of 'experience' (out of which historians such as E. P. Thompson argue comes class consciousness) is in fact not prior to and constitutive of language but is actively constituted by language, has increasingly been recognised as having far-reaching implications. In the disaggregation of 'class', deconstruction has taken this route of language, ideology and identity. This is the route of this book. Another route is that of organisation, it being argued for instance that 'class consciousness' should be seen as the attribute of organisations and not individuals.¹⁹ According to this argument what matters is the capacity of a class to behave as a 'class actor'. 'Class organisations' enable this, transforming a 'latent' class 'identity' into class consciousness. Consciousness, then, is the capacity, through organisations like parties and unions, to convert sectional, conflicting struggles and interests into solidaristic and political forms. This emphasis on institutions can, however, be both excessive and crude. No one disputes the significance of organisations: the first two parts of this book emphasise their role, but they

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do so, one hopes, not by pre-judging the issue, or by defining in advance what are to be 'class actors', 'class organisations' and class consciousness.

Those historians who have done most to direct attention to 'languages of class' have done most to explode this evident anachronism. American historians of France such as William Sewell and William Reddy have been influential.²⁰ Reddy's researches in particular have unearthed workers' notions of work, family and community that were often far removed from the values ascribed to them by contemporaries and by posterity – as much by the workingmen leaders of the labour and socialist movements of the time as by less ostensibly sympathetic commentators, then and since. What his work points to most forcefully is the whole area of those facets of belief and value often *not* articulated by organisations, those aspects of life buried in the subsequent historical record because they were not perceived, or were mis-perceived, at the time. Now, such instances might be the ones where history simply failed to turn. They have been neglected because they failed to lead anywhere. But more often they have been neglected because of unwarranted assumptions about where history led. In both respects they were important. This sense of suppressed alternatives and neglected possibilities informs the present work.

It also informs the work of the British social historian who has done most to open up the question of class 'language', Stedman Jones. The considerable body of criticism his work on Chartism has given rise to will be considered in subsequent chapters.²¹ This work has been rightly criticised for its formalistic account of political language and for its lack of attention to the contexts in which 'class' languages are used. In many respects, despite its bracing effect, it does not go very far either with language or with class.²² However, it does begin to suggest alternatives to the notion of class, even though its account of these is not far developed. In short, along with other recent work,²³ his writing suggests the presence of a powerful 'populism' behind the rhetoric of early-century popular radicalism. With the employment of the term 'populism' it is at last time to come to the matter of definition, and in turn to some discussion of possibilities other than that of class.

The sense in which 'class' is used in this work is already to some extent evident. A common socio-economic condition as proletarians, or dependent, manual, waged workers, would in fact seem central to any definition of what 'working class' might mean, as would a shared perception of this common condition. Now, the actual nature of proletarianisation in practice varied considerably, but nonetheless a certain level of common condition and outlook would have to