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Under the Skin of English Life

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REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

Under the Skin of English Life

David Levine

Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Radicalism During the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982).

Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1980).

Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981).

IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND, then the workshop of the world and the first industrial nation, there was a yawning gap between the objective conditions of social life and their subjective recuperation. In the face of rapid change and seemingly overnight development, older forms of inter-class relations proved, in many places, to be a sheet-anchor of stability and continuity. The helplessness of the working class, adrift in chaos, is nowhere better recounted than in the bitter-sweet remonstrances of Allen Clarke, a Bolton, Lancashire, cotton factory operative and socialist militant:

> They have no true idea of life. They believe they are born to work; they do not see that work is but a means to life.... They have no rational grasp of politics, or political economy.... They think that the masters build factories and workshops not to make a living by trading but in order to find the people employment. They honestly believe that if there were no mills or workshops the poor people would all perish. (quoted in Joyce, 90, 206).

These sentiments, voiced in the last year of the nineteenth century by an acutely conscious member of the working class about his fellows, directs our attention away from struggle and toward not just accommodation but patriarchy and deference. For it is the common theme running through these three books that, in an ideological-cum-cultural sense, England experienced the trauma of industrialization by calling upon older traditions of hierarchy and the social solidarity of community-based reciprocity between the rulers and the ruled.

D. Levine, "Under the Skin of English Life," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 177-184.

Craig Calhoun argues that the political radicalism of the protean working class of the 1790-1830 period was largely fuelled by backwards-looking "reactionary radicals." Their enormous energy was generated from opposition to new forms of exploitation as well as the blatant abdication of their "natural" rulers who failed to honour either their civil or moral rights. Their spokesman was Richard Cobbett who championed the moral economy and the communal experience of autonomous producers and sturdy peasants. According to Calhoun, it was not the factory proletariat but the proto-industrial cottagers who formed the rank and file of this oppositional movement, whose members were strongly "sociated" amongst themselves. Jacobin ideological theories of *political liberation and egalitarianism* were fused with an idealized version of the moral universe of the past. "As a traditional inheritance, the notion of a moral economy does not so much distinguish the rebels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from their forebears, as it sets them apart from the 'modern' working class. . . ."(43)

While the "reactionary radicals" struggled against the Industrial Revolution, the "modern" working class sought to reform it from within. "Factory workers were led of necessity to see themselves in relation to their employers; they were led to the formation of trade unions, and a trade-union consciousness. More specifically, their trade unions were led to a process of continual conflict and negotiation with employers rather than to political objectives or to an attempt to circumvent employers altogether." (122) "Control over a link in the chain of production is *thus critical to the factory worker.* Demand itself is critical to the artisan. The one is thus led to see a narrow set of issues arising directly between employer and employee. The other, the artisan [i.e. the proto-industrialist], is led to see a broader set of issues between producer and society." (123) In contrast to the constricted world view ascribed to the factory proletariat whose main concern is wages, "The artisan must defend an entire process of production; he must prevent his trade from being swollen and degraded, and he must prevent it from being supplanted by mechanized or foreign production. . . . An artisan is a producer who combines the different functions of design, discipline and fabrication in one person and one craft." (123) He/she did not, therefore, simply sell his/her labour time nor was he/she simply an adjunct to the machine-tool. Finally, one must stress (as Calhoun does) that the period 1790-1830 witnessed the massive expansion of *both* factory and proto-industrial modes of production. Indeed, as Raphael Samuel has suggested, for most of the "*classic*" *Industrial Revolution*, *hand*-powered, small-scale workshops were at least as common and important as large, steam-powered factories. This last point's importance is that it provides the material base, as it were, for the "reactionary radicals" and their numerical preponderance, even as late as the 1840s. "The age of Chartism and the early factory agitation was dominated as far as working people's action was concerned, by the split between older artisan populations and the newer factory and labouring populations" and, therefore, "Chartism needs to be seen, in important ways, as an ending as much as a beginning." (126)

Calhoun's argument, then, focuses on the centrifugal forces within the early industrial proletariat. He stresses variety and diversity of experience. He underscores the importance of local experience as opposed to national developments. His position is quite consciously distinct from *that of E.P. Thompson and, in fact, the* book is in many places an extended critique of *The Making of the English Working Class* and its thesis that this period was a time of generalized class formation. Calhoun is quite explicit in rejecting Thompson's suggestion that the early radicalism of the Luddites presaged the

"mature" struggles of the Chartists and the Plug riots. Calhoun's strongest criticism of Thompson is that "he chronicles not the making of the English working class but the rise and fall of the radical *English artisanate*." (14) "Thompson's narrative really ends with Peterloo" (132) and, therefore, his working class never is seen to have developed a critique of capitalism based on a labour theory of value in which workers are deprived of surplus value through their exchange of labour for wages. To the extent that "Thompson, in common with other Marxist humanists, has given class struggle, as well as class consciousness, priority over class as a social structural category" (23) he has apparently been deceived by the appearance and not the reality of the thing itself.

Calhoun's insistence on the cohesiveness of proto-industrial communities, based on a common material foundation, leads him to criticize Thompson's rather free-floating discussion since "what is neglected in Thompson's analysis is the fact that action depends not only on the premises in people's minds but also the objective circumstances in which they find themselves and the immediate social relations which bind them to each other." (22) In place of diffuse ideological currents, Calhoun claims that not only do "workers combine on the basis of their specific interest as workers in capitalist society. . . . [but also] It is necessary that workers form sentient groups, communities, which are congruent with the class mobilization." (145) He also asserts that "*community took a clear precedence over* national class as a motivation for and organization underlying collective action" so that "the sentiments, knowledge, and social relations which bound people together nationally were not [necessarily] sufficient to create an effective, active class." (131)

Calhoun pits an opposition between emotional commitment of the "reactionary radicals" and the analytic clarity of the working class. "Both radicalism and Methodism attempted to tame the emotional expression of their adherents and tie it to ideologically sound and organizationally sanctioned occasions" so that "it can readily be asserted that the proportionate influence of these 'non-rational' but ordered aspects of social life declined, and with the decline, some of the strength of the mobilization was sapped." (137) The price of this organizational success was steep since "While the communities of traditional workers had to transform the basis of the British economy or cease to exist [i.e., they had to stop the Industrial Revolution in its tracks], the new working class could gain an indefinite range of ameliorative reforms without fundamentally altering its collective existence." (140) In accepting the rules of the game and negotiating on a limited set of issues, the working class of the middle years of the nineteenth century divested itself of radical inheritance and "no special explanation is needed, thus, to account for the relative quiescence of the Victorian working class or its acceptance of economic concessions in lieu of political gains." (141) For Calhoun, then, effective political mobilization required grassroots solidarity. *Local ties were critically important* in explaining what turned an aggregate of individuals into a grouping capable of concerted collective action. He states that "community is a culturally defined way of life" (159) and that it provided the necessary impetus to coalesce sentiments, knowledge, and social relations into an effective political force. It was in isolated, one-industry communities that the Luddites operated and the Pentridge "Levellution" was hatched. Such communities were centripetal in their organization, parochial in their outlook, and usually uncontrolled by political superordinates. Rather like Marx's potatoes, however, these villagers did not seem to communicate across local lines particularly well although this weakness

was, ironically, their source of independent strength.

Calhoun's movement from bald assertion to historical example is, to say the least, disappointing. He has no evidence to buttress his claims regarding the social bonds within communities in southeast Lancashire. He is unable to detail the frequency of inter-community ties as opposed to intra-community ones. He does nothing to convince the reader that the communities he is talking about were stable since he presents no evidence on geographical or social mobility. He has *almost not a single procedure for distinguishing* ways of life in the proto-industrial villages from that in Manchester. We do not learn anything about the involvement of factory and/or proto-industrialists from the same communities in the process of struggle. And, finally, he does not in fact discuss any single community or group of communities, so that the reader is left with an abstracted picture of the social structure of southeast Lancashire and, in particular, the texture of life in the proto-industrial villages. Despite his protestations, we learn nothing new from Calhoun about Luddism and precious little to do with local history. Moreover, his treatment of patriarchalism is most disappointing. He never deals with the specific relationship between a generalized "reactionary radicalism," the moral economy and inter-class relations. Indeed, he seems to claim that it was as a result of the absention of the gentry from their role as brokers between the larger political process and the micro-processes of life in the proto-industrial villages which created a free space for independent activity. (161) But we never find out if this supposed absention took place everywhere in southeast Lancashire nor if it was a momentary phenomenon or even just a failure of will on the part of the "natural" patriarchs.

In contrast to Calhoun's highhanded disregard for the stuff of history, Patrick Joyce makes it abundantly clear that by the middle of the nineteenth century the "natural" patriarchs were firmly in control in the small factory towns of southeast Lancashire. *Work, Society and Politics* is a magnificent book which skillfully combines wide-ranging generalization with careful local reconstruction. The interplay between historical forces and quotidian life is masterfully accomplished so that the reader becomes fully aware of the ways that "Work got under the skin of everyday life" (97) and how most of the workers internalized the paternalist rhetoric of the factory owners. This cultural formula was itself based on "the completion of mechanization of factory production, for it was only in the two decades before the mid-1850s that this most profound transformation was successfully consolidated, confirming the historical inevitability of industrial capitalism in the mind of the employer as much as in the mind of the operative." (3) The close and neighbourly atmosphere of factory towns such as Blackburn, Bolton, and Ashton-under-Lyne was a world away from the supposedly anonymous urban life of Manchester. Although factory industry changed the labour process, the factory towns Joyce describes seem to have had a familiar face-to-face quality about them. Indeed, their very smallness and the correlative importance of the resident "gentleman manufacturer" are crucial components of Joyce's story. We stand before the family firm in its finest hours — after it had successfully taken off but before the scions had tired of its demands, sold out and packed their bags for the lures of the metropolis and a rentier's lifestyle.

Curiously, although Joyce's book is subtitled "The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England" we do not learn a great deal about the work processes themselves. Instead, the author writes about the multiplex social institutions which were redefined or had newly emerged to justify the hegemony of the factory. Unlike John Foster's *Class Struggle in the Industrial Revolution*,

Joyce is little concerned with either workers' living standards or their intimate relations with one another. Suffice it to say, Joyce seems to think, "It was in the most stable economic environments that paternalism thrived best, and the stability and harmony of labour relations in Lancashire contributed much to the success with which paternalism elicited an affirmative response." (xxi) In essence, "paternalism had to deliver the economic goods." (93) And, at least insofar as a modest increase in living standards took place over the last two generations of the nineteenth century, it did just that so far as the workers were concerned. Because "The need for security was elevated into the beginning and the end of life.... Dependence therefore bred the need for certainty and coherence that the acceptance of caste and hierarchy met." (98) "The limits of work were the limits of life." (97) It was only at the end of the century, ironically at the very time that Allen Clarke remonstrated, that an independent working-class critique penetrated "the closed immediacy of the factory community" and redefined "the boundaries of people's outlooks." (335)

The main thrust of Joyce's book is concerned with the manufacturers' skillful manipulation of the political, religious, and ideological horizons of their operatives. Joyce writes suggestively about town planning ("the ecological development of the factory town"), labour discipline inside and outside the factory, the culture of improvement and, particularly, the "labour aristocracy," and the permeation of the working classes' culture itself — its clubs, chapels, friendly societies and ritual self-definition. These ritual events bulk large in Joyce's account of local life: "In the history of nineteenth-century popular life, gatherings such as these [Titus Salt's massive funeral procession in Bradford, Yorkshire], as well as the great monarchical congregations of the second half of the century deserve to take their place beside the massive Chartist and post-Chartist political throngs." (184) Many of these ritual events provide "Considerable evidence for the spontaneous character of workers' reactions." (183) Tories, in particular, were skillful choreographers with a deft sense of the common tradition. Almost instinctively, they seem to have relied on "The personal, the local and the concrete as the defining and delimiting marks of the political culture [which] suggests the persistence of traditional authority and of communal loyalties." (276)

The making of the English working class led not to strife and conflict but, in the industrial heartland, the ascendancy of a self-confident bourgeoisie-cum-aristocracy which ruled easily and with an almost innate sense of its hereditary mantle. After reviewing the ascendancy of the industrial bourgeoisie, Joyce remarks "when the big employers are considered as a whole, not only is the length and stability of their local connection throughout this period [i.e. the nineteenth century] apparent, their origins in non-manual and often substantially wealthy backgrounds is quite clear." (20) Though they were frequently divided among themselves on questions of religion and politics, "examples of [marital] union across the religious and political divide indicate the fundamental importance of the needs of class preservation and perpetuation." (22) While their children were frequently educated in "decidedly partisan" schools, reflecting the deep denominational cleavages within the employer class, by the 1860s "the demon of gentility" drew the leading industrialists in the region towards increasing incorporation into the currents of national political and, particularly, cultural life. By the last quarter of the century the "southern" mentality had clearly triumphed and nowhere was this triumph more clearly apparent than in the ideological ramparts that were erected upon "the articulation of notions of social responsibility drawn from feudal, or pseudo-feudal, ideals." (137-8)

The gentrification of the industrialists

was, according to Martin Wiener, a cultural counter-revolution. "As capitalists became landed gentlemen, JPs, and men of breeding, the radical idea of active capital was submerged in the conservative ideal of passive property, and the urge for enterprise faded beneath the preference for stability." (14) "The trajectory of admiration for material progress had reached an apogee in the eighteen-fifties" (30) and, thereafter, social responsibility, not profit, became the guiding light of those who directed industrial enterprises. Anti-materialism took a firm hold since it found a willing audience among those who idealized the pastoral world of *bucolic "merrie England" of days gone* by. Here, again, William Cobbett's significance is crucial for, as J.H. Plumb has noted, "no one can understand the development of Liberalism and Socialism in England, even the British Labour Party today, without understanding William Cobbett . . . [because ever since his time] . . . the dream of an Elysian England of patriarchs, well-fed peasants, contented, if illiterate, craftsmen, and compassionate profit-sharing landowners, has haunted English radicalism." (quoted, 118) For the lower classes, and for their leaders, an "English way of life" was consonant with a rural setting and ordered *social relations. Thus, the socialist revolu*tionary William Morris valued the English past and hated modern civilization while situating his utopian communities in the bucolic, relaxed and unhurried countryside, freed from both modern conveniences and the consequent demands they made. For the early English socialists — Morris, Carpenter, and Blatchford — agriculture and traditional arts and crafts were the embodiment of humanity's technical calling; industrial manufacturing perverted the natural order of things. Morris himself wrote "I am not sure but we could do without it [coal (but also industrial society)] if we wished to live pleasant lives, and did not want to produce all manner of mere mechanisms chiefly for multiplying our own servitude and misery. . . ." (quoted, 119)

For intellectuals on the left and right the Industrial Revolution was a catastrophe. It perverted social life and subverted its material basis on the land. By the end of the nineteenth century a profound pessimism pervaded English society and the culture of the preceding century was reinterpreted through new glasses tinted with nostalgia for and guilt about a lost inheritance. Besides being "un-English" and urban, industrial society was also materialistic and fast-paced. These latter characteristics, seen as the embodiment of the American way of life, *were obnoxious and held to be essentially* dehumanizing. The common people were in danger of being led astray from the simpler paths of their ancestors. This sense of drift and loss of control gave an urgency to the patriarchal belief that the lower classes had to be protected from their own materialism. They had to be kept in contact with their own birthright which was naturally antipathetic to "modern life." Higher wages were therefore important to late nineteenth-century socialists because they "enable the working man to enter on a purer and more worthy life" untainted by "mere sensual gratification." (quoted, 82) R.H. Tawney, a leading Christian *Socialist and influential intellectual, con*veniently forgot his family's prominence in brewing, banking and engineering during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution and denounced the " 'fetish worship' [of] economic activity and industry and what is called business" which seemingly led to "the confusion of one minor department of life with the whole of life. . . ." (115) Not surprisingly, Tawney saw himself as "a peasant displaced from the soil." (122) Ramsay Macdonald, "the man most responsible for shaping the modern Labour Party" (120) was another devotee of rural anti-materialism. His successors, Stafford Cripps, Clement Attlee, and Aneurin Bevan exhorted the common people to an

austerity in consumption while turning against a capitalist system which opposed human values with mere efficiency. J.B. Priestley despised modern capitalist society "not that it made the mass of the people poor, but [because] it made them unhappy, that it was organized on false moral and psychological principles." (quoted, 123) More recently, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan have sought to "promote social harmony and stability, and cushion the social fabric and the economic status quo from the stresses of change." (164) In light of the foregoing discussion, one might hardly be surprised that both PMs eagerly bought themselves farms, thereby maintaining "a link to what Callaghan's wife called 'the peasant in us.' " (164)

The appeal of a rural community of small producers which fired Calhoun's "reactionary radicals" has thus become a staple of the English intellectual inheritance. Profoundly conservative and deeply anti-materialistic, this belief in technological backwardness and consumer austerity is the main reason for England's long-standing economic malaise according to Wiener. Ideology and not economics explains the slide to de-industrialization. For Wiener, such authors as E.J. Mishan *(The Cost of Economic Growth)* and E.F. Schumacher *(Small is Beautiful)* are part of the problem, not the solution. Joyce's Lancashire patriarchs who opted for stability and social harmony at the expense of growth and technological innovation thereby retarded economic expansion in such a way that "the social and intellectual revolution implicit in industrialism was muted, perhaps even aborted." (Wiener, 158) It is Wiener's contention that this anti-industrial spirit was fostered by an educational system which was more attuned to the demands of Empire than the needs of modern industry. In the public mind "science was linked . . . with industry, and this damaged its respectability in upper-class eyes. Industry meant an uncomfortable closeness to working with one's hands. . . ." (18) So it is not surprising that "The better students on the whole found more gentlemanly employment, and the number of industrialists' and engineers' sons leaving behind their fathers' sort of life continued to exceed the number of graduates entering it." (133) These attitudes permeated the upper classes — Tawney's disregard for his family's background has already been mentioned, while Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859), T.H. Huxley (1825-1895), and Lyon Playfair (1818-1898) were eminent Victorian "modernists" who "rarely pushed principle to the point of practice" (19) and meekly sent their sons off to public schools. In the twentieth century, so Wiener argues, England has had the worst of both worlds: the public schools have inculcated their students with a profound distaste for industrial production and yet, at the same time, these very public school products are most frequently "highly placed industrial managers" (138) who have little interest in innovation or, indeed, production processes themselves. A vicious circle and one to which Wiener attributes England's profoundly dismal record of "psychological and intellectual de-industrialization" (157) over the past century.

History is replete with ironies. These three books highlight the unexpected renaissance of ordered, quasi-feudal social models in the first industrial society. Having unbound Prometheus, the English bourgeoisie were both shocked and appalled at the implications of a social order based solely on market principles. The working classes recoiled from this assault on their dignity and their livelihoods by enthusiastically welcoming the patriarchal employer. If such a man "provided continuous work and good conditions and materials, and . . . tempered hardness with fairness, [he] was assured of popularity and a stable workforce" and his paternal responsibility was answered by the "loyalty, pride and discipline" of

his workers. (Joyce, 99) This is quite understandable, particularly for "the older generations... [who always had] the consciousness of the employer as the provider of work." (165) These first proletarians were shell-shocked from their frontline contact with the protean phase of factory industrialization. They welcomed a respite from that bleak age. The reassertion of patriarchal forms of social leadership was the natural correlative of a system which robbed its workers of their independence and made them mere adjuncts of simple machines.