

# The English working class - Tom Nairn



"The passage of the early English working class from revolt to political integration is often explained solely by Britain's ascendancy as the first major imperialist power. In this essay Nairn focuses upon the political culture which British workers inherited from the British bourgeois class and argues that this was a crucial element in its domestication. Taking as his starting point Edward Thompson's pioneering and influential work *The Making of the English Working Class* he seeks to demonstrate that 'history from below' must be complemented by a 'history from above'."

Tom Nairn was an editor of *New Left Review* and the author of *May 1968: The Beginning of the End* (UK, 1968).

## The English Working Class - Tom Nairn

The English working class is one of the enigmas of modern history. Its development as a class is divided into two great phases, and there appears at first sight to be hardly any connection between them.

It was born in conditions of the utmost violence, harshly estranged from all traditional and tolerable conditions of existence and thrown into the alien, inchoate world of the first industrial revolution. Formed in this alienation by the blind energies of the new capitalist order, its sufferings were made more hopeless by the severest political and ideological persecution. From the outset it inspired fear by its very existence. In the time of general fear produced by the French Revolution, such dread and hostility became chronic, affecting the old ruling class and the new industrial bourgeoisie alike, and creating a climate of total

repression. What was possible but revolt, in the face of this? Humanity, pulverized and recast in this grim mould, had to rebel in order to live, to assert itself as more than a mere object of history, as more than an economic instrument. The early history of the English working class is therefore a history of revolt, covering more than half a century, from the period of the French Revolution to the climax of Chartism in the 1840s.

And yet, what became of this revolt? The great English working class, this titanic social force which seemed to be unchained by the rapid development of English capitalism in the first half of the century, did not finally emerge to dominate and remake English society. It could not break the mould and fashion another. Instead, after the 1840s it quickly turned into an apparently docile class. It embraced one species of moderate reformism after another, became a consciously subordinate part of bourgeois society, and has remained wedded to the narrowest and greyest of bourgeois ideologies in its principal movements.

Why did this happen? It is important for us to try and understand why, for many reasons. But above all, because the difficulties confronting any socialist revolution in Britain today are as much the long-term product of this astonishing transformation as of any development in the ruling class or any evolution in the structure and techniques of capitalism.

The problem of the English working class cannot be separated from that of the growth of English bourgeois society as a whole - that is, it is one part of a wider enigma, and is normally obscured like everything else by those liberal mystifications the English have erected in honour of their past. We have a long way to go in penetrating this general obscurity. Nevertheless, one vital fact surely emerges and imposes itself upon any serious consideration of the origins of the English working class.

Given the time and circumstances of its birth, this class was fated to repeat, in certain respects, the historical experience of the English bourgeoisie itself.

The revolutionary period of the English bourgeoisie occurred early in the general evolution of capitalism, earlier than that of any equivalent class in a major country. Those urban and rural middle classes who made the Revolution of 1640 were pioneers of bourgeois development, advancing blindly into a new world. Such blindness was the price of being in the van. Although the English Revolution attempted like other revolutions to escape from the general blindness and chance of historical evolution in a conscious remaking of society, the attempt was inevitably crippled by the lack of the very materials for an adequate consciousness of this sort. The final destruction of English feudalism in the period 1640-60 took place long before the full flowering of bourgeois ideology. Initiating the cycle of bourgeois expansion in this way, the English middle classes could not hope to benefit from a new conception of the world that was itself produced in the course of the cycle and reached maturity at a later date. Hence, although they contributed powerfully to the Enlightenment their practical struggles were necessarily conducted in terms of a pre-Enlightenment philosophy, a religious world-view unequal to what was at stake, English Puritanism. This fact explains a large part of those aspects of the Revolution which appear to us as a failure: its profound empiricism, the patchwork of compromise and makeshift it ended in, and the resultant organic coalescence with the English *ancien régime*.

But economically, of course, the Revolution was not a failure. Out of the mercantile society which triumphed in it, capitalist forms of production arose with giant force, threatening in their turn the equilibrium of that society. Dependent for their inception upon a new race of

free, disinherited labourers, these forms in their violent rise soon swelled this labour force into a major social class, an even greater potential threat to society, to the old patrician order of mercantilism and the new industrialism alike.

Thus, the first bourgeois class to occupy the centre of the world-historical scene engendered the first great proletariat. And the latter was inevitably forced into existence as far from the world-view it needed as the former had been. Any coherent and adequate proletarian ideology, the theory and practice of socialism, lay hidden in the future, the fruit of many struggles and debates in many countries. The English working class too was bound to grope its way in history.

To this central fact, the unavoidable darkness of its time, were added other constricting conditions derived from the peculiarities of English bourgeois development. The very precocity of the English bourgeoisie had, paradoxically, brought in its train a subsequent retardation of growth. 'The Revolutions of 1648 and 1789 were not *English* and *French* revolutions,' according to Marx, 'they were revolutions of a European pattern ... The Revolution of 1648 was the victory of the 17th century over the 16th century, the Revolution of 1789 the victory of the 18th century over the 17th century.' [1] The English bourgeoisie was to remain partly set within this pattern of the seventeenth century, it retains something of it even today. The conquests and prosperity of mercantile England, its emergence as one of the two world-powers, the great economic advance culminating in the Industrial Revolution - these were the real nerve and meaning of bourgeois development, its historical agency as creator of a new mode of production. Blind empiricism had opened the door to this triumph. Blind empiricism and its consequences were justified by it. The English bourgeoisie stood apart from the victory of the eighteenth century, isolated in a unique path of evolution, half innovator, half anachronism, bringing forth a new world from the very bowels of society while in heart and head it looked back to an older one. It was the most confident ruling class in modern history. What need did it have of the Enlightenment? It could take what it wanted from it, and produce its own limited, parochial Enlightenment in the shape of political economy and Utilitarianism. When the pattern of the eighteenth century finally erupted in 1789, it first greeted it, mistakenly, as a repetition of its own experience of the previous century, and then after realizing the mistake fought it to the death. This battle between the two great bourgeois revolutions crystallized all the peculiarities of English bourgeois development in a quite decisive way. Its estrangement from the central current of later bourgeois evolution was confirmed by this event, the insular destiny of its civilization.

The English working class was to be the principal victim of such estrangement. For the bourgeoisie, it was simply the accompaniment to a world economic hegemony, a natural form of consciousness and conduct, justified by practice, a national pride. For a century, nothing was to contradict this confidence. But from the beginning, the fortune of the bourgeoisie was the undoing of the working class; the former's characteristic mode of appropriation of the world was a characteristic mode of expropriation of the latter, a unique way of preventing it from appropriating the world in its turn.

The French Revolution was in general the practical realization of the Enlightenment, its translation into politics. Its most radical phase, the Jacobin dictatorship, was the realization of the most advanced and democratic conceptions of the Enlightenment, and was enacted by the only stratum of the bourgeoisie capable of pushing the Revolution to its limit, the petite bourgeoisie, in alliance with the workers, the peasants, and various dispossessed groups. The Jacobin ascendancy and Terror were what essentially distinguished the French Revolution

from its great predecessor of the seventeenth century. The Jacobins of the English Revolution, the Levellers, had been defeated by Cromwell and his 'Girondins' the 'grandeens', the forces of large landed and commercial property. But the French bourgeoisie, in its revolutionary struggle against the far more powerful and regressive French *ancien régime*, needed Jacobinism as the English had not. English feudalism and would-be absolutism were swept away without the fire of Jacobinism.

Jacobinism, in one sense the apex of bourgeois progress, the most radical affirmation of its world-view, is nevertheless the most mixed of blessings in the future development of bourgeois society. Through it, capital comes into its inheritance by the active hegemony of classes destined to be expropriated by capital, it rises to dominance out of the herculean efforts and organized violence of its own future servants. But this origin is the worst of precedents for its own future stability. As the French bourgeoisie was to discover repeatedly in the nineteenth century, the great stamp imposed upon society by this critical experience - the noblest of all bourgeois achievements, a patrimony which it could not and cannot to this day fail to acknowledge - as also the never-ending source of its own weakness. It was a mark of Cain, perpetually visible as such to all the disinherited. While the bourgeoisie made a living museum of the revolutionary tradition, it remained a living inspiration, a promise surviving every defeat, to the masses.

Marx described this paradox of bourgeois development in the 'Communist Manifesto', claiming that the bourgeoisie - 'in all its battles sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and thus to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie.' [2] But in England the peculiar evolution of the bourgeoisie did *not* provide the English popular masses and the English proletariat with such a 'political and general education'.

Not only had the English Revolution by-passed Jacobinism. The Revolution itself was buried in a morass of euphemism and misrepresentation, like some infantile trauma driven deep into the national subconscious. As a result, in this English bourgeois universe all appeared as 'locked fast as in a sort of family settlement; grasped as in a kind of mortmain for ever.' [3] The bourgeoisie, through its piecemeal entry on to the scene, was able to appropriate all the tradition of the dead generations and render it a living, oppressive, mystifying presence. What was written in the English sky, to correspond to the towering words of 1789, 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité'? The shamanism of the British Constitution, an assorted repertoire of (largely fake) antiquities, the poisonous remains of the once revolutionary ideology of Puritanism, and the anti-revolutionary invective of Edmund Burke.

The manufacturers, the new industrial bourgeoisie of the period 1789-1832, were certainly discontented with the old order, with the 'family settlement' inherited from 1688. They wanted a larger place in it, but not as the Third Estate had wanted its rights in France - that is, as an absolute necessity, a *sine qua non* of all further progress. They had already progressed so far that a revolutionary demand of this sort was ridiculous. A reform of the terms of the settlement was required, nothing more. Listen to the voice of their most rational and radical spokesman, expounding the characteristic English version of '*égalité*': 'A single mistake in extending equality too far may overthrow the social order and dissolve the bonds of society,' mumbled Jeremy Bentham, 'Equality might require such a distribution of property as would be incompatible with security ... Equality ought not to be favoured, except when it does not

injuriously affect security, nor disappoint expectations aroused by the law itself, nor disturb a distribution already actually settled and determined.'[4] It was too late for an English Jacobinism.

The English working class, therefore, was not only born far from socialism. This fact in itself, though inevitable, was not necessarily a fatal handicap. To proceed empirically is of no importance, if one can learn in time to do better - history is largely a tale of groping in the dark, a condition no person or class can miraculously escape from. Not merely time, but a concrete combination of historical factors positively separated the English working class from socialism. It was, so to speak, deprived of a whole dimension of growth from the beginning. This privation was also, in the widest and most authentic sense, a *popular* one. That is, it concerned not simply the emergent proletariat, but the numerous closely-related strata of the 'people' out of which it emerged historically, and from which it was for long scarcely distinguishable : artisans and out-workers, the urban crowds of casual workers and workless, the petty bourgeoisie of small producers in town and country. These heterogeneous subordinate masses, pre-capitalist or half-capitalist in nature and outlook, were the potential social force behind Jacobinism. It is only through the early revolutionary radicalism of the bourgeoisie that they can dominate the historical scene, that the 'petty' bourgeoisie ceases to be in any sense 'petty' and assumes a transitory heroic role. Capital, by the relative ease with which it conquered and transformed English society, always kept these classes in subordination. The English petty bourgeoisie was deprived of the chance to play its heroic part in history. English radicalism was permanently reduced to a phenomenon of *protest*, burdened with an 'oppositional' mentality the very reverse of 'Jacobin' mentality, spasmodic in its appearances and, of course, infected with religious mania. This was the terrible negative 'education' inflicted on the English working class.

Alienated in this fashion from everything finest in bourgeois tradition, by the inner conditions of English social evolution, the masses suffered the *coup de grace* from the new external conditions of the war against France from 1793 until 1815. Jacobinism became, not only something extraneous, but the face of an enemy, the object of patriotic hatred. National fervour became another weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie, a reinforcement of its internal good fortune. English separateness and provincialism; English backwardness and traditionalism; English religiosity and moralistic vapouring; paltry English 'empiricism', or instinctive distrust of reason - all these features which, seen in an abstractly comparative perspective, may appear as 'defects' or 'distortions' of bourgeois development in England, were in reality hammered together into a specific form of bourgeois hegemony during the infancy of the working class. The British Constitution, claimed Burke, 'works after the pattern of nature'. That is, it and all the rest were made to appear as merely parts of nature, and so inevitable - aspects of an English firmament, like the south-west wind and the rain, not so many forms of domination of capital.

The French bourgeoisie could only triumph by forging a double-edged sword, a weapon the working class could in its turn develop and use against its rulers. The German bourgeoisie, frustrated in its early development, consoled itself with an intellectual world of heroic proportions and intensity, a world out of which, in spite of its abstractness and spiritualism, the seminal ideas of socialism could come. But the English bourgeoisie, more fortunate, could afford to dispense with the dangerous tool of reason and stock the national mind with historical garbage. Capital did not have to resort to self-wounding excesses to establish its reign in England; it could hide behind the Bible, and make of practically everything 'national' an instrument, direct or indirect, of dominion.

Such was the cage of circumstances into which the English working class was bound to grow up. Such were the full, daunting dimensions of the alienation awaiting it, above and beyond the economic and human alienation which was the stuff of its daily life. From the beginning, a giant's task confronted it.

British socialists are fortunate indeed to possess the great account of the origins of the English working class which has recently appeared : Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>[5]</sup> Above all, because it concentrates attention upon what must be our primary concern, the role of the working class as maker of history. Engaged in constant polemic against vulgar determinism, Thompson insists that: 'The working class made itself as much as it was made',<sup>[6]</sup> and indicates how by the time of the Great Reform Bill in 1832 the working class had become an active influence whose 'presence can be felt in every county in England, and in most fields of life'.<sup>[7]</sup> The working class was not merely the product of economic forces, but also realized itself in 'a social and cultural formation' partly directed against the operation of these very forces. Thompson's book is essentially the history of this revolt.

The popular masses out of which the working class arose remained for generations attached to pre-industrial traditions, their resistance to capitalism was also a reaching back towards this way of life, an attempt to recreate an ideal society of small, independent men controlling their own fate. The deepest sympathy with this aspect of popular sentiment is characteristic of Thompson's approach. Such aspirations were inevitably blotted out by the onward rush of capitalism, but were not for this reason unimportant or contemptible, and the author wants to 'rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" handloom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded followers of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity ...'<sup>[8]</sup> The slow, secular gestation of the first industrial revolution, the long phases of capital accumulation which opened the way to industrial capitalism, had created a rich, varied artisan culture with tenacious roots. During the period of formation of the working class, the most influential representative of this tradition was the journalist William Cobbett. Cobbett was typical in thinking of the misery and convulsion of the time as being an assault upon the immemorial rights of the 'free-born Englishman'. These rights, located in a mythical past, had to be defended and reasserted as a peculiarly English heritage. Thus, the traditions and never-ending retrospection of the ruling class were to be fought with an even deeper and more backward-looking traditionalism : radicalism was in essence the restoration of a kind of English golden age. This was 'the ideology of the small producers', as Thompson admits<sup>[9]</sup>. But he also insists upon the extent to which this sort of thinking was developed by the contact with the new proletarian public, and shows how its particular defensive strength was employed in the new situation. Even the Protestant dissident sects, in spite of their abject other-worldliness, had preserved a 'slumbering Radicalism'<sup>[10]</sup> with elements of resistance in it. In the conditions of the time, the new working class was desperately short of means of resistance. It had to utilize everything to hand, and posterity has no right to be condescending about the terrible limitations of what ensued, the crop of hybrid, even pathological, unions which the workers were saddled with.

Here, as so often, the author's sympathy and passion carry us to a real understanding of happenings; in his company, we penetrate beyond the level of mere chronology, into real history, into an imaginative re-creation of the experience of the past. He is engaged in constant polemic with the academic 'objectivity' which sees history as a relation of the 'facts', and the 'facts' as whatever can be expressed statistically. He tries consistently to grasp for us 'the quality of life' under the Industrial Revolution. This requires 'an assessment of the total

life-experience, the manifold satisfactions or deprivations, cultural as well as material, of the people concerned'.[11] Only an imaginative effort of this sort brings us to the reality, the human dimensions of what happened. And it is in this sense that Thompson defends a 'classical' view of the period, as one of mass immiseration and suffering, against the empiricists who have maintained that, after all, it saw some rise in the standard of living. 'During the years between 1780 and 1840 the people of Britain suffered an experience of immiseration, even if it is possible to show a small statistical improvement in material conditions,' he points out, 'the process of industrialization was carried through with exceptional violence in Britain ... This violence was done to *human* nature.'[12] The fundamental curse of the era was the very thing which raised the standard of living - the new economic conditions of life, the new alienation of the work-process itself which 'casts the blackest shadow over the years of the Industrial Revolution'.[13]

Besides the romantic, backward-looking resistance to industrialization represented by Cobbett, the English people were presented with another ideology during the same years : that of Tom Paine. The English bourgeoisie had shut out the more revolutionary aspects of the Enlightenment. Paine did his best to make up for this. *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* are injections of pure Enlightenment rationalism, the militant and democratic optimism of a newer bourgeois world. Here was the authentic voice of an English Jacobinism, and Thompson reminds us how important it was : '... the main tradition of 19th century working-class Radicalism took its cast from Paine ... Until the 1880's it remained transfixed within this framework.'[14] But if this was so, could not Paine fill the lacuna left by the cramped intellectual development of the bourgeoisie, could not this tradition educate the working class into the aggressive egalitarianism the masters had no use for? The ruling class had abandoned Reason for a footling reasonableness - why could its subjects not appropriate the lost heritage for themselves?

A book, however significant and popular, cannot itself permanently change and educate great masses of people. The presence and diffusion of the right ideas may be a necessary condition of advances in mass consciousness, but other conditions lie in the day-to-day awareness of people, their practical experience of reality. It is these which were decisive in this case. In considering what Thompson says on this theme, we approach the central nerve of his argument. 'Had events taken their "natural" course,' he observes, 'we might expect there to have been some show-down long before 1832, between the oligarchy of land and commerce and the manufacturers and petty gentry, with working people in the tail of the middle-class agitation.... But after the success of the *Rights of Man*, the radicalization and terror of the French Revolution, and the onset of Pitt's repression ... the aristocracy and the manufacturers made common cause. The English *ancien régime* received a new lease of life...' [15] There was to be no second revolution in England. 'The only alliance strong enough to effect it fell apart; after 1792 there were no Girondins to open the doors through which the Jacobins might come.' [16] Another instalment of bourgeois revolution was only possible if a significant enough section of the substantial middle class wanted it, and was prepared to risk the 'alliance' in question. Only this could have disrupted the forces of property and weakened the regime enough to launch a revolution, providing the circumstances under which the petty bourgeoisie and workers might have obtained power. By themselves, the latter were incapable of generating a revolutionary situation, whatever ideas were in their minds. But it is situations, and action, the bite of experience, which crystallize ideas from the 'mind' into the nervous system itself, making of them a dominating reflex and redrawing the limits of consciousness. Perhaps this is truest of all in the case of revolutionary ideas, struggling as they are against the dense weight of most historical culture - and how few those critical

situations are that can be turned into hinges of history in this way, 1789, 1917 or 1949! Hence, neither Paine nor any other revolutionary ideology could really penetrate and dominate the 'sub-political attitudes' of English subordinate classes. In several crucial passages, Thompson indicates what occurred instead.

The fundamental experience of the masses, in the period of the making of the working class, was the very opposite of coherent, aggressive self-assertion. It was an experience of being driven into revolt, and finding every means of expression cut away, every channel hopelessly blocked, every friendly element neutralized. In this historical nightmare 'the revolutionary impulse was strangled in its infancy; and the first consequence was that of bitterness and despair'. [17] Psychologically, a sort of withdrawal was the only possibility, the turning-in of a whole class upon itself. Escape was possible solely on the level of fantasy : in what Thompson describes, eloquently, as the 'ritualized form of psychic masturbation' provided by the Methodist Revival, or in the even more demented vagaries of Joanna Southcott and other prophets. The chapters on the ghastly religious terrorism into which Puritanism had degenerated at this period are, indeed, among the most instructive and impressive things in the book. [18] 'In the decades after 1795 there was a profound alienation between classes in Britain, and working people were thrust into a state of *apartheid* whose effects ... can be felt to this day ... Segregated in this way, their institutions acquired a peculiar toughness and resilience. Class also acquired a peculiar resonance in English life : everything ... was turned into a battleground of class. The marks of this remain...' [19] Here was the result of the long, sporadic, ill-organized revolt of the proletariat, in the first generation of its existence: apartheid, apartness - within the new capitalist social order, whose laws supposedly abolished feudal ranks and levelled all relations to that of the business contract, the working class was beaten by repression almost into the condition of a feudal 'estate'. It was, so to speak, forced into a corporative mode of existence and consciousness, a class in and for itself, within but not of society, generating its own values, organizations, and manner of life in conscious distinction from the whole civilization round about it. Everywhere, the conditions of capitalism made of the worker something of an exile inside the society he supported. Only English conditions could bring about such total exile.

But it is, paradoxically, precisely in relation to insights such as this that one feels the limitation of *The Making of The English Working Class* . We live in a society which, sociologically speaking, has been mainly working class for over a century. It is what it is, therefore, largely because of what the working class became, so that we must look with the most intense interest at any study of the formation of the class for clues as to this later evolution. There are many such hints in Thompson's book. But, exasperatingly, they remain hints. From his chosen period, 1789 to 1832, he looks backward in rich detail, describing popular traditions amply and appreciatively; while only occasional, almost incidental, remarks carry the reader forward in time to the maturity of the working class. This impression is aggravated by the inconclusive, even arbitrary, termination of the argument - the power of the work, the passion and enthusiasm animating it are such that one instinctively expects a more definite and sweeping conclusion. During the years of its terrible genesis, the English working class 'nourished, and with incomparable fortitude, the Liberty Tree. We may thank them for these years of heroic culture.' So the author ends. He is right, in their complacent embalming of the past the English have disfigured it, it is the duty, and the privilege, of socialists to rediscover and honour what deserves to be honoured, to make the past relive in the creative consciousness of the present. However, his study evokes other sentiments besides this gratitude, and Thompson has no words for them.

The formation of the English working class was a major tragedy. It was also one - and perhaps the greatest single - phase of the tragedy of modern times, the failure of the European working class to overthrow capital and fashion the new society that material conditions long ago made possible. The horrors of our time, Fascism and Stalinism, the agonizing problems of 'under-development' and the Cold War, are all products of this disastrous failure. If the working class of only one major industrial nation had succeeded, the course of history would have been radically changed. And did not the English working class seem destined to lead the way? With what confidence Marx wrote, in 1854, surveying its prodigious growth, its irresistible numbers, the overwhelming contrast between this leviathan and the bogus facades of Old England! 'In no other country ... has the war between the two classes that constitute modern society assumed such colossal dimensions, such distinct and palpable features. But it is precisely from these facts that the working classes of Great Britain, before all others, are called to act as leaders in the great movement that must finally result in the absolute emancipation of Labour.' [20]

If, given the conditions of its origin, the English working class was bound to repeat to some extent the experience of the English bourgeoisie - should it not produce the first great and decisive working-class revolution, the equivalent of 1640 in proletarian terms?

But the basic existential situations of the working class and the bourgeoisie are entirely different, and beyond a certain point this difference invalidates the comparison. Whereas the bourgeoisie arises as the agent of a new mode of production within medieval society, as a 'middle' propertied class established securely upon this basis, the working class possesses no corresponding foundation within capitalist society. It has nothing outside itself, its own organization and consciousness. Hence, while the bourgeoisie was able to develop gradually, to transform the older order in stages as one kind of economic life fell apart before the piecemeal invasion of another, the working class cannot hope for the same sort of victory. In certain cases, the genesis of capitalism did bring about tremendous social tension only resolvable by revolutions, in certain cases the bourgeoisie was compelled to evolve a pure, militant bourgeois consciousness as the weapon of its triumph - above all, in France. It was also possible for the bourgeoisie to transform society far more blindly and empirically, however, as the case of England shows - where 'empiricism' led to the most complete success of all, to the total subjection of society and economic domination of the world. And it is this kind of progress which is ruled out for the working class, and for socialism. Consciousness, theory, an intellectual grasp of social reality - these cannot occupy a subordinate or fluctuating place in the socialist transformation of society, no empirical and anti-ideology or trust in the 'natural' evolution of affairs can substitute for them.

Consequently, in order really to 'repeat' the pattern of English history, the working class had to become what the bourgeoisie had never been - what it had renounced, what it had found effective replacements for, what it desired not to be with all its force of instinct. That is, a class dominated by reason. To become a new hegemonic force, capable of dominating society in its turn, the English working class absolutely required a consciousness containing the elements ignored by, or excised from, the consciousness of the English bourgeoisie.

This was the task that was completely, tragically, beyond the powers of the English working class. Nothing else was beyond its powers. In numbers, in essential solidarity and homogeneity, in capacity for organization, in tenacity, in moral and civil courage, the English working class was, and is, one of the very greatest of social forces. And it has always existed in one of the least militarized of bourgeois states. No external fetters could ever have

withstood this colossus. It was held by intangible threads of consciousness, by the mentality produced by its distinctive conditions and experience.

One of the chief virtues of *The Making of the English Working Class* is the writer's insistence on the role of consciousness in finally determining the character of a class, and of class relations. The new 'collective self-consciousness' was, he claims, the 'great spiritual gain of the Industrial Revolution'.<sup>[21]</sup> The positive aspects of this consciousness, its brotherliness and mutuality, its sense of dignity and community, are clearly brought home to us. But its limitations are not clearly presented, although they are no less important, and have lasted just as long. 'If we have in our social life little of the traditions of *égalité*,' he says, 'yet the class-consciousness of the working man has little in it of deference.'<sup>[22]</sup> The 'apartness' of working class consciousness, however, *implies* a kind of deference - for it resigns everything else, the power and secret of society at large, to others, to the 'estates' possessing authority or wealth. A corporative mode of consciousness turns aside from everything not the 'natural' or 'proper' affair of the corporation or class, all that does not belong to 'its' own world. A real sense of social equality - foreign to the English bourgeoisie - renders such a consciousness utterly impossible, for its nerve is the conviction that everything social is the proper affair of everybody, once and for all. Hence, the imposition of this profoundly corporative outlook on the workers was a fundamental victory for the ruling orders. It is true indeed that the working class 'made itself, as much as it was made' - but not *freely*, rather along the lines laid down by the bitter experiences Thompson recounts so well, lines which partly turned this self-activity of the working class into the instrument of its own subjection. In the alienation from certain universal values of the bourgeoisie - values vital to the further evolution of society - lay a particularism, an ideological parochialism fatal to all revolutionary ideas. Revolution is the rejection of all corporative attitudes in the name of a vision of man.

Yet this general reflection only conveys half of the tragedy, or half of the unique ascendancy the English bourgeoisie attained through it. The final bite of the process of formation of working-class consciousness lay in the *integration* of the latter into an entire system of false consciousness, each element in which supported every other. The workers could not be transformed into this peculiar, densely corporate type of class, while the bourgeois became 'citizens'. There could be no 'citizens' in English society. The bourgeoisie had to remain a 'middle class' - as if feudalism was still in full vigour! - the 'backbone of the nation' functioning under yet another 'estate', the 'upper class' or ruling class. To the particularism of the working class there had logically to correspond a whole web of particularisms, in the weird heterogeneity and pluralism of society as a whole England. The English social world *had* to become a world of the inexplicably concrete, the bizarre, the eccentric individual thing and person defying analysis. Is this not the true historical sense of the quiet madness of England? Even such endearing, hi exasperating, Dickensian lunacy had its historical function - the function, so to speak, of not seeming to have any function or meaning.

The final success of the system in subordinating the working class can be gauged, perhaps, in terms of the sheer *impossibility* of a *real* 'apartheid' of one class. The working class could not in reality create such a separate world. The separate, inward-turned class-consciousness could not be uniquely a means of protection of the positive values and 'way of life' of the workers - it was bound to be also a specific vehicle of assimilation, whereby bourgeois ideas and customs were refracted downwards into the working class. The result was not a naked imitation of the middle class, but a kind of translation - the kind of working of class caricature of bourgeois ultra-respectability which puzzled and enraged Marx. The English working class transforms every thing into its own corporative terms. Where in England can

one find the perfect satirist's image of the bourgeois, if not among the older trade union leaders? But such mediate assimilation is more deadly than aping, precisely because it presupposes the self-activity of the class, because it reposes on a *genuine* distinctly working-class consciousness.

Because of the intensive, apart character of working-classes in consciousness, no social or political doctrine ignoring the real economic position of the working class could grip it lastingly. It is possible to see the meaning of this, perhaps, if we recall Marx's observation on the French proletariat in its early days : 'The more developed and universal is the *political* thought of a people, the more the *proletariat* - at least at the beginning of the movement - wastes its forces on foolish and futile uprisings which are drowned in blood ... Their political understanding obscures from them the roots of their social misery, it ... eclipses their social instinct.'<sup>[23]</sup> The story of the English working class is almost the contrary of this. This is the kind of *bloody* tragedy it escaped, thanks to the lack of development, the non-universality, of its political thought. The social instinct of the English proletariat could not be eclipsed, it was firmly embodied in a distinct class consciousness. But neither could it be expressed, realized positively in a non-corporative vision of the world, under the conditions of the time. Hence, the workers tried first of all to solve their problems with the Utopian-corporative ideology of Owenite trade-unionism, an attempt to build a kind of socialism in and for the working class itself, ignoring the rest of society. When this was proved impossible, their attention and force were directed to the question of hegemony over society as a whole - but in the totally inadequate forms provided by Chartism, a simple radical-democratic programme dissociated from the 'social instinct' of the class. No not force on earth would have defeated a social movement and ideology really expressing and rooted in the social instinct of the English working class, not even if the English ruling class had imported all the gendarmes in Prussia. But the defeat of Chartism was absolute, because it was not so rooted. After the collapse of the movement, the working class was thrown back of necessarily into itself, and into a more moderate and timid form of corporate action, into the trade-unionism which remains its basis to this day.

Unable to really 'repeat' the world-building experience of the English bourgeoisie, from 1850 onwards the working class indulges in a *false* repetition of that experience, in a kind of mimesis of bourgeois evolution as the latter was seen and misrepresented by the bourgeoisie itself. It behaves *as if* the workers, in their turn, could transform society in their own image by a gradual extension of their influence, by an accumulation of reforms corresponding to the bourgeois accumulation of capital. Customarily, this development is ascribed to external factors : the long prosperity of British capitalism after mid-century, the zenith of its power, or the imperialism which followed and permitted the ruling class to 'bribe' the workers still farther and make them conscious of their superiority to foreign exploited masses. But *The Making of the English Working Class* bring us to a vivid realization of the *internal* history that gave to such factors their true meaning and effects. It adds, or begins to add a missing dimension to the history of the working class and 'British Socialism'.

What could have made a difference, what could have prevented the fatal, closed evolution springing from the conditions Thompson describes? The temptation some will feel is to answer in one short, eloquent word : Marxism. Was not this the coherent universal, hegemonic ideology of socialism alone corresponding to the social instinct of the English working class? But the word has only to be raised for the false simplicity of the answer to be obvious. The ideas of Marx penetrated the consciousness of the English workers less than anywhere else, when they eventually arrived on the scene.

The dialectical contradiction made evident by the failure of Marxism among English workers consists in this : the very type of intense class-consciousness which preserves a fundamental authenticity of reflex and attitude - the prerequisite, the guarantee of socialism - also conceals and renders inaccessible this vital area of awareness, beneath a carapace of dead matter. This carapace, the product of generations of the static, vegetative culture of working class 'apartheid', with all its parochialism and elements of mimesis, cannot be split merely by the announcement of Marxist ideas. Marxism is the product of the confluence and rethinking of all the major currents of bourgeois thought - it is the child of the Enlightenment and of German philosophy, as well as of English political economy. And in it, the ideas of classical economics assume a quite new significance and resonance. England, the home of political economy, is also historically estranged from the Enlightenment and German philosophy - consequently, in England Marxism encounters an environment in a sense estranged from, unaffected by, impervious to the very sources of Marxism itself, in spite of the national reverence for political economy.

This fact, together with the immense accumulation of historical peculiarities in England, on the level of the social superstructures and on the level of class consciousness and class relations, meant that Marxism as much - in the form of the commonly diffused basic schemes of 'vulgar Marxism' - was bound to be more or less *meaningless*. Presented in this fashion - as a kind of revealed truth on a plate - it could not possibly make fruitful contact with the actual experience and consciousness of the working class. If it could not enter into consciousness in this way, how could it change consciousness?

To put the matter in another way, very schematically : the characteristic of the English working class was its alienation from bourgeois reason, and an objective necessity for its self realization was the overcoming of this alienation. Hence, Marxism - which, of course, in content offered the possibility of just this - could only be absorbed in England through a truly gigantic process of thought, an intense and critical activity capable of compensating and remedying the deprivation. Marxism, to be effective, had to be the means whereby the working class threw off the immense, mystifying burden of false and stultifying consciousness imposed on it by English bourgeois civilization. To be this, it had to be thought out organically in English of terms as an unmystified consciousness of English history and society. But this was a prodigious cultural task. And in Victorian England there was no radical, disaffected intelligentsia to even undertake it.

All working-class movements, all socialist movements, need 'theory'. The problem of consciousness and the changing of consciousness is always a crucial one. But in England, as Edward Thompson's book shows us, from the beginning the question assumed quite special acuteness, due to the special form of bourgeois hegemony in England and the special, distorted forms of consciousness this hegemony largely depended on. The problem was, to create theory in an environment rendered impervious to rationality as such; to create the intense rational consciousness and activity which were the necessary pre-requisites of revolution in this society of totemized and emasculated consciousness, to generate the intellectual and emotional force capable of exploding the omnipresent weight of the dead generations. The English working class, immunized against theory like no other class, by its entire historical experience, *needed* theory like no other.

It still does.

## NOTES

- 1] *The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution*, pp. 67-68, Selected Works, Vol. I..
- 2] *Communist Manifesto*, p. 43, Selected Works, Vol. 1.
- 3] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford Worlds' Classics Edition), p. 83.
- 4] *The Theory of Morals and Legislation*, pp. 319-29.
- 5] Victor Gollancz, 1963.
- 6] *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 7] *Ibid.*, p. 807.
- 8] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 9] *Ibid.*, p. 759.
- 10] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 11] *Ibid.*, p. 444.
- 12] *Ibid.*, pp. 445-6.
- 13] *Ibid.*, p. 446.
- 14] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 15] *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 16] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 17] *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 18] *Ibid.*, see Ch. XI, *The Transforming Power of the Cross*.
- 19] *Ibid.*, pp. 177 and 832.
- 20] 'Letter to the Labour Parliament', 1854, in *Marx & Engels on Britain*, p. 402.
- 21] Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 830.
- 22] *Ibid.*
- 23] Article II, 'Vorwärts', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, ed. Bottomore & Rubel, 1844, pp. 236-7.

**Source;** *New Left Review* I/24, March-April 1964