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# ARGUMENT

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# Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?

What follows below is better described as an argument than as an article. The first two sections are part of an argument about paternalism, closely related to my article 'Patrician society, plebeian culture', published in the *Journal of Social History*, summer 1974. The remaining sections (which have an independent genesis) explore further the questions of class and of plebeian culture.[1] Some parts of the argument rest upon detailed investigations, published and unpublished. But I doubt whether when all are put together they will constitute 'proof' of the argument. For an argument about historical process of this kind (which Popper no doubt would describe as 'holistic') may be *dis*proved: but it does not lay claim to the same kind of positive knowledge as commonly is claimed by positivistic research techniques. What is being claimed is something different: that in any given society we cannot understand the parts unless we understand their function and roles in relation to each other and in relation to the whole. The 'truth' or success of such a holistic description can only be discovered in the test of historical practice. So that the argument which follows is a kind of preamble, a thinking aloud.

### I

It has been a common complaint that the terms 'feudal', 'capitalist' or 'bourgeois' are too imprecise, and cover phenomena too vast and disparate, to be of serious analytic service. We now, however, find constantly in service a new set of terms, such as 'pre-industrial', 'traditional', 'paternalism', and 'modernization', which appear to be open to very much the same objections; and whose theoretical paternity is less certain.

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[1] The argument commenced six or seven years ago in the Centre for the Study of Social History at Warwick. Some parts of sections I and II were presented at the Anglo-American Conference of Historians, 7 July 1972, in London. Section V was added for a discussion at the Davis Centre Seminar, Princeton University, in February 1976. And I have interpolated, in section IV, some notes on 'class' offered to the Seventh Round Table in Social History at the University of Konstanz, June 1977. I am grateful to my hosts and colleagues on these three occasions, and for the valuable discussions which ensued. I am aware that an article cobbled in this way must lack some coherence.

133

It may be of interest that whereas the first set of terms direct attention to conflict or tension within the social process – they raise, at least by implication, the questions *who? whom?* – the second set appear to nudge one towards a view of society as a self-regulating sociological order. They offer themselves, with a specious scientism, as if they were value-free.

In some writers the 'patriarchal' and the 'paternal' appear as interchangeable terms, the one carrying a sterner, the other a somewhat softened implication. The two may indeed run into each other in fact as well as in theory. In Weber's description of 'traditional' societies the locus for analysis is posited in the familial relations of the tribal unit or household, and from these are extrapolated relations of domination and dependency which come to characterize a 'patriarchal' society as a whole – forms which he relates specifically to ancient and feudal forms of social order. Laslett, who has reminded us urgently as to the social centrality of the economic 'household' in the seventeenth century, suggests that this contributed to the reproduction of paternal or of patriarchal attitudes and relations which permeated the whole of society – and which perhaps continued to do so until the moment of 'industrialization'. Marx, it is true, had tended to see patriarchal attitudes as characteristic of the guild system of the Middle Ages, when:

> The journeymen and apprentices were organized in each craft as it best suited the interest of the masters. The filial relationship in which they stood to their masters gave the latter a double power – on the one hand because of the direct influence they exerted on the whole life of the journeymen, and on the other because, for the journeymen who worked with the same master, it was a real bond, which held them together against the journeymen of other masters and separated them from these.

Marx argued that in 'manufacture' these relations were replaced by 'the monetary relation between worker and capitalist'; but 'in the countryside and in small towns this relationship retained a patriarchal tinge'.[2] This is a large allowance, especially when we recall that at any time before about 1840 the bulk of the British population lived in such conditions.

And so, for 'a patriarchal tinge' we may substitute the term 'paternalism'. It might seem that this magical social quantum, every day refreshed from the innumerable springs of the small workshop, the economic household, the landed estate, was strong enough to inhibit (except here and there, for brief episodes) class confrontation, until industrialization brought all that in its train. Before this occurred, there was no class-conscious working class; no class conflict of that kind, but only fragments of proto-conflict; as an historical agent the working class did not exist and, since this is so, the exceedingly difficult business of attempting to find out what was the actual social consciousness of the inarticulate labouring poor would be tedious and unnecessary. We are invited to think

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[2] This is from a very general passage in *The German Ideology* (1845). I do not recollect any passage of equal generality in *Capital*. See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (London, 1976), V, 65–7.

of the consciousness of a Trade rather than of a class, of vertical rather than horizontal divisions. We can even speak of a 'one-class' society.

Examine the following accounts of the eighteenth-century landed gentleman. The first:

> The life of a hamlet, a village, a parish, a market town and its hinterland, a whole county, might revolve around the big house in its park. Its reception rooms, gardens, stables and kennels were the centre of local social life; its estate office the exchange for farm tenancies, mining and building leases, and a bank for small savings and investments; its home farm a permanent exhibition of the best available agricultural methods...; its law room...the first bulwark of law and order; its portrait gallery, music-room and library the headquarters of local culture; its dining-room the fulcrum of local politics.

And here is the second:

> In the course of running his property for his own interests, safety and convenience he performed many of the functions of the state. He was the judge: he settled disputes among his followers. He was the police: he kept order among a large number of people...He was the Church: he named the chaplain, usually some near relative with or without religious training, to care for his people. He was a welfare agency: he took care of the sick, the aged, the orphans. He was the army: in case of uprisings...he armed his kin and retainers as a private militia. Moreover, through what became an intricate system of marriages, kinship, and sponsorship...he could appeal for support if need be to a large number of relatives in the country or in the towns who possessed property and power similar to his own.

These are both acceptable descriptions of the eighteenth-century landed gentleman. However, it happens that one describes the aristocracy or great gentry of England, the other the slave-owners of Colonial Brazil.[3] Both might, equally, and with the smallest revision, describe a patrician in the *campagna* of ancient Rome, one of the landowners in Gogol's *Dead Souls*, a slave-holder in Virginia,[4] or the landowners in any society in which economic and social authority, summary judicial powers, etc., were united in a single place.

Some difficulties, however, remain. We may call a concentration of economic and cultural authority 'paternalism' if we wish. But if we allow the term, then we must also allow that it is too large for discriminating analysis. It tells us little about the nature of power and of the State; about forms of property-ownership; about ideology and culture; and it is even too blunt to distinguish between modes of exploitation, between slave and free labour.

Moreover, it is a description of social relations as they may be seen from above. This

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[3] Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780–1880* (1969), 42; Alexander Marchant, 'Colonial Brazil', in X. Livermore (ed.), *Portugal and Brazil; an Introduction* (Oxford, 1953), 297.

[4] See Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slave-holders Made* (New York, 1969), esp. 96.

does not invalidate it, but one should be aware that such a description may be too persuasive. If the first description is the only one that we are offered, then it is only too easy to pass from this to some view of a 'one-class society'; the great house is at the apex, and all lines of communication run to its dining-room, estate office or kennels. This is, indeed, an impression easily gained by the student who works among estate papers, quarter sessions records, or the Newcastle correspondence.

But there might be other ways of describing the society than the one offered by Harold Perkin in the first of our two extracts. The life of a parish might equally well revolve around the weekly market, the summer and winter festivals and fairs, the annual village feast, as about the occasions of the big house. The gossip of poaching, theft, sexual scandal and the behaviour of the overseers of the poor might occupy people's minds rather more than the remote comings and goings up at the park. The majority in the village would have little occasion for savings or investment or for agricultural improvement: they might be more bothered about access to firing, turves and grazing on the common than to turnip rotations. The law might appear not as a 'bulwark' but as a bully. Above all, there might be a radical disassociation – and at times antagonism – between the culture and even the 'politics' of the poor and those of the great.

Few would dispute this. But descriptions of the social order in the first sense, as seen from above, are far more common than are attempts to reconstruct the view from below. And whenever the notion of 'paternalism' is introduced, it is the first model which it calls to mind. And the term cannot rid itself of normative implications: it suggests human warmth, in a mutually assenting relationship; the father is conscious of duties and responsibilities towards his son, the son is acquiescent or actively complaisant in his filial station. Even the model of the small economic household carries (despite disclaimers) some sense of emotional cosiness: 'time was', Laslett writes, 'when the whole of life went forward in the family, in a circle of loved, familiar faces, known and fondled objects, all to human size'.[5] It would be unfair to meet this with the reminder that *Wuthering Heights* is presented in exactly such a familial situation. Laslett is reminding us of a relevant aspect of small-scale economic relations, even if the warmth could be of impotent revolt against abject dependency as often as it could be a warmth of mutual respect. In the early years of the industrial revolution workers often harked back to lost paternalist values, Cobbett and Oastler enlarged upon the sense of loss, and Engels endorsed the grievance.

But this raises a further problem. Paternalism as myth or as ideology is nearly always backward-looking. It offers itself in English history less as actuality than as a model of an antique, recently passed, golden age from which present modes and manners are a degeneration. Thus we have Langhorne's *Country Justice* (1774):

> When thy good father held this wide domain,
> The voice of sorrow never mourn'd in vain.
> Sooth'd by his pity, by his bounty fed,
> The sick found medecine, and the aged bread.

[5] Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (1965), 21.

> He left their interest to no parish care,
> No bailiff urged his little empire there;
> No village tyrant starved them, or oppress'd;
> He learn'd their wants, and he those wants redress'd...
>
> The poor at hand their natural patrons saw,
> And lawgivers were supplements of law!

And so on, to the disclaimer that such relations have any present reality:

> ...Fashion's boundless sway
> Has borne the guardian magistrate away.
> Save in Augusta's streets, on Gallia's shores,
> The rural patron is beheld no more...

But we may take our literary sources where we will. We may move back some sixty or seventy years to Sir Roger de Coverley, a late survivor, a quaint old-fashioned man, both ridiculous and lovable for being so. We may move back another hundred years to *King Lear*, or to Shakespeare's 'good old man' Adam; once again, the paternalist values are seen as 'antique', they are crumbling before the competitive individualism of the natural man of young capitalism, where 'the bond [is] crack'd 'twixt son and father' and where the gods stand up for bastards. Or we may move back another hundred years to Sir Thomas More. Always paternalist actuality appears to be receding into an ever more primitive and idealized past.[6] And the term forces us into confusions of actual and ideological attributes.

To resume: paternalism is a loose descriptive term. It has considerably less historical specificity than such terms as feudalism or capitalism; it tends to offer a model of the social order as it is seen from above; it has implications of warmth and of face-to-face relations which imply notions of value; it confuses the actual and the ideal. This does not mean that the term should be discharged as utterly unfit for service. It has as much and as little value as other generalized descriptive terms – authoritarian, democratic, egalitarian – which cannot in themselves, and without substantial additions, be brought to characterize a system of social relations. No thoughtful historian should characterize a whole society as paternalist or patriarchal. But paternalism can, as in Tsarist Russia, in Meiji Japan, or in certain slave-holding societies, be a profoundly important component not only of ideology but of the actual institutional mediation of social relations.[7] How do matters stand in eighteenth-century England?

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[6] See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford, 1973), *passim*.

[7] The significance of the analysis of paternalism in the work of Eugene D. Genovese, culminating in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York, 1974), cannot be over-stated. What may be over-stated, in the view of Genovese's critics, is the degree of 'reciprocity' in the relation between slave-holders and slaves, and the degree of adaptation (or accommodation) accepted by the slaves in the 'living space' provided by the slave-holders' manifest hegemony: see Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976), esp. 309–26, and Eric Perkins, 'Roll, Jordan, roll: a "Marx" for the master class', *Radical History*

## I I

Let us put aside at once one tempting but wholly unprofitable line of investigation: that of attempting to divine the specific gravity of that mysterious fluid, the 'patriarchal tinge', in this or that context and at different moments in the century. We commence with impressions: we ornament our hunches with elegant or apt quotations; we end with impressions.

If we look, rather, at the institutional expression of social relations, then this society appears to offer few genuine paternalist features. What one notices about it first of all is the importance of money. The landed gentry are graded not by birth or other marks of status but by rentals: they are worth so many thousand pounds a year. Among the aristocracy and ambitious gentry, courtship is conducted by fathers and by their lawyers, who guide it carefully towards its consummation, the well-drawn marriage settlement. Place and office could be bought and sold (provided that the sale did not seriously conflict with the lines of political interest); commissions in the Army; seats in parliament. Use-rights, privileges, liberties, services – all could be translated into an equivalent in money: votes, burgage-rights, immunities from parish office or militia service, the freedom of boroughs, gates on the common. This is the century in which money 'beareth all the stroke', in which liberties become properties, and use-rights are reified. A dove-cot on the site of an ancient burgage may be sold, and with it is sold a right to vote; the rubble of an ancient messuage may be bought up in support of a claim for common right and, thereby, of an extra allocation of the common on enclosure.

If use-rights, services, etc., became properties to be marked up at so many £s value, they did not, however, always become commodities open to any purchaser on the free market. The property assumed its value, as often as not, only within a particular structure of political power, influence, interest and dependency, made familiar to us by Namier. Titular offices of prestige (such as Rangers, Keepers, Constables) and such perquisites as came with them might be bought and sold; but these could not be bought or sold by anyone (during Walpole's rule, no Tory or Jacobite peer was likely to succeed in this market); and the holder of an opulent office who incurred the disfavour of politicians or Court might find himself threatened with ejection by legal process. Preferment to the highest and most lucrative offices in the Church, the Law and the Army were in a similar position. The offices came through political influence but, once gained, they normally carried life tenure, and the incumbent must milk them of all possible revenue while he could. The tenure of Court sinecures and of high political office was much more uncertain, although by no means less lucrative: the Earl of Ranelagh, the Duke of

*Review* (New York), III, 4 (Fall, 1976), 41–59. In a provisional reply to critics, *ibid.* (Winter, 1976–7), Genovese notes that he deleted from *Roll, Jordan, Roll* '200 pages on slave revolts in the Western Hemisphere' (which will appear in a subsequent volume); in the published work he was concerned to 'analyse the dialectics of class struggle and harsh antagonisms in an epoch in which open confrontation of a revolutionary type was minimal'. While the situations of slaves and of the English labouring poor in the eighteenth century are scarcely comparable, Genovese's analysis of hegemony and of reciprocity – and the ensuing discussion – are of great relevance to the themes of this paper.

Chandos, Walpole and Henry Fox were among those who founded fortunes upon brief tenures of the office of Paymaster General. And on the other hand, the tenure of landed estates, as absolute property, was wholly secure and heritable. It was both the jumping-off point for power and office, and the point to which power and office returned. Rentals might be jacked up by keen stewardship and improving agriculture, but they offered no windfall gains as did sinecure, office, commercial speculation or fortunate marriage. Political influence could do more to maximize profits than could four-course rotations – as, for example, in smoothing the way for private acts, such as enclosure, or in bringing a wad of unearned sinecurist income back to mortgaged estates, in easing the way to a marriage uniting congenial interests, or in gaining preferential access to a new issue of stock.

This was a predatory phase of agrarian and commercial capitalism, and the State was itself among the prime objects of prey. Victory in high politics was followed by the spoils of war, just as victory in war was often followed by the spoils of politics. The successful commanders in Marlborough's wars gained not only public rewards but also huge sums out of military subcontracting, for fodder, transport, ordinance; for Marlborough there was Blenheim Palace, for Cobham and Cadogan the mini-palaces of Stowe and Caversham. The Hanoverian succession brought a new set of courtier-brigands in its train. But the great financial and commercial interests also required access to the State, for charters, privileges, contracts, and for the diplomatic, military and naval strength required to break open the way for trade.[8] Diplomacy gained for the South Sea Company the *assiento*, or licence to trade in slaves to Spanish America; and it was upon the expectations of massive profits from this concession that the South Sea Bubble was blown. Blowing a bubble cannot be done without spit, and the spit in this case took the form of bribes not only to the king's ministers and mistresses, but also (it seems certain) to the king.

We are habituated to think of exploitation as something that occurs at ground level, at the point of production. In the early eighteenth century wealth was created at this lowly level, but it rose rapidly to higher regions, accumulated in great gobbets, and the real killings were to be made in the distribution, cornering and sale of goods or raw materials (wool, grain, meat, sugar, cloth, tea, tobacco, slaves), in the manipulation of credit, and in the seizure of the offices of State. A patrician banditti contested for the spoils of power, and this alone explains the great sums of money they were willing to expend on the purchase of parliamentary seats. Seen from this aspect, the State was less an effective organ of any class than a parasitism upon the backs of that very class (the gentry) who had gained the day in 1688. And it was seen as such, and seen to be intolerable, by many of the small Tory gentry during the first half of the century, whose

[8] We should not forget that Namier's great enquiry into the character of the parliamentary system originated as a study of 'The Imperial Problem during the American Revolution'; see *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, Preface to first edition. Since Namier's time, the 'imperial problem' and its ever-present pressure upon British political and economic life, has far too often been relegated to specialist studies, and then forgotten. See also the comments of Irfan Habib, 'Colonialization of the Indian economy, 1757–1900', *Social Scientist* (Delhi), 32, esp. 25–30.

land tax was transferred by the most patent means to the pockets of courtiers and Whig politicians – to that same aristocratic élite whose great estates were, during these years, being consolidated against the small. An attempt was even made by this oligarchy, in the time of the Earl of Sunderland, to make itself institutionally confirmed and self-perpetuating, by the attempted Peerage Bill and by the Septennial Act. That constitutional defences against this oligarchy survived these decades at all is due largely to the stubborn resistance of the largely Tory, sometimes Jacobite, independent country gentry, supported again and again by the vociferous and turbulent crowd.

All this was done in the king's name. It was in the name of the king that successful ministers could purge even the most subordinate officer of State who was not wholly subordinate to their interest. 'We have left nothing untry'd, to find out every malignant; and have dismiss'd all of whom we could have the least proof either from their present or pass'd behaviour,' wrote the three grovelling Commissioners of Customs in Dublin to the Earl of Sunderland in August 1715. It is 'our duty not to suffer any subordinate to us to eat His Majesty's Bread, who have not all imaginable zeal & affection for his service & Government.'⁹ But it was a prime interest among the political predators to confine the influence of the king to that of *primus inter predatores*. When George II at his accession seemed to be about to dispense with Walpole, it turned out that he could be bought like any Whig politician, but at a higher price:

> Walpole knew his duty. Never had a sovereign been more generously treated. The King – £800,000 a year down and the surplus of all taxes appropriated to the civil list, reckoned by Hervey at another £100,000: the Queen – £100,000 a year. The rumour ran that Pulteney offered more. If so, his political ineptitude was astounding. No one but Walpole could have hoped to get such grants through the Commons. . . a point which his Sovereign was not slow in grasping . . .
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> 'Consider, Sir Robert,' said the King, purring with gratitude as his minister set out for the Commons, 'what makes me easy in this matter will prove for your ease too; it is for my life it is to be fixed and it is for your life.'¹⁰

So Walpole's 'duty' turns out to be the mutual respect of two safe-breakers raiding the vaults of the same bank. In these decades the noted Whig 'jealousy' of the Crown did not rise from any fear that the Hanoverian monarchs would effect a *coup d'état* and trample underfoot the liberties of the subject in assuming absolute power – that rhetoric was strictly for the hustings. It arose from the more realistic fear that an enlightened monarch might find means to elevate himself, as the personification of an 'impartial', rationalizing, bureaucratic State power, above and outside the predatory game. The appeal of such a patriot king would have been immense, not only among the lesser gentry, but among great ranges of the populace: it was exactly the appeal of his image as an uncorrupted patriot which carried William Pitt the elder on a flood of popular acclaim to power, despite the hostility of politicians and of Court.¹¹

⁹ Blenheim MSS (Sunderland), D II, 8.
¹⁰ J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole* (1960), II, 168–9.

¹¹ See P. D. Langford, 'William Pitt and public opinion, 1757', *English Historical Review*, CCCXLVI

'The successors of the old Cavaliers had turned demagogues; the successors of the old Roundheads had turned courtiers.' Thus Macaulay; and he continues:

> During many years, a generation of Whigs, whom Sidney would have spurned as slaves, continued to wage deadly war with a generation of Tories whom Jeffreys would have hanged for republicans.[12]

This characterization does not long survive the mid-century. The feud between Whigs and Tories had been greatly softened (and – some historians would have it – obliterated) ten years before the accession of George III, and the ensuing 'slaughter of the Pelhamite innocents'. The Tory survivors among the great gentry re-entered the commission of peace, regained their political presence in the counties, had hopes of shares in the spoils of power. As manufacture moved up in the scales of wealth against merchanting and speculation, so certain forms of privilege and corruption became obnoxious to moneyed men, who became reconciled to the rationalized 'impartial' arena of the free market: killings could now be made without some prior political purchase within the organs of State. The accession of George III changed in many ways the terms of the political game – the opposition got out its old libertarian rhetoric and dusted it, for some (as in the City of London) it assumed a real and revivified content. But the King sadly bungled any attempt to offer himself as an enlightened monarch, an impartial apex to a disinterested bureaucracy. The parasitic functions of the State came under increasing scrutiny and piecemeal attack (attacks on the East India Company, upon places and sinecures, upon the misappropriation of public lands, the reform of the Excise, etc.); but its essential parasitic role remained.

'Old Corruption' is a more serious term of political analysis than is often supposed; for political power throughout most of the eighteenth century may best be understood, not as a direct organ of any class or interest, but as a secondary political formation, a purchasing-point from which other kinds of economic and social power were gained or enhanced; in its primary functions it was costly, grossly inefficient, and it survived the century only because it did not seriously inhibit the actions of those with *de facto* economic or (local) political power. Its greatest source of strength lay precisely in the weakness of the State itself; in the desuetude of its paternal, bureaucratic and protectionist powers; in the licence which it afforded to agrarian, mercantile and manufacturing capitalism to get on with their own self-reproduction; in the fertile soil which it afforded to *laissez-faire*.[13]

(1973). But when in power, Pitt's 'patriotism' was limited to the right hand of government only. The left hand, Newcastle, 'took the treasury, the civil and ecclesiastical patronage, and the disposal of that part of the secret service money which was then employed in bribing members of Parliament. Pitt was Secretary of State, with the direction of war and of foreign affairs. Thus the filth of all the noisome and pestilential sewers of government was poured into one channel. Through the other passed only what was

bright and stainless' (T. B. Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays* (1880), 747).

[12] *Ibid.*, 746.

[13] I must emphasize that this is a view of the State as seen from 'within'. From 'without', in its effective military, naval, diplomatic and imperial presence, whether directly or indirectly (as in the para-State of the East India Company) it must be seen in a very much more aggressive aspect. This mixture of internal weakness and external strength, and the balance be-

It scarcely seems, however, to be a fertile soil for paternalism. We have become used to a rather different view of eighteenth-century politics, presented by historians who have become habituated to seeing this age in terms of the apologetics of its principal actors.[14] If corruption is noted, it can be passed off by noting a precedent: if Whigs were predators, then Tories were predators too. Nothing is out-of-the-way, all is subsumed in the 'accepted standards of the age'. But the alternative view which I have offered should come with no sense of surprise. It is, after all, the criticism of high politics offered in *Gulliver's Travels* and in *Jonathan Wilde*; in part in Pope's satires and in part in *Humphrey Clinker*; in Johnson's 'Vanity of Human Wishes' and 'London' and in Goldsmith's 'Traveller'. It appears, as political theory, in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, and it reappears, in more fragmentary form, in Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*.[15] In the early decades of the century, the comparison between high politics and the criminal underworld was a common figure of satire:

> I know that if one would be agreeable to men of dignity one must study to imitate them, and I know which way they get Money and places. I cannot wonder that the Talents requisite for a great Statesman are so scarce in the world since so many of those who possess them are every month cut off in the prime of their Age at the Old-Baily.

Thus John Gay, in a private letter, in 1723.[16] The thought was the germ for the *Beggar's Opera*. Historians have commonly dismissed this figure as hyperbole. They should not.

There are, of course, qualifications to be made. One qualification, however, which can *not* be made is that this parasitism was curbed, or jealously watched, by a purposive, cohesive, growing middle class of professional men and of the manufacturing middle class.[17] Such a class did not begin to discover itself (except, perhaps, in London) until the last three decades of the century. For most of the century its potential members were content to submit to a condition of abject dependency. Except in London they made little effort (until the Association Movement of the late 1770s) to shake off the chains of electoral bribery and influence; they were consenting adults in their own corruption. After two decades of servile attachment to Walpole, the Dissenters emerged with their

tween the two (in 'peace' and 'war' policies) leads us to most of the real issues of principle thrown up in mid-eighteenth-century high politics. It was when the weaknesses inherent in the internal parasitism wreaked their revenges in external defeat (the loss of Minorca and the ritual sacrifice of Admiral Byng; the American disaster) that elements in the ruling class were shocked out of mere factionalism into a class politics of principle.

[14] But there has been a significant shift in recent historiography, to take more seriously into account relations between politicians and the political nation 'without doors'. See J. H. Plumb, 'Political man', in James L. Clifford (ed.), *Man versus Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1968); and,

notably, John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976); as well as several more specialized studies.

[15] 'In our time the opposition is between a corrupt Court joined by an innumerable multitude of all ranks and stations bought with public money, and the independent part of the nation' (*Political Disquisitions, or an Enquiry into Public Errors, Defects, and Abuses* (1774)). This, of course, is the critique of the old 'country' opposition to Walpole also.

[16] C. F. Burgess (ed.), *Letters of John Gay* (Oxford, 1966), 45.

[17] But note the relevant discussion in John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640–1832* (Cambridge, 1973), 49, note 1.

reward: £500 p.a. to be allocated to the widows of deserving clergy. Fifty years later, and they had still failed to secure the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. As churchmen, the majority fawned for preferment, dined and joked (upon sufferance) at the tables of their patrons, and, like Parson Woodforde, were not above accepting a tip from the squire at a wedding or a christening.[18] As surveyors, attorneys, tutors, stewards, tradesmen, etc., they were contained within the limits of dependency; their deferential letters, soliciting place or favour, are stashed in the manuscript collections of the great.[19] (As such, the sources give a historiographical bias to overemphasize the deferential element in eighteenth-century society – a man put, perforce, into the stance of soliciting favours will not reveal his true mind.) In general, the middle classes submitted to a client relationship. Here and there men of character might break free, but even the arts remained coloured by dependency upon the liberality of patrons.[20] The aspirant professional man or tradesman sought to remedy his sense of grievance less by social organization than by social mobility (or geographical mobility to Bengal, or to that European 'West' – the New World). He aimed to purchase immunity from deference by acquiring the wealth which would give him 'independence', or land and gentry status.[21] The profound resentments generated by this client status, with its attendant humiliations and its impediments to the career open to talents, fuelled much of the intellectual radicalism of the early 1790s; its embers scorch the foot even in the cool rationalist periods of Godwin's prose.

Thus for at least the first seven decades of the century we can find no industrial or professional middle class which exercises an effective curb upon the operations of predatory oligarchic power. But if there had been no curbs at all, no qualifications of parasitic rule, the consequence must have been anarchy, one faction preying without restraint upon another. The major qualifications to this rule were four.

First, we have already noted the largely Tory tradition of the independent lesser gentry. This tradition is the only one to emerge with much honour from the first half of the

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[18] 'April 11 1779... There were Coaches at Church. Mr Custance immediately after the Ceremony came to me and desired me to accept a small Present; it was wrapped up in a Piece of white Paper very neat, and on opening of it, I found it contained nothing less than the sum of 4. 4. 0. He gave the Clerk also 0. 10. 6.' (*The Diary of a Country Parson* (1963), 152).

[19] 'The letter-bag of every M.P. with the slightest pretensions to influence was stuffed with pleas and demands from voters for themselves, their relations or their dependants. Places in the Customs and Excise, in the Army and Navy, in the Church, in the East India, Africa and Levant Companies, in all the departments of state from door-keepers to clerks: jobs at Court for the real gentry or sinecures in Ireland, the diplomatic corps, or anywhere else where duties

were light and salaries steady' (J. H. Plumb, 'Political man', 6).

[20] Hence Blake's angry annotation to Sir Joshua Reynolds: 'Liberality! we want not Liberality. We want a Fair Price & Proportionate Value & a General Demand for Art' (Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (1957), 446).

[21] For savage comments on deference and independence, see Mary Thrale (ed.), *The Autobiography of Francis Place* (Cambridge, 1972), 216–18, 250. The successful Birmingham tradesman, William Hutton, notes in his autobiography how he first came to buy land (in 1766 at the age of forty-three): 'Ever since I was eight years old, I had shewn a fondness for land; often made inquiries about it; and wished to call some my own. This ardent desire after dirt never forsook me...' (*The Life of William Hutton* (1817), 177).

century; it re-emerges, in a Whig mantle, with the Association Movement of the 1770s.[22]
Secondly, there is the Press: itself a kind of middle-class presence, in advance of other
articulated expression – a presence extending in range as literacy extended, and as the
Press itself learned how to enlarge and sustain its freedoms.[23] Thirdly, there is 'the Law',
elevated during this century to a role more prominent than at any other period of our
history, and serving as the 'impartial', arbitrating authority in place of a weak and
unenlightened monarchy, a corrupt and ineffective bureaucracy and a democracy which
offered to the real intrusions of power little more than rhetoric about its ancestry. The
Civil Law afforded to the competing interests both a set of defences to their property
and those rules of the game without which all would have fallen into anarchy. (The
Criminal Law, which faced in the main towards the loose and disorderly sort of people,
wore an altogether different aspect.) Fourthly, and finally, there is the ever-present
resistance of the crowd: a crowd which stretched at times from small gentry and
professional men to the poor (and within whose numbers the first two groups sometimes
sought to combine opposition to the system with anonymity), but which appeared to
the great, through the haze of verdure surrounding their parks, to be made up of 'the
loose and disorderly sort'. The relation between the gentry and the crowd is the
particular concern of this argument.

## III

But my concern, at this point, is less with the actual expression of this relationship (this
has been, and continues to be, a central concern of my work) than with the theoretical
implications of this particular historical formation for the study of class. In 'Patrician
society, plebeian culture'[24] I have directed attention to the actual erosion of paternalist
forms of control through the expansion of 'free', masterless labour. But although this
change is substantial, and has significant consequences for the political and cultural life
of the nation, it does not present any 'crisis' to the old order. It is contained within the
older structures of power, and the cultural hegemony of the gentry is not threatened,
*provided that* the gentry meet certain expectations and perform certain (partly theatrical)

[22] Although the Country opposition to Walpole had
central demands which were democratic in form (an-
nual parliaments, curbs on placemen and corruption,
no standing army, etc.), the democracy demanded
was of course limited, in general, to the landed gen-
try (as against the Court and the moneyed interest)
as is made clear by continued Tory support for landed
property qualifications for MPs. See Quentin Skin-
ner's useful discussion (which, however, neglects the
dimension of the political nation 'without doors' to
which Bolingbroke appealed). 'The principles and
practice of opposition: the case of Bolingbroke versus
Walpole', in Neil McKendrick (ed.), *Historical Per-
spectives* (1974); H. T. Dickinson, 'The eighteenth-
century debate on the "Glorious Revolution"',

*History*, LXI, 201 (February 1976), 36–40; and (for the
continuity between the platform of old Country party
and new radical Whigs), Brewer, *op. cit.*, 19, 253–5.
The Hanoverian Whigs also endorsed the high pro-
perty qualifications for MPs: Cannon, *op. cit.*, 36.

[23] See Brewer, *op. cit.*, chapter 8; and, for one
example of its provincial extension, John Money,
'Taverns, coffee houses and clubs: local politics and
popular articulacy in the Birmingham area in the age
of the American Revolution', *Historical Journal*, XIV,
1 (1971).

[24] The next three paragraphs offer a résumé of my
article in the *Journal of Social History*, VII, 4 (Summer
1974).

roles. There is, however, a *reciprocity* in gentry–plebs relations. The weakness of the spiritual authority of the Church made possible the resurgence of a most vigorous plebeian culture removed from external controls. So far from resisting this culture, in the middle decades of the century the more traditional gentry extended to it a certain favour or flattery. 'There is some mutuality of relationship here which it is difficult *not* to analyse at the level of class relationship.'

The argument that many urban artisans evinced the 'vertical' consciousness of 'the Trade' (rather than the 'horizontal' consciousness of a 'mature' industrial working class) is one which I accept. (This is one reason why I have adopted the term 'plebs' in preference to working class.[25]) But this vertical consciousness did not bind them with adamantine chains of consensus to that society's rulers. The characteristic fissures in that society do not arise between employers and wage-labourers (as horizontal 'classes') but on the issues out of which most riots actually arise: when the 'plebs' unite as petty consumers, or as tax-payers or excise-evaders (smugglers), or on other 'horizontal' libertarian, economic or patriotic issues. Not only was the consciousness of these plebs different from an industrial working class, but also their characteristic forms of revolt: as, for example, the anonymous tradition, 'counter-theatre' (ridicule or outrage against the symbolism of authority), and swift, destructive direct action.

I argue that we must see the crowd 'as it was, *sui generis*, with its own objectives, operating within the complex and delicate polarity of forces of its own context'. And I find the critical clue to this structural equilibrium of gentry–crowd relations in the gentry's jealousy of the State, the weaknesses of the organs of the State, and the particular inheritance of Law. 'The price which aristocracy and gentry paid for a limited monarchy and a weak State was, perforce, the licence of the crowd. This is the central structural context of the reciprocity of relations between rulers and ruled.'

It is not a price which was gladly paid. Through the first half century, in particular, the Whigs loathed the licentious crowd. From at least the time of the Sachaverell riots they looked for opportunities to curb its actions.[26] They were the authors of the Riot Act. At the time of Walpole's ascendancy there were undoubtedly attempts to find a more authoritarian resolution to the problems of power and order. A standing army became

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[25] There are other reasons; and one is historically specific to eighteenth-century British society, and may emphasize that I am not offering 'plebs' as a term universally valid to all societies in the 'stage' of 'proto-industrialization'. For the ruling class of Britain, the Greco-Roman world (most specifically, republican Rome) provided the most coherent sociological and political model against which they measured their own problems and conduct. As Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, 'For nascent bourgeois society the Greco-Roman world provided the mantle which human values wear.' Classical education offered 'a study of a whole society, of the language, literature, history and philosophy of Greco-Roman culture'. 'Breaking the chains of reason', in E. P. Thompson (ed.), *Out of*

*Apathy* (1960), 205; see also Brewer, *op. cit.*, 258–9. In moments of self-reflection and of self-dramatization, the rulers of eighteenth-century England saw themselves as patricians and the people as plebs.

[26] It is astonishing to be reminded that the Duke of Newcastle served his apprenticeship to politics by raising a mob, as he recalled in 1768 ('I love a mob. I headed a mob once myself. We owe the Hanoverian succession to a mob'). For this brief episode of the organization of rival mughouse mobs in London at George I's accession, see James L. Fitts, 'Newcastle's mob', *Albion*, v, 1 (Spring 1973), 41–9; and Nicholas Rogers, 'Popular protest in early Hanoverian London', *Past and Present* (forthcoming).

a normal recourse of rule.[27] Borough patronage was tightened and electoral nuisances were curbed.[28] In the same parliament that passed the Black Act, a committee appointed to consider the laws relating to labourers in husbandry reported in favour of extensive disciplinary powers to be extended over the whole labour force: J.P.s should have powers to compel unmarried male labourers to be bound to yearly service, the assessment of wages should be strengthened, J.P.s should have powers to attach labourers leaving work unfinished, and greater powers to punish idle and disorderly servants.[29] An undated draft of 'heads of a bill to prevent tumults and maintain the peace at elections', among Walpole's papers, suggests that some in his circle wished to go further: 'Evil-minded and disorderly persons. . . frequently do assemble themselves in a riotous and tumultuous manner' in towns during elections. Among remedies proposed were the rigorous exclusion of all persons not inhabitants or voters from such towns during the period of the poll; the appointment of extraordinary constables with extraordinary powers; fines and penalties for election disorders, for window-breaking, stone-throwing, etc., the penalty in every case to be *double* in the case of an offender who was a non-elector; and the prohibition of 'any sort of Flaggs, Standards, Colours or Ensigns' or political badges or favours.[30] Neither the direct actions nor the colour and theatre of the unenfranchized crowd were to be permitted. The bill, however, never reached the statute-book. It was, even for the Great Man, beyond the limits of the possible. Any licence afforded to the crowd by the Whigs during these years arose less from libertarian sentiment than from a realistic sense of what those limits were. And these limits, in their turn, were imposed by a particular equilibrium of forces which cannot, in the end, be analysed without recourse to the concept of class.

## I V

It seems that, once again, it is necessary to explain how a historian – or how *this* historian – understands the term 'class'. Some fifteen years ago I concluded a rather protracted work of analysis into a particular moment of class formation. In the Preface I offered some comments on class which concluded: 'Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.'[31]

[27] See Skinner, *op. cit.*, 96–7.

[28] The critical shift towards disciplined oligarchy comes in the early 1720s: i.e. at the moment when Walpole's ascendancy announces 'political stability'. The vigour of an expanding, undeferential electorate has been shown in several studies: J. H. Plumb, 'The growth of the electorate in England from 1600 to 1715', *Past and Present*, XLV (1969); W. A. Speck, *Tory and Whig: The Struggle in the Constituencies, 1701–1715* (1970). This now throws into much sharper relief the *contrary* process, after 1715 and the Septennial Act (1716): the increasingly narrow determinations of the House as to borough franchise (see Cannon, *op. cit.*,

34, and his helpful chapter, 'Pudding time', in general); the purchasing and control of boroughs; the desuetude of elections, etc. In addition to Cannon, see W. A. Speck, *Stability and Strife* (1977), 16–19, 164; Brewer, *op. cit.*, 6; and especially the very careful argument of Geoffrey Holmes, *The Electorate and the National Will in the First Age of Party* (University of Lancaster, 1976).

[29] *Commons Journals*, XX, 11 February 1723–4.

[30] Cambridge University Library, *C(holmondeley) H(oughton) MSS*, P 64 (39).

[31] *The Making of the English Working Class* (Pelican edn), 11.

It is generally supposed today, among a new generation of Marxist theorists, that such a statement must either be 'innocent' or (far worse) '*not* innocent': i.e. evidence of an ulterior surrender to empiricism, historicism, etc. These people have very much better ways of defining class: definitions moreover which can be swiftly reached within theoretical practice and without the fatigue of historical investigation.

That Preface was, however, a considered one, arising out of both historical and theoretical practice. (I did not start out from the conclusions in the Preface: the Preface expressed my conclusions.) In general, after fifteen more years of practice, I would uphold the same conclusions. But perhaps these should be re-stated and qualified.

(1) Class, in my own usage, is a *historical* category: that is, it is derived from the observation of the social process over time. We know about class because people have repeatedly behaved in class ways; these historical events disclose regularities of response to analogous situations, and at a certain stage (the 'mature' formations of class) we observe the creation of institutions, and of a culture with class notations, which admits of trans-national comparisons. We theorize this evidence as a general theory of class and of class formation: we expect to find certain regularities, 'stages' of development, etc.

(2) But at this stage it is only too often the case that the theory takes precedence over the historical evidence which it is intended to theorize. It is easy to suppose that class takes place, not as historical process, but inside our own heads. Of course we do not admit that it goes on only in our heads, although a great deal of argument about class is in fact only an argument in the head. Instead, models or structures are theorized that are supposed to give us objective determinants of class: for example, as expressions of differential productive relations.[32]

(3) From this (false) reasoning there arises the alternative notion of class as a *static*, either sociological or heuristic, category. The two are different, but both employ categories of stasis. In one very popular (usually positivistic) sociological tradition, class can then be reduced to literal quantitative measurement: so many people in this or that relation to the means of production, or, in more vulgar terms, so many wage-earners, white-collar workers, etc. Or class is what class people say they *think* they belong to in response to a questionnaire; once again, class as a historical category – the observation of behaviour over time – has been expelled.

(4) I would like to say that class as a historical category is the proper or mainstream Marxist usage. I think that I could show that this is Marx's own usage, in his more historical writings, but this is not the place to argue scriptural authority. It is certainly the usage of many (but not all) in the British tradition of Marxist historiography, especially of the older generation.[33] However, it has become very clear in recent years

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[32] I do not mean to suggest that such static structural analysis is not both valuable and essential. But what it gives us is a determining logic (in the sense of both 'setting limits' and 'exerting pressures': see the critically important discussion of determinism in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford,

1977)), and not the historical conclusion or equation – that these productive relations = these class formations. See also para (7) below, and note 36 below.

[33] It appears to me to be the usage generally found in the historical practice of Rodney Hilton, E. J. Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and many others.

that class as a static category has taken up occupation within very influential sectors of Marxist thought as well. In vulgar economistic terms this is simply the twin to positivistic sociological theory. From a static model of capitalist productive relations there are derived the classes that ought to correspond to this, and the consciousness that ought to correspond to the classes and their relative positions. In one common (usually Leninist) form this provides a ready justification for the politics of 'substitution': i.e. the 'vanguard' which knows better than the class itself what its true interests (and consciousness) ought to be. If 'it' does not happen to have that consciousness, then whatever it has is 'false consciousness'. In an alternative (very much more sophisticated) form – for example, with Althusser – we still have a profoundly static category; a category which finds its definition only within a highly theorized static structural totality, which disallows the real *experiential* historical process of class formation. Despite this theory's sophistication, the results are very similar to the vulgar economistic version. Both have a similar notion of 'false consciousness', or 'ideology' although Althusserian theory tends to have a larger theoretical arsenal to explain ideological domination and the mystification of consciousness.

(5) If we return to class as a historical category, we can see that historians can employ the concept in two different senses: (*a*) with reference to real, empirically observable correspondent historical content; (*b*) as a heuristic or analytic category to organize historical evidence which has a very much less direct correspondence.[34] In my view the concept may properly be employed in both ways; nevertheless, confusion often arises when we move from one sense to the other.

(*a*) It is true that class in its modern usage arises within nineteenth-century industrial capitalist society. That is, class in its modern usage only became available to the cognitive system of the people then living at that time. Hence the concept not only enables us to organize and analyse the evidence; it is also, in a new sense, *present in the evidence itself*. We can observe, in industrial Britain or France or Germany, class institutions, class parties, class cultures, etc. This historical evidence has in its turn given rise to the mature concept of class and has, to some degree, marked it with its own historical specificity.

(*b*) This (anachronistic) historical specificity must be guarded against when we employ the term in the second sense in the analysis of societies prior to the industrial revolution. For the correspondence of the category to the historical evidence then becomes very much less direct. If class was not available within people's own cognitive system, if they saw themselves and fought out their own historical battles in terms of 'estates' or 'ranks' or 'orders', etc., then if we describe these struggles in class terms we must exert caution against any tendency to read back subsequent notations of class.

That we choose to continue to employ the heuristic category of class (despite this

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[34] Cf. E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Class consciousness in history', in Istvan Meszaros (ed.), *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (1971), 8: 'Under capitalism class is an immediate and in some sense a directly *experienced* historical reality, whereas in pre-capitalist epochs it may merely be an analytical construct which makes sense of a complex of facts otherwise inexplicable.' See also *ibid.*, 5–6.

ever-present difficulty) arises not from its perfection as a concept but from the fact that no alternative category is available to analyse a manifest and universal historical process. Thus we cannot (in the English language) talk of 'estate-struggle' or 'order-struggle', whereas 'class-struggle' has been employed, not without difficulty but with signal success, by historians of ancient, feudal and early modern societies; and these historians have, in the course of their employment, imposed their own refinements and qualifications on the concept within their own historical fields.

(6) This emphasizes, however, that class, in its heuristic usage, is inseparable from the notion of 'class-struggle'. In my view, far too much theoretical attention (much of it plainly a-historical) has been paid to 'class', and far too little to 'class-struggle'. Indeed, class-struggle is the prior, as well as the more universal, concept. To put it bluntly: classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process.[35] But if we employ a static category of class, or if we derive our concept from a prior theoretical model of a structural totality, we will not suppose so: we will suppose that class is instantaneously present (derivative, like a geometric projection, from productive relations) and that *hence* classes struggle.[36] We are launched, then, upon the endless stupidities of quantitative measurement of classes, or of sophisticated Newtonian Marxism in which classes and class fractions perform their planetary or molecular evolutions. All this squalid mess around us (whether sociological positivism or Marxist-structuralist idealism) is the consequence of the prior error: that classes exist, independent of historical relationship and struggle, and that they struggle *because* they exist, rather than coming into existence out of that struggle.

(7) I hope that nothing I have written above has given rise to the notion that I suppose that the formation of class is independent of objective determinations, that class can be defined simply as a cultural formation, etc. This has, I hope, been disproved by my own historical practice, as well as in the practice of many other historians. Certainly, these objective determinations require the most scrupulous examination.[37] But no examination

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[35] Cf. Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, 6: 'For the purposes of the historian...class and the problem of class consciousness are inseparable. Class in the full sense only comes into existence at the historical moment when classes begin to acquire consciousness of themselves as such.'

[36] Marxist Political Economy, in a necessary analytical procedure, constructs a totality within which productive relations *are posited already* as classes. But when we return from this abstracted structure to the full historical process, we find that (economic,

military) exploitation are *experienced* in class ways and only thence give rise to class formations: see my 'An Orrery of Errors' in *Reasoning, One* (Merlin Press, September 1978).

[37] For the determinants of class structure (and of the property or 'surplus extraction' relations which impose limits, possibilities, and 'long-term patterns'in societies in pre-industrial Europe) see Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe', *Past and Present*, LXX (February 1976), esp. 31–2.

of objective determinations (and certainly no model theorized from it) can give one class and class-consciousness in a simple equation. Class eventuates as men and women *live* their productive relations, and as they *experience* their determinate situations, within 'the *ensemble* of the social relations', with their inherited culture and expectations, and as they handle these experiences in cultural ways. So that, in the end, no model can give us what ought to be the 'true' class formation for a certain 'stage' of process. No actual class formation in history is any truer or more real than any other, and class defines itself as, in fact, it eventuates.

Class, as it eventuated within nineteenth-century industrial capitalist societies, and as it then left its imprint upon the heuristic category of class, has in fact no claim to universality. Class in that sense is no more than a special case of the historical formations which arise out of class struggle.

<div align="center">V</div>

Let us return, then, to the special case of the eighteenth century. We shall expect to find class struggle but we need not expect to find nineteenth-century cases of class. Class is a historical formation, and it does not occur only in ways prescribed as theoretically proper. Because in other places and periods we can observe 'mature' (i.e. self-conscious and historically developed) class formations, with ideological and institutional expression, this does not mean that whatever happens less decisively is not class.

In my own practice I find the notion of gentry–crowd reciprocity, of the 'paternalism-deference equilibrium' in which both parties to the equation were, in some degree, the prisoners of each other, more helpful than notions of a 'one-class society' or of consensus. What must concern us is the polarization of antagonistic interests and the corresponding dialectic of culture. There is very articulate resistance to the ruling ideas and institutions of society in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries: hence historians expect to analyse these societies in some terms of social conflict. In the eighteenth century resistance is less articulate, although often very specific, direct and turbulent. One must therefore supply the articulation, in part by de-coding the evidence of behaviour, and in part by turning over the bland concepts of the ruling authorities and looking at their undersides. If we do not do this we are in danger of becoming prisoners of the assumptions and self-image of the rulers: free labourers are seen as the 'loose and disorderly sort', riot is seen as spontaneous and 'blind'; and important kinds of social protest become lost in the category of 'crime'. But there are few social phenomena which do not reveal a new significance when exposed to this dialectical examination. The ostentatious display, the powdered wigs and the dress of the great must be seen also – *as they were intended to be seen* – from below, in the auditorium of the theatre of class hegemony and control. Even 'liberality' and 'charity' may be seen as calculated acts of class appeasement in times of dearth and calculated extortions (under threat of riot) by the crowd: what is (from above) an 'act of giving' is (from below) an 'act of getting'. So simple a category as 'theft' may turn out to be, in certain circumstances, evidence of protracted attempts by villagers to defend ancient common-right usages, or by labourers to defend customary perquisites.

And following each of these clues to the point where they intersect, it becomes possible to reconstruct a customary popular culture, nurtured by experiences quite distinct from those of the polite culture, conveyed by oral traditions, reproduced by example (perhaps, as the century goes on, increasingly by literate means), expressed in symbolism and in ritual, and at a very great distance from the culture of England's rulers.

I would hesitate before I described this as a *class* culture, in the sense that one can speak of a working-class culture, within which children were socialized into a value-system with distinct class notations, in the nineteenth century. But one cannot understand this culture, in its experiential ground, in its resistance to religious homily, in its picaresque flouting of the provident bourgeois virtues, in its ready recourse to disorder, and in its ironic attitudes towards the Law, unless one employs the concept of the dialectical antagonisms, adjustments, and (sometimes) reconciliations, of class.

When analysing gentry–plebs relations one finds not so much an uncompromising ding-dong battle between irreconcilable antagonists as a societal 'field-of-force'. I am thinking of a school experiment (which no doubt I have got wrong) in which an electrical current magnetized a plate covered with iron filings. The filings, which were evenly distributed, arranged themselves at one pole or the other, while in between those filings which remained in place aligned themselves sketchily as if directed towards opposing attractive poles. This is very much how I see eighteenth-century society, with, for many purposes, the crowd at one pole, the aristocracy and gentry at the other, and until late in the century, the professional and merchant groups bound down by lines of magnetic dependency to the rulers, or on occasion hiding their faces in common action with the crowd. This metaphor allows one to understand not only the very frequent riot situation (and its management) but also much of what was possible and also the limits of the possible beyond which power did not dare to go. It is said that Queen Caroline once took such a fancy to St James's Park that she asked Walpole how much it would cost to enclose it as private property. 'Only a *crown*, Madam,' was Walpole's reply.[38]

I am therefore employing the terminology of class conflict while resisting the attribution of identity to *a* class. I do not know whether this might be thought by other Marxists to be heretical, nor does this bother me. But it seems to me that the metaphor of a field-of-force can co-exist fruitfully with Marx's comment in the *Grundrisse*, that:

> In all forms of society it is a determinate production and its relations which assign every other production and its relations their rank and influence. It is a general illumination in which all other colours are plunged and which modifies their specific tonalities. It is a special ether which defines the specific gravity of everything found in it.[39]

What Marx describes in metaphors of 'rank and influence', 'general illumination' and 'tonalities' would today be offered in more systematic structuralist language: terms

[38] Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Second* (1847), II, 220–1.

[39] For a slightly different translation, see *Grundrisse* (Penguin, 1973), 106–7. Even here, however, Marx's metaphor relates not to class or social forms, but to co-existent dominant and subordinate economic relations.

sometimes so hard and objective-seeming (as with Althusser's 'repressive' and 'ideological state apparatuses') that they disguise the fact that they are still metaphors which offer to congeal a fluent social process. I prefer Marx's metaphor; and I prefer it, for many purposes, to his subsequent metaphors of 'basis' and 'superstructure'. But my argument in this paper is (to the same degree as Marx's) a structural argument. I have been forced to see this when considering the force of the obvious objections to it. For every feature of eighteenth-century society to which attention has been directed may be found, in more or less developed form, in other centuries. There were free labourers and food riots in the sixteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; there was religious indifferentism and an authentic plebeian folk culture in the same centuries; there was an active revival of paternalist rituals – especially harvest-homes, tenant dinners, charities – in the nineteenth-century countryside. And so on. What then is specific to the eighteenth century? What is the 'general illumination' which modifies the 'specific tonalities' of its social and cultural life?

To answer this we must rephrase the foregoing argument in more structural terms. The error most common today is that of bringing to the definition of eighteenth-century popular culture antitheses (industrial/pre-industrial; modern/traditional; 'mature'/ 'primitive' working class) inapposite because they entail reading back into a prior society categories for which that society had no resources and that culture no terms. If we wish to effect a definition antithetically, then the relevant antitheses which may be brought to eighteenth-century plebeian culture are two: (1) the dialectic between what is and is *not* culture – the formative experiences in social being, and how these were handled in cultural ways, and (2) the dialectical polarities – antagonisms and reconciliations – between the polite and the plebeian cultures of the time. This is why I have gone such a long way around to approach the proper theme of this paper.

As a matter of course this culture exhibits certain features commonly ascribed to 'traditional' culture. Especially in rural society, but also in thickly populated manufacturing and mining areas (the West of England clothing towns, the Cornish tinners, the Black Country), there is a heavy weight of *customary* definitions and expectations. Apprenticeship as an initiation into adult skills is not confined to its formal industrial expression. The child serves her apprenticeship as a housewife, first to her mother (or grandmother), then as a domestic servant; as a young mother, in the mysteries of child-rearing, she is apprentice to the matrons of the community. It is the same in the trades without formal apprenticeship. And with the induction into these particular skills comes an induction into the social experience or common wisdom of the community: each generation stands in an apprentice relation to its seniors. Although social life is changing, and although there is much mobility, change has not yet reached that point at which it is assumed that the horizons of each successive generation will be different;[40] nor has that engine of cultural acceleration (or estrangement), formal education, yet interpolated itself significantly into this generational transmission.

[40] See the perceptive comments on the 'circular' sense of space in the unenclosed agricultural parish in John Barrel, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of*   *Place: an Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972), 103, 106.

Both practices and norms are reproduced down the generations within the slowly differentiating ambience of 'custom'. Hence people tend to legitimize practice (or protest) in terms of customary usage or of prescriptive right and perquisite. (The fact that – from rather different premises – such arguments tend to control the high political culture also acts to reinforce this plebeian disposition.) Traditions are perpetuated largely through oral transmission, with its repertoire of anecdote and of narrative example; where oral tradition is supplemented by growing literacy, the most widely circulated printed products (chapbooks, almanacs, broadsides, 'last dying speeches' and anecdotal accounts of crime) tend to be subdued to the expectations of the oral culture rather than challenging it with alternatives. In any case, in many parts of Britain – and especially those regions where dialect is strongest – basic elementary education co-exists, throughout the *nine*teenth century, with the language – and perhaps the sensibility – of what is then becoming 'the old culture'.

In the eighteenth century this culture is neither old nor insecure. It transmits vigorously – and perhaps it also generates – ritualized or stylized forms of behaviour, whether in recreation or in forms of protest. It is even possible that geographical mobility, together with growing literacy, actually *extends* the range and distributes such forms more widely: 'setting the price', as the central action of food riot, moves across most of the country; the ritual divorce known as a 'wife sale' appears to have distributed its incidence throughout the country from some unknown point of origin. The evidence of rough music suggests that in the more traditional communities – and these were by no means always ones with a rural or agrarian profile – quite powerful self-activating forces of social and moral regulation were at work. This evidence may show that while certain deviant behaviour was tolerated up to a point, beyond that point the community sought to impose its own inherited expectations as to approved marital roles and sexual conduct upon transgressors. Even here, however, we have to proceed with caution: this is not *just* 'a traditional culture'. The norms so defended are not identical with those proclaimed by Church or authority; they are defined within this plebeian culture itself, and the same ritual forms which are used against a notorious sexual offender may be used against the blackleg, or against the squire and his gamekeepers, the excise-officer, the J.P. Moreover, the forms do not simply inherit expectations and reproduce norms: seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century skimmingtons may be directed frequently against the woman who offends against patriarchal notations of marital roles, nineteenth-century rough musics are commonly directed against wife-beaters or (less frequently) married men who are notorious for seducing and leaving pregnant young girls.[41]

This, then, is a conservative culture in its forms; these appeal to custom and seek to reinforce traditional usage. The forms are often also irrational; they do not appeal to 'reason' through pamphlet, sermon or platform-speech; they impose the sanctions of force, ridicule, shame, intimidation. But the content of this culture cannot so easily be

[41] See my 'Rough music: le charivari anglais', *Annales E.S.C.*, 27ᵉ Année, 11 (1972); and my further comment in the Proceedings of the Conference on 'Le charivari' under the auspices of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (VIᵉ section), in Paris 25–7 April 1977 (to be published shortly).

described as conservative. For in actual 'social being' labour is becoming, decade by decade, more 'free' of traditional manorial, parochial, corporate and paternal controls, and more distanced from direct client relations to the gentry. Hence we have the paradox of a customary culture which is not subject in its daily operations to the ideological domination of the rulers. The gentry's hegemony may define the limits or the 'field-of-force' within which the plebeian culture is free to act and grow, but since this hegemony is secular rather than religious or magical it can do little to determine the character of this plebeian culture. The controlling instruments and images of hegemony are those of the Law and not those of the Church or of monarchical power. But the Law does not sow pious sisterhoods in cities nor extract the confessions of delinquents; its subjects do not tell their rosaries nor go on pilgrimages of the faithful – instead they read broadsides in taverns and attend public executions, and at least some of the Law's victims are regarded, not with horror, but with an ambiguous admiration. The Law may punctuate the limits of behaviour tolerated by the rulers; it does not, in the eighteenth century, enter into the cottages, find mention in the housewife's prayers, decorate the chimney-piece with icons, or inform a view of life.

Hence one characteristic paradox of the century: we have a *rebellious* traditional culture. The conservative culture of the plebs as often as not resists, in the name of 'custom', those economic innovations and rationalizations (as enclosure, work-discipline, free market relations in grain) which the rulers or employers seek to impose. Innovation is more evident at the top of society than below, but, since this innovation is not some normless and neuter technological/sociological process ('modernization', 'rationalizing') but is the innovation of capitalist process, it is most often experienced by the plebs in the form of exploitation, or the expropriation of customary use-rights, or the violent disruption of valued patterns of work and leisure. Hence the plebeian culture is rebellious, but rebellious in defence of custom. The customs defended are the people's own, and some of them are in fact based upon rather recent assertions in practice. But when the people search for legitimations for protest, they often turn back to the paternalist regulations of a more authoritarian society, and select from among these those parts most calculated to defend their present interests; food rioters appeal back to the Book of Orders and to legislation against forestallers, etc., artisans appeal back to certain parts (e.g. apprenticeship regulation) of the Tudor regulatory labour code.[42]

This culture has other 'traditional' features, of course. One feature which interests me in particular is the priority afforded, in certain areas, to 'non-economic' over direct monetary sanctions, exchanges and motivations. Again and again, when examining

[42] As late as 1811 sophisticated London trade union-ists, in appealing to the apprenticeship clauses of the Statute of Artificers ('Mechanics! Protect your Liberties from Lawless Invaders!!!'), commenced with an 'Ode to the Memory of Queen Elizabeth':

> Her memory still is dear to journeymen,
> For shelter'd by her laws, now they resist
> Infringements, which would else persist.

> Tyrannic masters, innovating fools
> Are check'd, and bounded by her glorious rules.
> Of workmen's rights, she's still a guarantee...

*Report of the Trial of Alexander Wadsworth against Peter Laurie*, 28 May 1811: Columbia University Library, Seligman Collection, Place pamphlets, vol. XII.

eighteenth-century behaviour one finds it necessary to 'de-code'[43] this behaviour and to disclose invisible rules of action unlike those which a historian of 'working-class movements' has come to expect.

In this sense one shares some of the preoccupations of historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of an 'anthropological' orientation: thus, in de-coding rough music, or the wife-sale, or in attending to the symbolism of protest. In another sense the problem is different, and perhaps more acute, for capitalist logic and 'non-economic' customary behaviour are in active and conscious conflict, as in resistance to new patterns of consumption ('needs'), or in resistance to time-discipline and to technical innovation or work-rationalization which threaten to disrupt customary usage and, sometimes, the familial organization of productive relations and roles. Hence we can read eighteenth-century social history as a succession of confrontations between an innovative market economy and the customary moral economy of the plebs.

But if we are de-coding behaviour, does it follow that one should go further than this, and attempt to reconstruct from these fragments of code a plebeian cognitive system with its own ontological coherence and symbolic structure? Historians of seventeenth- and of eighteenth-century popular culture may face somewhat different problems here. The issue has arisen, in general terms, in a recent exchange between Hildred Geertz and Keith Thomas,[44] and while I would associate myself firmly with Thomas in this exchange, I could not reply, from the eighteenth century, in exactly the same terms. Where Geertz expects some coherent system to underlie the symbolism of popular culture, I must agree with Thomas that 'the immense range of variations, chronological, social and regional, presented by a society as diverse as seventeenth-century England' – and even more, the eighteenth century! – prohibit such expectations. (At every point in this paper when I have referred to *the* plebeian culture I have been only too well aware of variations and exceptions.) I must associate myself with Thomas even more strongly in his objection to Geertz's 'simple distinction between literate and illiterate'; any such distinction is fuzzy at every point in the eighteenth century: the illiterate hear the products of literacy read aloud in taverns and they may accept from the literate culture some categories, while many of the literate employ their very limited literate skills only instrumentally (writing invoices, keeping accounts) while their 'wisdom' and customs are still transmitted within a pre-literate oral culture. For seventy or eighty years the collectors and connoisseurs of folk song have disputed bitterly among themselves as to the purity, authenticity, regional origin and means of dispersal of their materials, and as to the mutual interaction between polite, commercial and plebeian musical cultures. Any attempt to segregate the literate and illiterate cultures will meet with even greater difficulty.

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[43] I hope that my use of 'de-code' does not instantly assimilate my argument to this or that school of semiotics. What I mean should be clear in the next few pages: it is not sufficient merely to *describe* popular symbolic protests (burning of effigies, wearing of oak-leaves, hanging of jack-boots): it is necessary also to recover the significance of these symbols with reference to a wider symbolic universe, and hence to locate their force, both as affronts to the rulers' hegemony and as expressions of the expectations of the crowd; see the suggestive article of William R. Reddy, 'The textile trade and the language of the crowd at Rouen, 1752–1871', *Past and Present*, LXXIV (February 1977).

[44] *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VI, 1 (1975).

Where Thomas and I may differ is in our assessments as to the degree to which popular forms, rituals, symbolism and superstitions remain as 'unintegrated remnants of older patterns of thought', which, even when taken together, make up 'not one single code, but an amalgam of the cultural debris of many different ways of thinking, Christian and pagan, Teutonic and classical; and it would be absurd to claim that all these elements had been shuffled together to form a new and coherent system'.[45] I have already offered a criticism of Thomas's references to 'popular ignorance', to which Thomas has briefly replied;[46] and no doubt the point may be argued more thoroughly in the future. But perhaps it is the century, or the relevant field-of-force of the different centuries, as well as the kind of evidence which each throws forward into prominence, which makes the difference? If we look at 'magic', astrology, wise men, this may support Thomas's conclusions; if we look at skimmingtons, rites of passage, or the characteristic forms of eighteenth-century riot and protest, it may support mine.

The eighteenth-century evidence appears to me to gesture towards a rather more coherent mental universe of symbolism informing practice than Thomas allows for the seventeenth. But the coherence (and here I would expect some anthropologists to lay this paper down in disgust) arises less from any inherent cognitive structure than from the particular field of force and sociological oppositions peculiar to eighteenth-century society; to be blunt, the discrete and fragmented elements of older patterns of thought become integrated by *class*. In some cases this has no political or social significance whatsoever, beyond the elementary antitheses of definitions within antithetical cultures: the scepticism as to the parson's homilies, the mixture of effective materialism and vestigial superstition of the poor, are held to with a particular confidence because these attitudes are sheltered within a wider, robust culture. This confidence strikes one again and again: 'Lor' bless yer honours,' a West Countryman exclaimed to a Reverend folk-lore collector well into the nineteenth century, when questioned about a wife-sale, 'You may ask anyone if that ain't marriage, good, sound and Christian, and they will tell you it is.'[47] 'Lor' bless yer honours' carries a sense of the patronizing; 'anyone' knows what is right – except, of course, the parson and the squire and their educated children; 'anyone' knows better than the parson himself what is...'Christian'! In other cases, the assimilation of older fragments within plebeian consciousness or even into the armoury of plebeian protest is very explicit: from the burning of witches and heretics the plebs borrow the symbolism of burning their enemies in effigy; 'ancient prophecies', such as those of Merlin, become part of the repertoire of London protest, appearing in pamphlet form during the agitations surrounding the closure of Richmond Park, in broadside and satire at the time of Wilkes.

It is in class itself, in some sense a *new* set of categories, rather than in older patterns of thought that we may find the shaping cognitive organization of plebeian culture.

[45] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), 627–8.

[46] 'Anthropology and the discipline of historical context', *Midland History*, I, 3 (Spring 1972); *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VI, 1 (1975), 104–5, esp. note 31.

[47] S. Baring-Gould, *Devonshire Characters and Strange Events* (1908), 59.

Perhaps, indeed, it was necessary that class should become possible within cognition before it could find institutional expression. Class also, of course, was very present in the cognitive system of the rulers of society, and informed their institutions and the rituals of order; but this only emphasizes that gentry and plebs held alternative views of life and of the ordering of satisfactions. This presents to us exceptional problems of evidence. Everything transmitted to us through the polite culture has to be scrutinized upside-down. What appears to the distanced paternalist clergyman as 'popular ignorance' cannot be accepted as such without scrupulous enquiry. To take the case of the riots for possession of the bodies of the hanged at Tyburn, which Peter Linebaugh has (I think) de-coded in *Albion's Fatal Tree*: it was no doubt 'ignorant' in the rioter to risk his life so that his shop-mate or mess-mate should not serve the highly rational and utilitarian function of being a specimen for dissection in the surgeon's hall. But we cannot present the rioter as an archaic figure, motivated by the 'debris' of older patterns of thought, and then pass the matter off with a reference to death-superstitions and *les rois thaumaturges*. Linebaugh shows us the rioter as being motivated by solidarity with the sufferer, respect for the sufferer's kin, and notions of the respect due to the integrity of the corpse and to the ritual of burial which are part of the beliefs about death widely dispersed in the society. These beliefs survive with vigour well into the nineteenth century, as is evidenced by the strength of riots (and of near-hysterias) in several towns against body-snatchers and the sale of corpses.[48] The code which informs these riots, whether at Tyburn in 1731 or at Manchester in 1832, cannot be understood only in terms of beliefs about death and its proper treatment. It involves also class solidarities, and the hostility of the plebs to the psychic cruelty of the law and to the marketing of primary values. Nor is it, in the eighteenth century, just that a taboo is being threatened: in the case of the dissection of corpses or the hanging of corpses in chains, one class was deliberately and as an act of terror breaking or exploiting the taboos of another.

It is, then, within this class field-of-force that the fragmented débris of older patterns are revivified and reintegrated. In one sense the plebeian culture is the peoples' own: it is a defence against the intrusions of gentry or clergy; it consolidates those customs which serve their own interests; the taverns are their own, the fairs are their own, rough music is among their own means of self-regulation. It is not *any* 'traditional' culture but a rather peculiar one. It is not, for example, fatalistic, offering consolations and defences in the course of a lifetime which is utterly determined and constrained. It is, rather, picaresque, not only in the obvious sense that more people are mobile, go to sea, are carried off to wars, experience the hazards and adventures of the road. In more settled ambiences – in the growing areas of manufacture and of free labour – life itself proceeds along a road whose hazards and accidents cannot be prescribed or avoided by forethought: fluctuations in the incidence of mortality, of prices, of employment, are experienced as external accidents beyond any control; the high rate of infant mortality makes nonsense

[48] Peter Linebaugh, 'The Tyburn Riot against the surgeons', in Douglas Hay *et al.*, *Albion's Fatal Tree* (1975); Ruth Richardson, 'A dissection of the Anatomy Act', *Studies in Labour History*, 1 (Brighton, 1976).

of predictive familial planning; in general, the populace has little predictive notation of time – they do not plan 'careers', or see their lives in a given shape before them, or salt away weeks of high earnings in savings, or plan to buy cottages, or ever in their lives think of a 'vacation'. (A young man, knowing this from his culture, may set off, once in his life, upon the road to 'see the world'.) Hence experience or opportunity is grabbed as occasion arises, with little thought of the consequences, just as the crowd imposes its power in moments of insurgent direct action, knowing that its moment of triumph will last only a week or a day.

For this plebeian culture is, in the end, constrained within the parameters of gentry hegemony: the plebs are ever-conscious of this constraint, aware of the reciprocity of gentry–crowd relations,[49] watchful for points to exert their own advantage. The plebs also take over to their own use some of the gentry's rhetoric. For, once again, this is the century of the advance of 'free' labour. The custom that was 'good' and 'old' was often of relatively recent assertion. And the distinctive feature of the manufacturing system was that, in many kinds of work, labourers (taking petty masters, journeymen and their families together) still controlled in some degree their own immediate relations and modes of work, while having very little control over the market for their products or over the prices of raw materials or food. This explains something of the structure of industrial relations and of protest, as well as something of the culture's artefacts and of its cohesiveness and independence of control.[50] It also explains much of the consciousness of the 'free-born Englishman', who took to himself some part of the constitutionalist rhetoric of his rulers, and defended stubbornly his rights at law and his rights to protest turbulently against military, press-gang or police, alongside his rights to white bread and cheap ale. The plebs were aware that a ruling-class that rested its claim to legitimacy upon prescription and law had little authority to over-rule their own customs and rights.

The reciprocity of these relations underlies the importance of the symbolic expressions of hegemony and of protest in the eighteenth century. That is why, in my previous paper, I directed so much attention to the notion of theatre. Of course, every society has its own kind of theatre; much in the political life of our own societies can be understood only as a contest for symbolic authority.[51] But I am saying more than that the symbolic contests of the eighteenth century were particular to that century and require more study. I think that symbolism, in that century, had a peculiar importance, owing to the weakness of other organs of control: the authority of the Church is departing, and the authority of the schools and the mass media has not yet arrived. The gentry had three major resources of control – a system of influence and preferment which could scarcely contain the unpreferred poor; the majesty and terror of law; and the symbolism of their hegemony. This was, at times, a delicate social equilibrium, in which the rulers were

[49] Compare Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 91: 'The slaves accepted the doctrine of reciprocity, but with a profound difference. To the idea of reciprocal duties they added the doctrine of reciprocal rights.'

[50] I am supporting here the argument of Gerald M. Sider, 'Christmas mumming and the New Year in Outport Newfoundland', *Past and Present*, (May 1976).

[51] See Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Politics as drama as politics', in *Power and Consciousness* (New York, 1969).

forced to make concessions. Hence the contest for symbolic authority may be seen, not as a way of acting out ulterior 'real' contests, but as a real contest in its own right. Plebeian protest, on occasion, had no further objective than to challenge the gentry's hegemonic assurance, strip power of its symbolic mystifications, or even just to blaspheme. It was a contest for 'face', but the outcome of the contest might have material consequences – in the way the Poor Law was administered, in the measures felt by the gentry to be necessary in times of high prices, in whether Wilkes was imprisoned or freed.

At least we must return to the eighteenth century, giving as much attention to the symbolic contests in the streets as to the votes in the House of Commons. These contests appear in all kinds of odd ways and odd places. Sometimes it was a jocular employment of Jacobite or anti-Hanoverian symbolism, a twisting of the gentry's tail. Dr Stratford wrote from Berkshire in 1718:

> Our bumpkins in this country are very waggish and very insolent. Some honest justices met to keep the Coronation day at Wattleton, and towards the evening when their worships were mellow they would have a bonfire. Some bumpkins upon this got a huge turnip and stuck three candles just over Chetwynd's house. . . They came and told their worships that to honour King George's Coronation day a blazing star appeared over Mr Chetwynd's house. Their worships were wise enough to take horse to go and see this wonder, and found, to their no little disappointment, their star to end in a turnip.[52]

The turnip was of course the particular emblem of George I as selected by the Jacobite crowd, when they were in good humour; in ill-humour he was the cuckold king, and horns would do instead of turnips. But other symbolic confrontations in these years could become very angry indeed. In a Somerset village in 1724 an obscure confrontation (one of a number of such affairs) took place over the erection of a maypole. A local land-owner and magistrate seems to have taken down 'the Old Maypole', newly dressed with flowers and garlands, and then to have sent two men to the bridewell for felling an elm for another pole. In response his apple and cherry orchard was cut down, an ox was killed and dogs poisoned. When the prisoners were released the pole was re-erected and 'May Day' was celebrated with 'seditious' ballads and derisory libels against the magistrate. Among those dressing the maypole were two labourers, a maltster, a carpenter, a blacksmith, a linenweaver, a butcher, a miller, an inn-keeper, a groom and two gentlemen.[53]

As we pass the mid-century the Jacobite symbolism wanes and the occasional genteel offender (perhaps pushing his own interests under the cover of the crowd) disappears

[52] Hist. MSS Comm, *Portland MSS*, VII, 245–6.

[53] P.R.O., K.B. 2 (1), Affidavits, Easter 10 G I, relating to Henstridge, Somerset, 1724. On George's accession the common people of Bedford 'put the May-pole in mourning' and a military officer cut it down. In August 1725 there was an affray about a maypole in Barford (Wilts), between the inhabitants and a gentleman who suspected the pole had been stolen from his woods (as it probably was). The gentleman summoned a posse to his aid, but the inhabitants won: for Bedford, *An Account of the Riots, Tumults and other Treasonable Practices since His Majesty's Accession to the Throne* (1715), 12; for Barford, *Mist's Weekly Journal*, 28 August 1725.

with it.[54] The symbolism of popular protest after 1760 sometimes challenges authority very directly. Nor was such symbolism employed without calculation or careful fore-thought. In the great strike of seamen on the Thames in 1768, when some thousands marched upon parliament, the fortunate survival of a document enables us to see this taking place.[55] At the height of the strike (7 May 1768), when the seamen were getting no satisfaction, some of their leaders went into a dock-side pub and asked the publican to write out in a good hand and in proper form a proclamation which they intended posting on all the docks and river-stairs. The publican read their paper and found 'many Treasonable & Rebellious Expressions' and at the bottom 'No W—, no K—' (i.e. 'No Wilkes, no King'). The publican (by his own account) remonstrated with them:

> Publican: 'I beg Gentlemen you would not talk of compulsion or be guilty of the least Irregularity.'
> Seamen: 'What do you mean Sir, if we are not speedily redressed there is Ships & Great Guns at Hand which we will use as Occasion shall require in Order to redress Ourselves besides we are determined to unmast every ship in the River & then bid you, & Old England adieu & steer for some other country....'

The seamen here were only playing the same game as the legislature with their repeated enactments of capital offences and legislative overkill; both sides to the relation tended to threaten more than they performed. Disappointed by the publican the seamen took their paper to a schoolmaster who undertook this kind of clerical business. Once again the sticking-point was the conclusion to the proclamation – on the right hand 'Seamen', on the left hand 'No W—, no K—'. The schoolmaster had more respect for his own neck than to be the author of such a paper. The following dialogue, by his own account, then ensued, although it is a somewhat unlikely conversation-piece on Shadwell stairs:

> Seamen: 'You're not a Seaman's Friend.'
> Schoolmaster: 'Gentlemen I am so much Your Friend that I would by no means be an Instrument of doing you the greatest Injury by Proclaiming you Traitors to our Dread Sovereign Lord the King & raisers of Rebellion & Sedition amongst your fellow subjects and this I humbly conceive to be the Contents of Your Paper....'
> Seamen: 'Most of us has ventured our lives in defence of His Majesty's Person, Crown and Dignity and for our native country and on all occasions have attacked the Enemy with courage & Resolution & have been Victorious. But since the conclusion of the War We Seamen have been slighted and our Wages reduced

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[54] However, as the maypole episodes remind us, the Tory tradition of paternalism, which looks backward to the Stuart 'Book of Sports', and which extends either patronage or a warm permissiveness to the recreations of the people, remains extremely vigorous even into the nineteenth century. This theme is too large to be taken into this paper, but see R. W.

Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1973).

[55] William L. Clement Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, *Shelburne Papers*, vol. 133, 'Memorials of Dialogues betwixt several Seamen, a certain Victualler, & a S--l Master in the late Riot'. I am grateful to the Librarian and his staff for permission to consult and cite these papers.

so low & Provisions so Dear that we have been rendered uncapable of procuring the common necessaries of Life for ourselves & Familys, and to be plain with you if our Grievances is not speedily redressed there is Ships & Great Guns enough at Deptford and Woolwich we will kick up such a Dust in the Pool as the Londoners never see before, so when we have given the Merchants a coup de grease [*sic*] we will steer for France where we are well assured we shall meet with a hearty welcome.'

Once again the seamen were disappointed; they exeunt on the line, 'do you think such a Body of British seamen is to be dictated by an old Fusty School Master?' Somewhere they found themselves a scribe, but even this scribe refused the full commission. The next morning the proclamation duly appeared on the river-stairs, signed at the bottom right 'Seamen' and on the left...'Liberty & Wilkes for ever!'

The point of this anecdote is that at the very height of the seamen's strike the leaders of the movement spent several hours going from pub to schoolmaster to scribe, in search of a writer willing to set down the biggest affront to authority which they could imagine: 'No King.' The seamen may not have been in any reflective sense republicans; but this was the biggest symbolic 'Great Gun' that they could fire off, and if fired with the seeming support of some thousands of British tars it would have been a great gun indeed.[56]

This symbolic contest acquires its significance only within a particular equilibrium of social relations. The plebeian culture cannot be analysed independently of this equilibrium; its definitions are, in some part, antagonisms to the definitions of the polite culture. What I have been attempting to show, perhaps repetitiously, is that each element of this society, taken separately, may have precedents and successors, but that when all are taken together they add up to a sum which is more than the sum of the parts: it is a structured set of relations, in which the State, the Law, the libertarian ideology, the ebullitions and direct actions of the crowd, all perform roles intrinsic to that system, and within limits assigned by that system, which limits are at the same time the limits of what is politically 'possible'; and, to a remarkable degree, the limits of what is intellectually and culturally

[56] How far explicit anti-monarchical and republican ideas were abroad among the common people, especially during the turbulent 1760s, is a question more often turned aside with a negative than researched. George Rudé's immensely valuable work on the London crowd tends to evince a methodological scepticism towards 'ideal' political motivations: thus he has come across, in another source, the rumour that demonstrators used the slogan, 'No Wilkes, No King!' but dismisses it as rumour; see G. Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty* (Oxford, 1962), 50; cf. Brewer, *op. cit.*, 190; W. J. Shelton, *English Hunger and Industrial Disorders* (1973), 188, 190. On the other hand, we have the forceful *caveat* of J. H. Plumb: 'Historians, I feel, never give sufficient emphasis to the prevalence of bitter anti-monarchical, pro-republican sentiment of the 1760s and 1770s' ('Political man', *op. cit.*, 15). We are not likely to decipher the truth from printed sources, subject to the Treasury Solicitor's scrutiny. There are times during these decades when one senses that a good part of the English people were more ready to secede from the Crown than were the Americans; but they had the misfortune not to be protected from it by the Atlantic. In 1775 some fortunately placed artisans were able to secede more directly, and American agents (disguised in women's clothes) were busily recruiting more than one ship-load of shipwrights from Woolwich' (William L. Clement Library, *Wedderburn Papers*, II, J. Pownall to Alexander Wedderburn, 23 August 1775).

'possible' also. The crowd, at its most advanced, can rarely transcend the libertarian rhetoric of the radical Whig tradition; the poets cannot transcend the sensibility of the humane and generous paternalist.[57] The furious anonymous letters which spring up from society's lower depths blaspheme against the gentry's hegemony but offer no strategy to replace it.

In one sense this is a rather conservative conclusion, for I am endorsing eighteenth-century society's rhetorical self-image – that the Settlement of 1688 defined its form and its characteristic relations. Given that that Settlement established the form of rule for an agrarian bourgeoisie,[58] it seems that it was as much that form of State power as it was that mode of production and productive relations which determined the political and cultural expressions of the next hundred years. Indeed that State, weak as it was in its bureaucratic and rationalizing functions, was immensely strong and effective as an auxiliary instrument of production in its own right: in breaking open the paths for commercial imperialism, in imposing enclosure upon the countryside, and in facilitating the accumulation and movement of capital, both through its banking and funding functions and, more bluntly, through the parasitic extractions of its own officers. It is this specific combination of weakness and of strength which provides the 'general illumination' in which all colours of that century are plunged; which assigned to the judges and the magistracy their roles; which made necessary the theatre of cultural hegemony and which wrote its paternalist and libertarian script; which afforded to the crowd its opportunity for protest and for pressures; which laid down the terms of negotiation between authority and plebs, and which established the limits beyond which negotiation might not go.

Finally, how far and in what sense do I use the concept of 'cultural hegemony'? This can be answered at a practical or at a theoretical level. At a practical level it is evident that the gentry's hegemony over the political life of the nation was effectively imposed

[57] I do not doubt that there was a genuine and significant paternalist tradition among the gentry and professional groups. But that is a different theme. My theme here is to define the limits of paternalism, and to present objections to the notion that eighteenth-century social (or class) relations were mediated by paternalism, on paternalism's own terms.

[58] Professor J. H. Hexter was astonished when I uttered this improper copulation ('agrarian bourgeoisie') at the Davis Centre seminar in Princeton in 1976. Perry Anderson was also astonished ten years earlier: 'Socialism and pseudo-empiricism', *New Left Review*, xxxv (January–February 1966), 8 'A bourgeoisie, if the term is to mean anything, is a class based on *towns*; that is what the word means.' See also (on my side of the argument), Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 249; and a judicious commentary on the argument by Richard Johnson, *Working Papers*

in *Cultural Studies* ix (Birmingham, Spring 1976). My re-statement of this (somewhat conventional) Marxist argument was made in 'The peculiarities of the English', *Socialist Register* (1965), esp. 318. Here I emphasize not only the economic logic of agrarian capitalism, but the specific amalgam of urban and rural attributes in the life-style of the eighteenth-century gentry: the watering-places; the London or town season; the periodic urban passage-rites, in education or in the various marriage markets; and other specific attributes of a mixed agrarian–urban culture. The economic arguments (already ably presented by Dobb) have been reinforced by Brenner, *op. cit.*, esp. 62–8. Additional evidence as to the urban facilities available to the gentry is in Peter Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance: the development of provincial urban culture, *c.* 1680 – *c.* 1760', *Social History*, v (May 1977).

until the 1790s.[59] Neither blasphemy nor sporadic episodes of arson call this in question; these do not offer to displace the gentry's rule but only to punish them. The limits of what was politically possible (until the French Revolution) were expressed externally in constitutional forms and, internally, within men's minds, as taboos, limited expectations, and a disposition towards traditional forms of protest, aimed often at recalling the gentry to their paternalist duties.

But it is necessary also to say what this hegemony does *not* entail. It does not entail any acceptance by the poor of the gentry's paternalism upon the gentry's own terms or in their approved self-image. The poor might be willing to award their deference to the gentry, but only for a price. The price was substantial. And the deference was often without the least illusion: it could be seen from below as being one part necessary self-preservation, one part the calculated extraction of whatever could be extracted. Seen in this way, the poor imposed upon the rich some of the duties and functions of paternalism just as much as deference was in turn imposed upon them. Both parties to the equation were constrained within a common field-of-force.

In the second place, we must recall once more the immense distance between polite and plebeian cultures, and the vigour of the authentic self-activity of the latter. Whatever this hegemony may have been, it did not envelop the lives of the poor and it did not prevent them from defending their own modes of work and leisure, and forming their own rituals, their own satisfactions and view of life. So that we are warned from this against pressing the notion of hegemony too far and into improper areas.[60] Such hegemony may have defined the outside limits of what was politically, socially practicable, and hence influenced the forms of what was practised: it offered the bare architecture of a structure of relations of domination and subordination, but within that architectural tracery many different scenes could be set and different dramas enacted.

Eventually an independent plebeian culture as robust as this might even have nurtured alternative expectations, challenging this hegemony. This is not my reading of what took place, for when the ideological break with paternalism came, in the 1790s, it came in the first place less from the plebeian culture than from the intellectual culture

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[59] I say this despite the question raised in note 54 above. If republican sentiment had become an effective force, I think it could have done so only under republican gentry leadership, in the first stage. I very much welcome John Brewer's fresh view of the ritual and symbolism of Wilkesite opposition: Brewer, *op. cit.*, esp. 181–91. But if Wilkes acted the role of the crowd's 'fool', he never ceased to be a *gentleman*-fool. In general my paper has been concerned mainly with the 'self-activating' plebeian crowd, and (a serious weakness) I have been forced to leave the licensed or gentry-manipulated crowd out of account.

[60] In a relevant criticism of certain uses of the concept of hegemony, R. J. Morris notes that it can imply 'the near impossibility of the working class or organized sections of that class being able to generate radical...ideas independent of the dominant ideology.' The concept implies the need to look to intellectuals for this, while the dominant value system is seen as 'an exogenous variable generated independently' of subordinate groups or classes ('Bargaining with hegemony', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, xxxv (Autumn 1977), 62–3). See also Genovese's sharp response to criticisms on this point: 'Hegemony implies class struggles and has no meaning apart from them...It has nothing in common with consensus history and represents its antithesis – a way of defining the historical content of class struggle during times of apparent social quiescence' (see *Radical History Review* (Winter 1976–7), 98). I am glad that this has been said.

of the dissenting middle class, and from thence it was carried to the urban artisans.[61] But Painite ideas, carried through by such artisans to an even wider plebeian culture, instantly struck root there; and perhaps the shelter provided by this robust and independent culture enabled them to flourish and propagate themselves, until they gave rise to the great and undeferential popular agitations at the end of the French Wars.

Theoretically I am saying this. The concept of hegemony is immensely valuable, and without it we would be at a loss to understand how eighteenth-century social relations were structured. But while such cultural hegemony may define the limits of what is possible, and inhibit the growth of alternative horizons and expectations, there is nothing determined or automatic about this process. Such hegemony can be sustained by the rulers only by the constant exercise of skill, of theatre and of concession. Second, such hegemony, even when imposed successfully, does not impose an all-embracing view of life; rather, it imposes blinkers, which inhibit vision in certain directions while leaving it clear in others. It can co-exist (as it did co-exist in eighteenth-century England) with a very vigorous self-activating culture of the people, derived from their own experience and resources. This culture, which may be resistant at many points to any form of exterior domination, constitutes an ever-present threat to official descriptions of reality; given the sharp jostle of experience, the intrusion of 'seditious' propagandists, the Church-and-King crowd can become Jacobin or Luddite, the loyal Tsarist navy can become an insurrectionary Bolshevik fleet.

It follows that I cannot accept the view, popular in some structuralist and Marxist circles in Western Europe, that hegemony imposes an all-embracing domination upon the ruled – or upon all those who are not intellectuals – reaching down to the very threshold of their experience, and implanting within their minds at birth categories of subordination which they are powerless to shed and which their experience is powerless to correct. This may perhaps have happened here and there, but not in England, not in the eighteenth century.

## VI

The old paternalism–deference equation was losing force even before the French Revolution, although it saw a temporary revival in the Church-and-King mobs of the early nineties, the military display and the anti-Gallicanism of the wars. The Gordon Riots had seen the climax, and also the apotheosis, of plebeian licence; and inflicted a trauma upon the rulers which can already be noted in a growing disciplinary tone in the eighties. But by then the reciprocal relation between gentry and plebs, tipping now one way, now the other, had lasted for a century. Grossly unequal as this relationship was, the gentry

[61] The question as to whether a subordinate class can or cannot develop a coherent intellectual critique of the dominant ideology – and a strategy reaching beyond the limits of its hegemony – seems to me to be a *historical* question (that is, one to which historical evidence offers many different answers, some of them highly nuanced), and not one which can be solved by pronouncements within 'theoretical practice'. The number of 'organic intellectuals' (in Gramsci's sense) among the artisans and workers of Britain between 1790 and 1850 should never be understated.

nevertheless needed *some* kind of support from the poor, and the poor sensed that they were needed. For a hundred years the poor were not altogether the losers. They maintained their traditional culture; they secured a partial arrest of the work-discipline of early industrialism; they perhaps enlarged the scope of the Poor Laws; they enforced charities which may have prevented years of dearth from escalating into crises of subsistence; and they enjoyed liberties of pushing about the streets and jostling, gaping and huzzaing, pulling down the houses of obnoxious bakers or Dissenters, and a generally riotous and unpoliced disposition which astonished foreign visitors, and which almost misled them themselves into believing that they were 'free'. The 1790s expelled that illusion, and in the wake of the experiences of those years the relationship of reciprocity snapped. As it snapped, so, in the same moment, the gentry lost their self-assured cultural hegemony. It suddenly appeared that the world was not, after all, bounded at every point by their rules and overwatched by their power. A man was a man, 'for a' that'. We move out of the eighteenth-century field-of-force and enter a period in which there is a structural reordering of class relations and of ideology. It is possible, for the first time, to analyse the historical process in terms of nineteenth-century notations of class.

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