

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: the case of twentieth-century England

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE CASE

§1. In the theory of social selection, no one society is privileged for study any more than any one species in the theory of natural selection. All societies have their distinctive modes and sub-types of production, persuasion, and coercion. When they evolve (as they all do, sooner or later) out of one into another, it is because the practices defining the earlier one have been displaced by mutant practices which confer greater competitive advantage on the roles which carry them in their changed ecological, demographic, and institutional environment. But later societies are not on that account more deserving of attention than earlier, or Western than Eastern, or the stronger than the weaker, or the more technologically advanced than the less – or vice versa. The evolution of societies, like the evolution of species, is a story with a beginning but not an end: it points no moral, vindicates no religious or political doctrine, and entitles no one group or category of human beings to regard themselves as the norm to which others are the backward or deviant exceptions.

Yet England does have a special place in the annals of social evolution, partly because it is the society where the technical innovations and concomitant mutations of practices amounting to the ‘Industrial Revolution’ occurred and partly because the changes of structure and culture which followed it were, to many people’s surprise both then and since, as limited as they were. There was no comprehensive transformation of the mode of production, no categorical repudiation of the mode of persuasion, no revolutionary subversion of the mode of coercion. To be sure, the lives of countless men and women were radically altered by it, often (earlier on) for what they felt to be the worse and often (later on) for what they felt to be the better. Mutant economic, ideological, and political practices were replicated and diffused while existing ones declined or disappeared; the nature of work and its relation to patterns of residence and kinship were transformed; urban life ceased to be the exception and became overwhelmingly the rule; regional differences in manners and

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W. G. Runciman

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mores began to be merged within a national culture; and the technological changes which industrialization made possible steadily improved both public amenities and the furnishings of the home. But to the sociologist concerned to explain, describe, and evaluate changes (or their absence) in England's modes of production, persuasion, and coercion, the continuities are at least as striking as the differences.

There was nothing inevitable about these continuities. As always in social evolution, there are hypothetical might-have-beens by which the central institutions of English society could have been changed out of recognition, whether from without or within. But they weren't. In 1800, the mode of production had rested on a commercialized network of bankers, merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, and small manufacturers with agriculture largely dependent on capitalist tenant farming; the mode of persuasion had rested on a hierarchy of inherited status and patronage symbolically legitimated by a quasi-hereditary monarchy and a Church which was both formally and informally allied to the institutions of government; and the mode of coercion had rested on an oligarchy answerable to a small and venal electorate, staffed by a minimal bureaucracy, and reliant on a scattered local gentry commanding a half-trained militia. By 1900, the franchise had been progressively widened and the first representatives of the working-class interest had been elected to Parliament; the hierarchy of place and patronage had begun to give way to an ideology of professionalism, formally equal opportunity, and at least notionally vocational education; and the economy had in many sectors and regions (although by no means all) become a factory-based industrial system¹ in which the owners of the means of production hired for wages the labour of a proletariat in the modern sense of that term. Both during the course of this evolution, as later, there were many observers and participants who predicted, and in some cases actively worked for, either an authoritarian or a socialist alternative. But the practices defining the roles constitutive of English society remained obstinately capitalist, liberal, and democratic, both before and after the transition from a sub-type of capitalist liberal democracy which lasted from about 1880 to the First World War to the sub-type which evolved thereafter. When or how this transition might have come about without the First World War we have no way of knowing; what we do know, and what therefore dictates the agenda of this volume, is that between 1915 and 1922 it did. What is more, it came about despite the frequent assertions of commentators on both Left and Right that

¹'Factory-based' is not to be taken literally. Mines, docks, and shipyards exemplified equally well the new mode of production and concomitant pattern of social relations (Benson 1989, p. 40). Cf. F. M. L. Thompson (1988, p. 31): 'Industrialization, even considered in the restrictive and potentially misleading sense as something that happened simply to manufacturing industry rather than to all sectors of the economy, was far from being a one-way procession into the factory.'

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nothing significant had changed – to the Left, because capitalism was (alas!) still visibly unreformed, and to the Right, because ‘normalcy’, as it came to be called, had (thank goodness!) been restored.

Within this mode, English society’s differences from other capitalist liberal democracies became, as the century progressed, more marked, not less. Far from being the paradigm for those societies which followed it down the evolutionary road to ‘modernization’, British institutions came to look increasingly distinctive and even anomalous when contrasted with those of France or Germany or the United States or Sweden or Australia or Switzerland or Japan. To Marx and Engels it had seemed that the dialectic of social change unfolding itself in England before their eyes must be repeated in due course elsewhere: as Marx had said to his German readers in his preface to volume I of *Capital*, ‘*de te fabula narratur*’. But this was mistaken twice over. Not only were the circumstances of England’s transition to industrialism unique, but it widened rather than constrained the range of evolutionary alternatives open to societies which industrialized after it. What is more, the selective pressures which had transformed England’s mode of production in the first place continued to influence its structure and culture long after the process of industrialization was complete. As I pointed out in the various references to England in volume II, the peculiarity of its institutions can be traced all the way back through the commercialization of the economy, the defeat of monarchical absolutism, and the formation of a homogeneous but open aristocracy to before the Norman Conquest, when an increasingly active land market, relatively high rates of social mobility, and control of the means of coercion by local magnates loyal to a patrimonial monarchy foreshadowed much of what was later to evolve in more or less permanent form. The particular mutations of economic, ideological, and political practices which were necessary to bring all this about can, for the purposes of the present volume, be taken as given. But once England had escaped invasion or defeat in any but a colonial war, and the might-have-beens of internal subversion or anarchy had failed to eventuate, this state of affairs itself imposed lasting constraints on its subsequent evolution from one to another mode of production, persuasion, and coercion alike.

Admittedly, the force of these constraints can be overstated. But observers of all persuasions have commented time and again on the conservatism of England’s central institutions; and as soon as explanation of the actual course of the society’s evolution shades over into description of what it was like for those who experienced it, myths of continuity have to be treated as if they were true. The ‘Englishness’ invoked by English people in explanation and description (and, very often, evaluation) of their own roles and institutions may not deserve to be taken too seriously by sociologists who well know how little substance there is to self-created images of national character and how much of

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what passes for English tradition is of altogether more recent invention than most English people suppose (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Porter, 1992). But they cannot ignore the fact that English people hold the views about their own society which they do; and they must acknowledge that these views are not only fundamental to the description of what it is like to be one of 'them' but may also explain a part, even if not the most important part, of their reciprocal behaviour as incumbents of the different roles and thereby members of the different systacts of which English society is composed.²

'Englishness', indeed, is itself one of the reasons for which this volume deals, as its title makes clear, only with English and not with the whole of British society in the twentieth century. In part, the restriction is due to the difficulty of doing adequate justice to the very different local structure and culture of parts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, the roles of whose inhabitants, citizens as they may be of a 'United Kingdom', have had hardly less tenuous a connection with its central institutions than did the roles of their grandparents. But it is also because the distinctive characteristics of these regions are largely irrelevant to the modes of production, persuasion, and coercion of an English society whose dominance of them in all three dimensions was, by 1900, indisputable. This is not to deny that what has happened in the peripheries has had a significant influence on what has happened at the centre: events in Clydeside, Belfast, and the valleys of South Wales have been more important to the history of twentieth-century England than events in Humberside, Exeter, or the Vale of Evesham. But for all the impact of Ireland, in particular, on English politics, neither the fission of the Irish Republic nor the continuing attachment of the counties of Ulster to the Crown made any fundamental difference to the modes of production, persuasion, and coercion of English society as they evolved after the First World War. Nor did the intermittent upsurges of either Welsh or Scottish nationalism. I do not underestimate the importance of the careers of thousands of men and women from those regions in roles which were an integral part of twentieth-century English society. But those careers are themselves a testimony to the peripheral nature of the structure and culture they had left behind them. Lloyd George, Ramsay MacDonald, Aneurin Bevan, and Neil Kinnock performed their roles in England's Parliament, just as Welsh, Scottish, and Irish regiments fought in England's wars, and Welsh, Scottish, and Irish authors contributed to English literature. Whatever value-judgements you may choose to make about the rights and wrongs of England's 'internal colonialism', as it is sometimes called,

² It may, however, be worth my repeating from chapter 1 of volume II that societal boundaries can be 'both fluid and tenuous, and many roles and institutions either overlap or transcend them': for English examples, think only of Basil Hume, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, at one end of the spectrum and Kim Philby, the Soviet agent, at the other.

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and whatever the self-regarding illusions which English people may nourish about it, it is a culture and a structure dominated by English institutions with which the sociologist (as opposed to the anthropologist or the historian) of twentieth-century Britain must be concerned.

§2. Both the distinctiveness of England's history and the sense which English people had of it were, by 1900, a familiar theme, however differently they might be interpreted by rival observers with different presuppositions and purposes in mind. Nor was there anything very remarkable in the manifestations of complacent insularity and strident patriotism which can be documented in all systacts and milieux in late-Victorian and Edwardian England. However much Engels might proclaim himself, when writing to Plekhanov in May of 1894, 'driven to despair by these English workers with their sense of imaginary national superiority', he can hardly have been surprised by it. Engels did not live long enough to share the dismay of both socialist and liberal observers at the enthusiasm with which workers and their families in East London celebrated Mafeking night. But whatever the reservations of a minority of intellectuals, the consciousness that England had won all its major wars except one, had made itself the 'workshop of the world', had preserved its freedom from 'despotism', and had diffused its influence throughout an empire out of all proportion to its apparent strength could not fail to generate a sense of collective self-esteem transcending divisions of region, religion, and class.

Indeed, it could hardly be questioned that it *had* been a remarkable history. Romanticized as it has been both by the nostalgic sociologists and historians of the Right for the better and by the utopian sociologists and historians of the Left for the worse, there cannot fail to be agreement among observers of all theoretical schools about the fact of Britain's brief era of global hegemony. Well before the end of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, there was no lack of informed opinion to warn that this hegemony was under threat. The industrial might of the United States, the efficiency of German scientific and technical education, the mounting intensity of competition in overseas markets for British goods, and the economic costs as well as the strategic risks of a far-flung and loose-knit empire were all themes increasingly commonplace in public debate; and the Boer War, whatever may have been its short-term effect in rallying popular patriotism, exposed not only the vulnerability of the nation's army but also the inadequacy of the physical condition of an alarming proportion of the potential recruits to it. But these were anxieties which arose as a function of earlier success. If relative decline was in prospect, it was decline from a position reached after a long evolution which had established an institutional tradition all the more deeply entrenched because it appeared to have served England so well in inter-societal competition. This was recognized

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and even welcomed not only by complacent apologists but also by observers who could not possibly be accused of wishing to maintain the modes of production, persuasion, and coercion unchanged. Orwell, writing in the darkest days of the Second World War, caught this sense of uniqueness very well: 'The whole conception of the militarised continental state, with its secret police, its censored literature and its conscript labour is utterly different from that of the loose maritime democracy, with its slums and unemployment, its strikes and party politics' (1941, pp. 121–2). It is a remark which could just as well have been made, and with the very same overtones, half a century earlier or, for that matter, half a century later.

Orwell can be, and has been, accused of demystifying other people's descriptions of England only to misdescribe it in his own way in turn (Williams 1958, p. 283; Gloversmith 1980, pp. 109–23). Nor do any of his readers need guidance from literary critics to be aware that he is sometimes more revealing about his own attitudes and beliefs than about those of the people whom he describes. But there could be no disputing that England was a society where a certain minimum of formal liberties had long been recognized. To speak in these terms is not to impute any special good sense to its statesmen or any special taste for reasoned argument to its people. The notion that 'moderation' was merely a fortunate consequence of the fact that England had fought its civil war and solved the problem of its peasantry a long time ago (Moore 1966, chapter 1) had long been a commonplace of history teaching in English schools. There had indeed been a time when Englishmen tortured and killed one another for their beliefs, forcibly deprived one another of the means of subsistence, waged war on one another on English soil, and denied one another freedom of movement as well as of expression (Plumb 1967, chapter 1). But by 1900, all that was long since over and done with – was it not?

'Whiggish' narratives of a progressive evolution towards economic prosperity, ideological consensus, and political freedom were not without their effective critics, then and since. But even those most concerned to deny that England's evolution was in any way a matter for self-congratulation did not dispute that English society remained, whether for better or for worse, capitalist, liberal, and democratic. Perhaps the distinctive features of its structure and culture might have permitted either an authoritarian or a socialist mode of the distribution of power to evolve in some distinctively English form. Granted (it might be said) that an evolution to Fascism was as implausible as an evolution to Communism, was it not possible to envisage a sort of 'gentlemanly' authoritarianism in which a 'national' government would seek genuinely to incorporate the representatives of organized labour into the workings of the state and to exercise social control with a minimum of recourse to paramilitary auxiliaries? Or, alternatively, was it not possible to envisage the

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evolution of a socialism 'with a human face' in which central control of the means of production would be exercised with a minimum of bureaucratic centralism, and ideological dissent be tolerated up to the limits compatible with the proletarian party's 'leading role'? But such speculations are academic in a double sense. First, they presuppose that these distinctively English sub-types could somehow overcome the constraints and contradictions which, on the evidence summarized in volume II, confront all authoritarian and socialist societies. Second, they have to counter the objection that even in their 'English' forms the programmes of the carriers, or would-be carriers, of either authoritarian or socialist practices never commanded the support of more than a small minority even of the members of those systacts whose interests would, at least in theory, have been advanced had they come to power.

The relative lack of support for the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) between the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 calls for comment not only because of its presumptive appeal to the sense of relative deprivation of unemployed and low-paid wage-earners but also because of the events which might have been supposed to work to its advantage. The apparent success of the Soviet five-year plans, the failure of the Labour governments of the 1920s to deal with unemployment, the difficulties faced by workers in the strongly unionized but steadily declining staple industries, and the rise of Fascism in Germany and Italy might all have been expected to encourage the belief that only a workers' seizure of power from the faltering hands of the ruling class could bring about the transformation of capitalism. A number of contingent influences can be cited in explanation, of which the determination of established trade-union leaders and officials to resist being overtaken from the Left is one, systematic infiltration, surveillance, and intimidation by the police another,³ the subservience of the CPGB to Moscow a third, and the British worker's dislike of being preached at by anybody a fourth. But in any event, how would a takeover of the British Labour movement by a committed socialist faction have come about? Where in the institutional environment were the selective pressures favouring the mutant practices of which the roles making up that faction were the carriers? It is sometimes suggested that if war had not broken out in 1914, the widespread industrial unrest of the time could have been welded under syndicalist rather than communist inspiration and leadership into a revolutionary movement directed to the overthrow of the capitalist state. But the overwhelming majority of the strikers themselves, however militantly disposed towards both their

³ Not that its effectiveness should be overestimated: I cannot resist citing from Pelling (1958, pp. 28–9) the episode in 1924 when two plain-clothes officers were found hiding under the stage of the theatre where the Party Executive was about to meet: the two were promptly handed over to the nearest uniformed constable who, not realizing who they were, took them in charge.

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employers and those of their union officials whom they held to be too willing to settle with them, were not concerned at all with attacking the state;⁴ and in any case, the syndicalists faced the inescapable contradiction that they could not weld their followers into a disciplined force capable of wresting control of the means of coercion from the governing élite without the adoption of practices which would violate the very principles from which their appeal to the rank and file derived.

If, therefore, neither the syndicalist nor the communist Left could pose a serious threat to England's capitalist, liberal, and democratic mode of the distribution of power (and still less the middle-class intellectuals of the Independent Labour Party (ILP)), what of the authoritarians on the Right? They, after all, had some active sympathizers within the governing élite, and were well placed by both doctrine and practice to recruit and train the paramilitary auxiliaries who might be strong enough for a coup which would put a government of their choosing in control of the state. In the General Strike of 1926, middle-class men turned out in force to do working-class men's jobs. But the far-Right 'volunteer' was as little of a threat to the established modes of production, persuasion, and coercion as the far-Left 'agitator'.⁵ It is likely that many members of the police were more sympathetic to Mosley's blackshirts than to the demonstrators who marched and protested against them. But the Public Order Act of 1936 was deployed against the blackshirts as and when the Home Office thought it expedient to do so, and their ranks were infiltrated by informers just as effectively as were those of the Communists. Similarly, although there were Conservatives both in and outside of Parliament who would have welcomed a single-party state, a restructuring of industry imposed from above, and the radical curtailment of trade-union power, few if any were disposed to take part in paramilitary defiance of the traditions of peaceful protest, constitutional debate, and respect for the formal liberties of the individual citizen. Whatever the hopes of right-wing admirers of Mussolini or the fears of left-wing theoreticians for whom Fascism was the natural form into which capitalism was being driven in self-defence, Fascism in Britain was a failure.

There were, admittedly, sub-sets of roles among which the practices and doctrines of extremist factions began to spread. Fascism did appeal to a

⁴ G. D. H. Cole's retrospective comment was that 'If a new temper was abroad, and the moderate leaders found their control of the movement seriously threatened, this did not imply a wholesale conversion of the British working class to revolutionary doctrines' (1927, p. 71).

⁵ The two roles are placed in quotation marks as illuminating examples of the way in which the vernacular terminology reflects the dominant ideology. The 'volunteer' is by implication a patriotic citizen moved to action in defence of the national interest; the 'agitator' is by implication a trouble-maker whose disruptive activities have therefore to be countered by the 'volunteer'.

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number of middle- and lower-middle-class ex-servicemen or non-unionized or unemployed workers from traditionally Conservative Northern constituencies (Webber 1986, p. 44) whose ideological predispositions could be channelled into a simultaneous hostility to working-class Communists on the one hand and Jewish financiers on the other. Communism had an equally evident appeal for wage-workers in homogeneous working-class communities with established traditions of militancy – the ‘little Moscovs’ as they were designated by the press, partly to the pride and partly to the embarrassment of their inhabitants.⁶ But it was hardly as if they felt a sense of relative deprivation, whether regional or sectoral, sufficiently intense to mobilize militant Welshmen and Scotsmen, or militant coalminers and transport workers, for a guerilla war, or even a sustained campaign of civil disobedience, against the state. These loyalties undoubtedly furthered a disposition to industrial militancy at local level, and commentators then and since have noticed that where immigrants were concentrated within particular regions or communities outbreaks of industrial unrest were likely to be more difficult either to settle or to control. But again, this only serves further to illustrate the domination, economic, ideological, and political alike, of English society over its non-English peripheries. What is more, the ablest leaders from peripheral communities and regions always had open to them the opportunity of individual upward mobility into England’s central institutions. Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald apart, James Maxton and the other ‘Clydesiders’ of the inter-war period were perhaps the most celebrated (Middlemas, 1965); but they are by no means the only ones. This mobility was important not for its scale, which was always small, but for its effects. Here as elsewhere, it served the double function of voicing the sense of relative deprivation of the underprivileged and at the same time depriving them of leaders who, had they remained in their roles, might have become the carriers of more militant practices and doctrines rather than less. This process has been as much deplored by observers on the Left as it has been welcomed (not always explicitly) by observers on the Right. But whichever the view to which your evaluative presuppositions may incline you, it is a well-attested sociological fact about the structure and culture of twentieth-century (and earlier) England.

§3. Relative stability in the modes of production, persuasion, and coercion has not ruled out events and changes in the lives of English men and women as significant by any measure as those which took place over the course of earlier centuries than the twentieth. Two world wars of unprecedented scale and

⁶ Macintyre (1980, p. 16) found that ‘Paradoxically, when some of the residents of Mardy were interviewed in their old age, a sense of pride about Mardy’s radical identity was expressed by the less political informants, while leading Communists were apt to dwell on its disadvantages.’

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duration brought not only death and bereavement to some but hitherto undreamt of opportunities and rewards to others. The twists and turns of both domestic and international politics signalled triumph or disaster for life-histories no less dramatic than those of Disraeli or Palmerston or Pitt. Great fortunes were as spectacularly made, and sometimes lost, as they had ever been. Clashes between opposing ideologies affected those embroiled in them just as deeply as had any of the religious conflicts of the previous era. Employers and employees contested their rival claims with as much at stake for both as had their predecessors in the high noon of nineteenth-century industrialization. And however much the academic observer may be impressed, with hindsight, by the mismatch between the attitudes and beliefs of contemporaries and the reality of the processes of social selection actually at work, their written or spoken words reflect strongly felt subjective experiences which are more often than not being authentically described in their own contemporary terms.

But subjective experiences can never provide the explanation of why the structure and culture of English society in the twentieth century have changed both as much and as little as they have. There is a fundamental and persistent disjunction between description of what the changes in it have been like for 'them' and explanation of why the practices defining its pervasive roles and central institutions so changed as to require it to be assigned to a different sub-type of the capitalist-liberal-democratic mode in the years between the aftermath of the First World War and the time of writing from the year of Queen Victoria's death. At the turn of the century, English society was in the middle of what I shall continue to call its 'late-Victorian and Edwardian' evolutionary stage. After the First World War, it became capitalist, liberal, and democratic in a qualitatively different sense which, however it should be labelled, and however it was seen by the people who lived through it, made the institutions of the pre-war era irrecoverable even for those who were most determined to restore them and most reluctant to accept that the world, and England's place in it, would not be the same again.

But then what (it might be asked) about the Second World War? Did that war not bring about further changes which mark off the 1950s and 1960s from the 1920s and 1930s as much as they are marked off from the period between 1880 and 1914? Is there not an enormous difference between the experience of a demobilized wage-earner who, after 1918, went through a short-lived boom and a wave of strikes only then to be faced with the prospect of a wage-cut or the loss of his job, and that of one who, after 1945, returned to a period of full employment and, despite a continuance of rationing and shortages, a much higher level of collective provision for his and his dependants' welfare than he would have thought possible a generation before? And wasn't there, more