



# CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

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'Ideology' and 'Consciousness': Some Problems  
in Marxist Historiography

by

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ON ONE

DUCTION

The aim of this essay is to outline some recent developments in Marxist historiography, and to situate these in the context of general theoretical discussions current within marxism, in particular over the question of the analysis of 'ideology' and 'class-consciousness'. The importance of this question is intimately connected with larger political and theoretical events of recent times; especially the re-assertion of marxism as a humanism, and subsequent attempts (expressed above all in the work of Louis Althusser and in the rediscovery of that of Antonio Gramsci) to provide a more scientific analysis of social formations allowed for by the (related) extremes of 'economism' and 'humanism'.

Unfortunately, these developments and other significant debates - related problems of 'empiricism' and 'historicism', for example - can only be acknowledged and, to some extent, assumed in what follows. A longer philosophical discussion would probably overburden the paper, since adequate analyses of many of the concepts exist elsewhere, it is rational to refer the reader to them.<sup>1</sup> Another major reason for the omission of this kind concerns the background to the analytical perspective adopted here. It was formed in part by a critical reading of the central proposition emerging from Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst's important text 'Pre-capitalist Modes of Production': that marxism cannot claim a 'science of history'. Now, that proposition rests on a closely argued position which depends not only on an interpretation and critique of empiricism and essentialism, but also on an analysis of those concepts in relation to Althusser's work. The present paper is not conceived as an explicit contribution to that debate. Rather, it attempts to engage with the issues raised in that debate at an 'intermediate' level - not so much to rescue or reject Althusser's 'science of history' as to show how the general problems are implicit in current British Marxist historiography. Accordingly, the informing question is, 'What are some of the key issues confronting a theoretical marxist history?', rather than the more specific 'Is not the very idea of a marxist history an inconception?'

Two further levels of incompleteness arise from this absence. First, this essay is structured in a somewhat descriptive fashion. In a later edition the inadequacies of such an approach - something more than a matter of procedural convenience, especially with regard to history - will be indicated. On the other hand, such a procedure can be justified providing its limitations are recognised. As a 'moment' (but not only one moment) in the search for conceptual clarity, it is not altogether valueless. Second, as suggested, current theoretical debates have ever clearer the difficulty of entering a discussion over a specific question without making explicit one's own particular interpretation of the 'basic' concepts of historical materialism: mode of production, social formation, class, transition, and so on. The problem of ideology, perhaps more than most, is bound up with such interpretations. Yet the assessment of the character of marxism as a theoretical enterprise is something too vast to be in any sense adequately summarised or appended to a paper of this kind. I choose, therefore to raise, rather than offer a definitive solution to, such issues. The somewhat negative stance

possibilities, is a question conveniently forestalled by the restrictions of space. We hope, however, to return to these problems, and, in particular to the nature of Hindess and Hirst's intervention, in a future paper.

It is, nevertheless, an important strand of this essay to insist that the problem of theoretical presuppositions is quite central to the practice of marxist historians. It has been too often assumed that their 'closeness' to the 'real' historical process is privilege enough to exempt them from explicit recognition of theoretical 'relevance'. I have included a short study of E.P. Thompson because in his work this very proximity is openly given theoretical status. The other, younger, writers to which I refer are chosen because - in rather different ways - 'abstract' questions have a direct and conscious bearing on their 'historical' products. The dialogue between these two approaches seems to me extremely useful, and its resolution in favour of the latter inevitable. Marxist history will develop, is developing, only in the light of enquiry into conceptual issues not directly related - it would seem - to one's 'research'. Justification by reference to 'the facts' or 'reality' or History or 'working class experience' begs rather than (as it once did) answers all the questions. Despite its temporary negative phases, a conceptual enquiry of this kind is not a retrogressive enterprise: on the contrary, its exciting dependence on critical rigour and coherence can only be to the long-term benefit of historiography.

There are, broadly speaking, it seems to me, three ways in which 'ideology' can be conceived in a 'marxist' account.

A) Economistically. This conception would be that ideas are more or less direct (superstructural) emanations from the economically-defined 'base' or reality of a given society. Ideology thus reflects the dominance of a 'ruling' class: in capitalism, for example, the bourgeoisie. If, however, it is also held that such independent movement of the economy necessitates in the long run, say, a transition from capitalism to socialism, then it will be maintained that the class responsible for such a transition is but temporarily bound by bourgeois ideas. These ideas, therefore, because they are i) temporary, and ii) do not reflect the long term 'interests' of the proletariat, are false ideas, 'ideological' (in the pejorative sense) since they are the imposition of apparently-eternal truths by a historically limited minority class on the majority class, whose real interests lie elsewhere. The realisation that this is so, and that socialism is the true embodiment of working class 'aspirations', is often termed 'revolutionary class consciousness'. It is the logical opposite of false (ideological) consciousness.

B) Culturally. The reaction against this kind of determinist or 'vulgar' marxism often takes the form of an assertion of the equality of social conditions and ideas. Each is 'as real' as the other. Human agency (dependent upon ideas) is a precondition of revolutionary change, not its mechanical result. Societies are dialectical totalities in which there is not a pre-given dominance of economy over ideas and agency, but, rather, an essential complementarity. The sense which people make of their 'objective' situation is part of, and not reducible to, that situation. There is no abstract 'imposition' or 'distortion' of ideas. To reject such a schematism is to acknowledge the real constituents of socio-cultural formations. It is the task of historians to reveal and investigate such processes.

C) Structurally. Both Gramsci and Althusser have in different ways gone beyond the reductionism of the first account and the lack of theoretical differentiation in the essentialist or culturalist approach. Gramsci has argued that ideology springs from everyday life as much as from class design. 'Consciousness' is situated in practices defined and dominated by capitalist social relations. Nevertheless, the process by which that dominance is established ('Hegemony') is something to be continually secured: it is a negotiated process involving a changing relation between coercive and consensual practices, and taking place throughout 'civil society', often through alliances, from the level of everyday practical consciousness to that of political parties. This conception is clearly an advance on the mechanical notion, which remains ever-open to the (justifiable) criticisms of both non-marxist and marxist writers on the question of exceptions 'lags', a priorism, and so on. It also goes beyond the 'culturalist position', which comes too close to relativism and empiricism to be a recognisably marxist account.

Althusser's theory is similar, but tries to avoid both the 'cultural' and catch-all characteristics of some Gramscian interpretations. The social formation, for Althusser, is a determinate structure of relatively autonomous 'levels', the articulation of effective hierarchy within which is specified, ultimately, by the economic level, or, more strictly, the mode of production. As one such level, the 'ideological' 'region' is necessarily (structurally) incomplete, incapable of itself of grasping the totality of which it is a determinate part. Now, while there can be various degrees of recognition or 'misrecognition' at the level of consciousness (ideology is relatively autonomous; it is not wholly determined by the economy, or anything else), ideology is by definition a partial, or, better, imaginary relation by which individuals relate themselves to their real conditions of existence. It 'alludes' to reality without being inferior or reducible to that larger reality: their respective 'objects', Althusser would say, are logically incomparable.

Despite charges of dogmatism and obscurity, this Althusserian conception is at once more flexible and coherent than any variety of the first two explanations. Indeed, such an openness, he has argued, is characteristic of a non-ideological conception. Whether assertions of 'common sense' or more sophisticated 'bourgeois' rationalisations, ideological notions constantly seek to account for the totality, strive to identify its 'object', in terms inevitably reducible to their limited position. As such, ideologies are equally inevitably prone to a theoretical 'closure' which is, for Althusser, in contradiction to the canons of genuinely scientific practice. I cannot go into these questions any further here, though the differences between Gramsci and Althusser are significant and interesting, as is Althusser's view of science.<sup>2</sup> I hope, however, to have indicated that the theoretical scope of the 'third' interpretation of ideology, despite such differences, is far greater than that of the other two. The nature of the practical problems in marxist history should provide some backing for that claim.

Of course, it would be strange if the work of any one marxist historian corresponded exactly to any one of the abstract positions outlined. Texts or arguments quite often combine analyses and methods of substantiation which may have different conceptual bases. I have tried to schematically trace these differences. My argument will be that John Foster's work is, by large, dependent on the first series of positions, and that EP Thompson provides a good example of the second approach. In that sense, the first two sections of the paper can be seen as the most important ones. Yet Hinton and Stedman Jones represent

a complex combination of viewpoints perhaps more typical of marxist historians. The difficulty in 'placing' the former pair is, certainly, to do with the restricted scope of their respective objects of analysis. Yet the work of Hobsbawm, Hill, Dobb, or Hilton might just as well have been examined to show a similar combination of perspectives, were it not for the convenience offered by the smaller volume and more recent theoretical formation of Stedman Jones' and Hinton's books. Within and between texts, a greater or lesser, explicit or implicit, degree of conceptual 'impurity' can often be detected. Dobb, for example, was by no means the straightforwardly 'economistic' marxist which he is sometimes said to be<sup>3</sup>. Hilton has even less been so, and both Hobsbawm and (particularly) Hill have produced important 'cultural' and 'political' texts.<sup>4</sup> Having said that, the abstract of concepts which I have offered is no less an objective theoretical criterion. Authorial complexity, or juxtaposition within and between texts, for example, are no guarantees that the theoretical positions offered are coherent examples of the 'third' problematic - the latter being something more than a combination of the first and second 'tendencies'.

One last prefatory comment. The inability of 'sectional' viewpoints to adequately account for the structure of social formations, and thus the historical conjunctures which might be said to 'fall under' them, raises serious doubts concerning the methodology of 'labour history' or 'history from below'. Such practices depend on the idea that one has only to fill in the large blanks left by 'bourgeois' historiography in order to reach a more balanced view of the 'actual' historical process. The untheorised pluralism of this position (its reliance on a 'given' distribution of social places) is obvious, and it is empirically clear that the existence of a substantial body of trade union or working class history by no means produces a systematic marxist history. If it is indeed the case that this is due to the inherent limitations of any sectional viewpoint, then whatever the moral justification for such research, its political aim, if it has one, is theoretically misguided. To adequately establish this last assertion would require the kind of long and difficult discussion into the nature of historicist, empiricist and teleological explanation to which I have already referred, and which can therefore only be hinted at here. Such justification as my account has, however, is, in part, dependent on these broader arguments.



SECTION TWO

THE CENTRALITY OF EXPERIENCE

The writings of Edward Thompson, stretching over twenty years, form a massive and consistent body of militant socialist-humanist work. From his principled opposition to stalinism, through the break-up of right and left Cold War ideologies, to the resurgence of what he regards as the new dogmatism of marxist theory, his purpose has remained the same:

"Always life is more unexpected, arbitrary, contradictory than the thoughts of the philosophers who abstract and make conceptual patterns ..... Imaginative and intellectual faculties are not confined to a 'superstructure' and erected upon a 'base' of things (including men-things); they are implicit in the creative act of labour which makes man man" (Letter to the Philostines, 1957 p. 129; 131)

"To reduce class to an identity is to forget where agency lies, not in class, but in men". (Peculiarities of the English, 1965, p. 358.)

"People are not so stupid as some structuralist philosophers suppose them to be". (Whigs and Hunters, 1975, p. 262)

Thompson's humility with respect to the human agency he observes in the history of 'subordinate' classes is counterbalanced by the moral outrage directed against those (especially marxists) who 'seek' to replace individuality and agency by the reification of concepts: a reductionist scholasticism which cannot but lead to political sectarianism. For Thompson, history requires the closest attention to the feelings and motives of those who, due to bias or philistinism, have been lost to our own modern experience. Historical study therefore necessitates a certain suspension of presuppositions, an empathetic ability to 'listen' to people whose essential rationality in terms of their everyday experience relative to the conditions of their own society is often cynically dubbed by the right as the spontaneity of the mob, or by the left as 'ideology', something pre-given by a social structure. In the light of this stress on the validity of experience, it is no accident that Thompson, wherever possible, uses literary rather than statistical sources, descriptive rather than analytical argument.

It must be admitted at once that Thompson's command of such sources, and the line of argumentation deriving from it, have resulted in formidable achievements of humanist history. 'The Making of the English Working Class' is a classic of imaginative historical reconstruction. By skilfully combining 'literary' radical documents with the premiss that class is agency as much as conditioning<sup>1</sup>, he traces the politically articulate process by which the labouring poor, under conditions of increasing industrialisation, became, in their growing experience of solidarity as an interest group, and through varying degrees of self-recognition (machine breaking, radical societies and press, reform movements, etc.), a distinct class.

In his studies of the Eighteenth century crowd<sup>2</sup>, of the anonymous threatening letter, or of the identity of plebian culture, Thompson's project remains the same: to establish by sympathetic documentation the essential rationality and cultural autonomy of the 'lower classes', with the intent and effect of massively redressing the imbalance in our total



view of social relations and their historical development. It is important to see, I think, that such a project is of a general nature: one not simply about 'periods' but about (any) class society. The clear political directives about the recruiting ground for socialist ideas which derives from such a view indicate that Thompson is a political and socialist historian, and not merely one keen to see a more fully-balanced literary picture. And politics, he argues in his essay on the origins of the I.L.P.,<sup>3</sup> is no efflux of a system. Rather, it is the product of the energy and intellect of men such as Tom Macguire, something absolutely basic to the creative organisation of ordinary working people. It is Thompson's task as a socialist historian to rescue such people from oblivion.

The political thrust of his work, however, leads one to question his implicit methodological assumption that experience is to be seen in its own terms. I noted earlier that this position is linked to a variety of relativism. It has the implication that all experiences are equal in the face of the researcher. I have tried to show too that Thompson's political concerns are linked to his practice as a historian. Yet it seems that any political significance which the experiences he illuminates allow i) is part of the substance of their historically relative social totality, but ii) that such significance can only be the expression of some, amongst very many, 'interests', because all experiences, be they patrician or plebian, are equally valid. One way out of this difficulty - one which would seem to reduce the importance of political-historical generalisations which are based on external moral, and therefore contingent, judgements - would be to deny that experiences are the basic social data, that in themselves experiences are incapable of achieving a 'total' perspective, delimited as they are by their 'objective' social-structural positions. This is a solution, however, which Thompson has fiercely resisted.

The difficulty here is that Thompson himself would certainly not argue that class power, economic production, or any other concept is necessarily inapplicable, or that they can only be derived from experience. Rather, they must be validated in terms of peoples' experience, not seen as external forces moulding them. The term 'empiricist', therefore, would be (and with some justification) objected to, probably in terms of a necessarily dialectical materialism. The further argument as to whether such a concept of materialism shares large premisses with empiricism is something which I pointed to earlier, but which is, in the marxist tradition, hotly contested. Merely to deduce, from that argument, that someone such as Thompson is wholly concept-less or anti-theoretical, would be a travesty, whatever intractable problems remain.

In his paper, 'Peculiarities of the English' and in his review of John Foster's book Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution, Thompson takes up arms against modern marxist 'platonism' and 'idealism'. His adverse view of Foster's (as with K. Thomas<sup>4</sup>) use of computerised statistics, is, not surprisingly, accompanied by a defence of literary sources and sympathetic understanding. Against Perry Anderson<sup>5</sup> he - in a different way - urges a return to concrete research into the uniqueness of historical phenomena (in this case, the English 'route') at the expense of distorting theoretical models (especially that of 'other countries'). But, as before, not simply in order to argue for concreteness as such. This is clear in his criticism of Anderson's use of the concept 'hegemony'. Briefly, this is that hegemony, as Anderson uses the term, becomes a fact or property of the existence of a dominant class, such that - almost by definition - a class society entails effective hegemonic functions. Such an a priori position, Thompson rightly argues, commits us to the idea that the working class, for as

long as it is the working class, is necessarily subordinate to bourgeois hegemony, inevitably 'corporatist' in ideology and practice. For Gramsci, of course, hegemony was a process of domination, achieved on a number of levels. It is never 'given', but something to be continually consolidated, and therefore open to the influences of the class struggle. Difficult though the attainment of working class hegemony might be, it is, for Gramsci, the precondition and site of fundamental social change, and not its unproblematic result. If Thompson's defence of Gramsci slides over some extremely difficult problems of analysis (corporatism, reformism) raised by the Anderson-Nairn theses on labourism<sup>6</sup>, he is nevertheless correct to reassert a Gramscian position.

Indeed, in some ways, his own practice is a Gramscian one: essentially historicist in outlook, it seeks to reassess the real balance of forces in particular societies, the degree and mechanisms of hegemony exercised by the dominant class. His descriptions of forms of resistance on the part of the labouring poor in the eighteenth century not only aims to show the rationality of, say, food riots as collective bargaining, or the criminal letter, or the attempts to disrupt governmental control over forestry. He is also at pains to point out that in certain crucial respects these practices were allowed for in the outward 'theatre' of patronage and deference, ultimately limited by the equally ritual violence of the gallows. If the subtle reciprocity of ideas<sup>7</sup> which was the primary cultural hegemony of deference was at times stretched, it was nevertheless firmly enough based, itself specified the regions of opposition, such that it was never, before 1800, stretched to breaking point.

Thompson's conception of the social totality, then, is primarily historical, and only secondarily general or theoretical; or, more strictly, that the separation of the two (allegedly different) modes of analysis is untenable for a serious marxist historian. However, Thompson's historicism, despite its stress on the interrelationship of basic experiences, is not of the openly 'expressive' type, exemplified, for example, in some of Raymond Williams' work.<sup>8</sup> The latter's insistence on the necessary complementarity and unity of different social practices is entailed by their harmony at a methodological level. That is, that since any level of social intercourse is in principle inseparable from the totality, any concrete instance is an expression of an essential unity. His concept of 'structure of feeling', for example as something wider and deeper in application than 'ideology', depends on this methodological conception. It is not dissimilar to a notion of a different tradition: that of the 'spirit of an age'. Thompson has rightly taken Williams to task over such a conflict-free formalism, when applied to a concrete historical formation, namely the 1840s. On the contrary, Thompson argues, conflict - and in particular, class conflict - was the motor of social relationships. His expertise in C19 history is used to adequately substantiate the claim.

I have been attempting to show that Thompson's practice as a historian is far from presuppositionless or concept-free. One further example should suffice. In his essay 'Time, Work-discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', while still insisting on subjective experience as the validation of concepts about social relationships, this study of the inward apprehension of time under changing conditions of wage labour as a commodity nevertheless raises questions not dissimilar to those posed by Althusser in his discussion of the concept of historical time. In a sentence such as "Time becomes currency: it is not passed but spent."<sup>9</sup> Thompson implicitly acknowledges the necessity of an objective account of modes of production and the relationships which they define as the precondition, and not the result, of subjective or collective experience. In addition, that proposition

poses the problem of how to conceptualise time 'itself', or, strictly speaking, different temporal structures.<sup>10</sup> This, in turn, undermines the conception of the historians 'object' as given 'periods', or areas of analysis delineated by temporal boundaries, such as 'the social history of the nineteenth-century'. To extend a phase of Hobsbawm's<sup>11</sup> we have to move from social history to the history of society to the theory of social formations.

In the course of his latest work - a project intended to reconstruct a view of eighteenth century social relations as a whole from the scattered documentary sources of a supposedly 'criminal' fringe - Thompson again mounts an attack on current formalism within marxism. The onslaught is not so out of the blue as seems at first sight. He has been attempting to suggest that the Waltham Black Acts represented a last resort (though not entirely successful) on the part of an apparently secure class society, to counter the growing militancy of hunters and poachers of peasant or yeoman background, which threatened to undermine the property relations upon which that class society rested. In their defence of certain agrarian practices and livelihood, these hunters consciously challenged the arbitrary extension of property by taking extreme action. They nevertheless retained a belief in the appeal to justice and 'legal' protection.

Thompson theorises his defence of the hunters by opposing it to two apparently antagonistic theories which, for him, share the same assumptions. These are a 'law and order' historiography, and structuralist marxism. The former rationalises the actions of the ruling class in terms of the necessity for the stability of the legal status of property relations. The latter, he claims, shares this view by its insistence that we should never be surprised to find out that laws are always class laws. Against both positions, and in favour of the hunters' indignation at blatant miscarriages of justice, Thompson, argues, rightly in my view, that were laws as obviously partial as is made out, there would be no way in which they could contribute to the often subtle mechanisms by which cultural hegemony is exercised. In some sense, laws must actually be fair and just for much of the time. In that sense, he concludes, legal protection against arbitrary power is an unquestionable human good.

In this series of arguments, it seems to me, virtually all the characteristics of Thompson's work are present. The methodological belief that cultural experience is the only starting point. The idea that by the imaginative reconstruction of the rationality of the lower classes, as expressed in their own beliefs and agency, one can 'get at' the real history. The insistence that this real history can defy overbrief abstractions. The ethical impulse to defend the subjects of his text because they are the basis of both history-making and politics. The assertion that such positions are related to, but not reducible to, concepts such as class or hegemony. Just to list these elements, however, reveals the inherent ambiguity of some of his theoretical arguments.

Is the transformative labour of the historian ever simply a more or less transparent view on to the real historical past? Are past systems of social relations in any sense chiefly explicable in terms of (a minority) literary experience gleaned from selectively created and selectively preserved sources? How can there be a subjectively defined concept of class? On these questions, Thompson's position can only be described as naively empiricist. On the other hand, I have indicated that certain features of his work are inconceivable without a familiarity with marxist concepts which, whatever his claim to the contrary, necessarily have criteria of application quite removed from the moral priority of subjective experience. This very term is dubious:



he often means by it cultural formations or traditions, but these yet more depend on a series of general concepts. In arguing against the idea that law is invariably a reflection of class interests, Thompson misguidedly attempts to foist upon 'structuralist' marxists a vulgar conception of ideology and politics which it has been one of their primary achievements to refute. In the concept of 'relative autonomy', it has been the position of Althusser, and (for the political 'level') Poulantzas<sup>12</sup>, to insist that there is a genuine effectivity of each of these levels: not the appearance of, but a real dislocation between social practices. And this is, if less rigorously, what Thompson himself argues. However, in the myopic misrecognition of which he is often guilty, he does not carry the argument further to include the realisation that the very scope and limits of autonomy are in turn set by its compatibility with the reproduction of the relations of production. These relations are class relations.

There are, then, some similarities between Thompson and those marxists against whom he takes a stand. In his analysis of methodism, to take a final example,<sup>13</sup> Thompson comes close to a 'structural' account of ideology. By this I mean that in his refusal to write off ideology as simply 'false consciousness', a discussion of the mechanisms in which it operates as a necessarily imaginary relation seems to be on the agenda. However, in his determination i) to avoid abstraction, and ii) to repeatedly conflate vulgar with what he equally indiscriminately calls 'structuralist' marxism, he is subjectively bound to close the discussion. This personalist ascription has methodological roots: in maintaining that experience and agency are the irreducible stuff or historical reality, Thompson is epistemologically prevented from theorising the object of marxism and therefore of marxist history. His rejoinder to such a charge would no doubt be similar to that directed against Anderson: (to paraphrase) history remains irreducible, but also does not become history until there is a model. Yet the moment the model becomes explicit, it begins to petrify into axioms. We cannot, however, do without models; there must be a quarrel between model and reality, "the creative quarrel which is at the heart of cognition".<sup>14</sup>

Now EP Thompson is not a naive realist: he is aware that conceptual categories are indispensable for making sense of 'the facts'. The above definition of knowledge, consequently, displays an anti-empiricist intention. In conclusion, I want to briefly argue that in spite of that intention, the argument embodies the confusion which lies at the heart of Thompson's work. The main point here is to insist that theoretical history - or indeed any other kind of scientific theory - to be coherently anti-empiricist, cannot rely on the notion of a model. For the conception of a model already admits of the separation between fact and theory with priority given to the former. A theoretical 'hypothesis' can, therefore, only be a more or less plausible construction to be judged by its 'correspondance' or similarity to the 'real' facts. Yet this picture (itself a model) presupposes a means of identifying how closely the model approximates to reality. That is, an independent, a-theoretical means of identification: a projected neutrality which empiricism quickly reduces to the 'common sense', or experiences, or perceptions of the empirical individual. There cannot be a theory of models of approximation which is not intrinsically open to the empiricist position. A consistent anti-empiricist theory of models is, therefore, an untenable theoretical stance, as is the concomitant notion of a dialectical provocation of theory by fact. 'Facts' and theory are not equivalent and comparable categories: facts can neither stand on their own, nor 'speak' for themselves. Any role which supposedly non-theoretical referents play in the construction of knowledge is itself, and cannot be other than, theoretically produced.

Thus it is important to see that Thompson's thesis that models are the precondition of knowledge, yet necessarily distort it, is not a dialectical thesis, but a contradictory one. There is no logical sense in which knowledge can be defined as having a contradictory essence. To offer a somewhat psychologistic explanation: that move represents the wishful thinking of someone who cannot resolve the antithetical pull of his theoretical tendencies. I have argued that in spite of a strong marxisant and political thrust, a substantial presupposition of Thompson's work in general is that the object of history is real and unproblematic, and that the task of the historian is to reveal its authenticity. The result of this reversion to the irreducibility of certain realities is to theoretically close discussion under the shelter of a metaphysical belief. Such a closure, whatever the important source work and humanist insight of Thompson's project, is ideological.

SECTION THREE

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Thompson's review of John Foster's book is appropriately entitled 'Measuring Class Consciousness'. This is a useful starting point from which to grasp the apparent similarities and profound divergencies of the two historians. The convergence is at the level of 'subject-matter': part of Foster's account is the growing class consciousness of the proletariat in a period which partly includes, but goes beyond, the limits of Thompson's 'The Making'. On the other hand, it will be clear from my outline of the latter's interests that the notion that such a phenomenon can be 'objectively' assessed, especially by the partial use of statistical methods of measurement, is fundamentally in opposition to Thompson's phenomenological approach. Characteristically, the review is intended to establish the 'platonism', typical of all 'pre-selective' modes of historical analysis, in Foster's work. This polemic once again allows Thompson to undermine an argument by reference to the actual facts (misconceptions about handloom weavers, chartism, etc.). In the review, however, Thompson refers to a method of analysis wider in scope than the perhaps too-easy critique of pre-conceived models. This is that, for all Foster has done to reassert 'social being' as the basis of marxist history, his thesis - and in particular its pre-conceived nature - paradoxically remains at the level of a supposed progression of working class consciousness. Now, although we do an injustice to Foster to miss the fact that he is concerned too overcome the rigid conception that ideas are without material effects, be they in the economy or in political practice, nevertheless Thompson's point signals discrepancies in Foster's project. In this section I will attempt to identify these by arguing that they are primarily to be located not in the epistemological space between concept and fact, but at the level of the concepts themselves.

Foster's claim, to simplify, is this: the limited class identity of the early (-1830) working class gave way to a revolutionary consciousness in a period of crisis for the bourgeoisie (1830-47), that was followed in turn by a phase of 'liberalisation', which, though corresponding to a new stage of capitalist expansion, was the product of a necessary and conscious response on the part of the bourgeois class to the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. I have put this argument in a general form because Foster himself regards it as a contribution to our knowledge of the overall development of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, important to remember that his claim and its substantiation refer primarily to Oldham. This imposes necessary limitations on his mode of analysis. The identification of the nature and extent of class membership, cultural formations, political alliances, and, above all, the mechanisms of liberalisation, are specific to Oldham. Yet the method of enquiry is general and comparative: this is why Foster insists that his inclusion of material from Northampton and South Shields is crucial. In this sense the study is 'objective' and anti-historicist. The reasons for the existence of class consciousness here, or the lack of it there, are assessed by general criteria. And, as a marxist, it is not surprising to find that these are a combination of economic, political and ideological factors. The means of assessment, however, as Thompson points out, are in no way the prerogative of marxists: census data, housing, intermarriage, poverty, and occupational statistics familiar to social scientists of many persuasions. It is in his marshalling of the extensive research in the light of a thesis about the development of the social totality which distinguishes Foster's project as marxist, and from modern social scientific empiricism.<sup>2</sup>



What are the more specific arguments? The early formation of capitalist social relations - quite distinct from the later 'industrial' revolution - removed the conditions necessary for social revolution in the C18. Despite influential and literate radical groups around the turn of the century, state intimidation on a massive scale prevented the fruition of Jacobin ideas. The new development of the productive forces, however, entailed different and characteristically industrial methods of guaranteeing profit levels. There was, consequently, a change in the control of working class living standards from prices to wages. It was in the face of wage cutting as a systematic mechanism of class exploitation that a parallel economic class consciousness amongst the working class was formed. This having been established, Foster traces the development of trade union consciousness from the 'guerilla campaign'<sup>3</sup> of 1811-12, though its legalisation in 1825, to the upsurge and failure of general unionism. In Oldham, this massive new presence of the working class had political dimensions, which, by the late 1820s, had qualitatively altered the political balance of forces. With its unique 'unity from below', the alliance in Oldham between petty-bourgeois radicals and the working class had established its control over police force and vestry, had MPs committed to radical policies decisively formed by the masses, themselves unable to vote. This local political eminence resulted in popular control over the Poor Law, which remained unenforced for 12 years.

Such popular gains, Foster argues, achieved through mass mobilisation, required a high degree of unity between vanguard and rank-and-file which was absent in previous struggles, and suggests that we are dealing with a new phase of class consciousness. What other factors would clarify such a development? In a painstaking comparison of his 'three towns', Foster concludes that there is not enough to establish that unemployment, poverty, or unionisation have significant political consequences. Again, the existence of a tradition of radicalism does not help to distinguish Oldham's class consciousness from Northampton or Shields, where it was conspicuously absent.

Tradition and conditions of life, then, do not, of themselves, imply revolutionary class consciousness. Neither do patterns of housing conditions, intermarriage, or occupational and neighbourhood interrelations. (It should be noted that some of Foster's figures are not actually for the period under analysis). We can, in fact, observe, as would be reasonable if political factors overshadowed sectional, a higher degree of occupational integration in Oldham, but it is probably too small to substantiate Foster's case. In one respect, however Oldham is clearly differentiated: the 'logic' of the structure of its main industries, especially cotton. Shipping in Shields was a (basically) stable trade, where unemployment was a recurrent problem for employers and men alike. Northampton's shoe industry remained domestic and sweated. The scale and technology of Oldham's cotton industry alone of the three created work conditions which hinged around wage struggles. Here the connection could no longer be hidden: the arbitrariness and severity of cuts in living standards were directly produced by the capitalist mode of appropriation itself. Here were the 'economics of class consciousness' which provided the conditions for the crucial level of 'intellectual commitment' which, according to Foster, differentiated the first stage of consciousness from the second, and revolutionary, stage. This revolutionary consciousness, however, was defeated by a conscious and consistent ruling class offensive. The reason, we are told, is not to be seen in terms of either economic recovery or the reassertion of law and order. The facts might suggest this: loss of popular control over police, poor relief, and parliamentary representation, and the disaffection from the alliance of tradesmen and small masters at a time of the switch to foreign investment and increased differentials. But

these are results, Foster insists, and not causes of the loss of initiative in mass political action, which allowed the re-isolation of the town's vanguard. This is in turn partially explained by the bourgeoisie's change of strategy: accepting the popular demand for '10 hours' legislation, household suffrage, and a Health of Towns Act.

These political concessions accompanied measures in industry aimed to cut out the initial source of the problem. The creation of a 'labour aristocracy' by means of increased differentials reintroduced sectional authority and consciousness. Pacers in cotton, pieceworkers in metal, and (to some extent) pithead observers in coal, became the new vehicles of class discipline. 'Liberalisation' succeeded at an ideological level through the return of religious influences, Sunday schools, and reformist institutions such as mechanics institutes. The completion of the process of capitalist counter-offensive is indicated by the deep-seated anti-Irish and anti-foreign chauvinism shown in the 1850s and 1860s.

One way to begin assessing Foster's challenging account is to start, following a 'review' procedure, by noting its omissions, and thus making, in a fairly ad hoc fashion, some counter-suggestions. It could be pointed out, for example,<sup>4</sup> that there can be no simple bipartite division between boom and slump, or that Sunday schools, institutes, and popular demands for reform occur throughout the century. Or that there is no account of either national context or the role of Chartism,<sup>5</sup> and that to apply the tag 'guerilla campaign' to a series of complex, but to some extent backward struggles ('Luddism'), under the general heading of 'early trade union consciousness', is simply inadequate. At a more general level, Saville<sup>6</sup> has criticised the unmarxist anachronisms of Foster's conception of initial industrialisation, and his categorisation of the early movements' 'lack of Leninist rigour about state power'.<sup>7</sup> Further, his case - indeed his research - is undermined by his own admission that the statistical evidence is no more than a 'rough backing for more impressionistic findings'<sup>8</sup>, yet it is maintained that the factor of 'intellectual commitment' (the findings) constituted the 'decisive factor'.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the grounds for such a variety of criticisms - and many of them are, in my view, correct - they are only the index of Foster's real difficulty: the incoherence of his theoretical framework. If the overall importance of his work is as a rare attempt to systematically apply marxist concepts to historical sources, the most impressive features are those least amenable to Foster's Leninist rigour. What is lacking, however, is not the empiricist proposition that abstraction will necessarily distort the raw material, but a curious lack of systematisation and rigour, not in their application, but in the concepts themselves.

In a review I have found very useful in this account, Gareth Stedman Jones<sup>10</sup> argues that the problem lies in the combination of two sets of concepts which are in certain respects fundamentally opposed. In characterising capitalist relations as 'alienation', expressed above all in terms of ideas as 'false' consciousness, Foster employs a concept of the early Marx which is inherently unhistorical. It is a thesis which, because of its philosophical dependence on an abstract and unverifiable 'human nature' (or identity, or creativity), in positing a lost essence, entails the possibility of its recovery. Foster, following other marxists who have used this humanist schema, sees such a recovery in the victory of true consciousness over false. The content of such a process is filled out not by

philosophical explanation but in the Leninist thesis that trade union consciousness can give way to revolutionary consciousness by the politicisation of the former stage through the intervention of a politically literate organisation. In modern times, this has been seen to be the task of a Communist Party. Foster's necessary historical modification of that role emphasises instead the remarkable degree of unity between the masses and the leaders of the radical tradition. And, following Lenin, Foster attempts to show that the conditions for such political mobilisation are themselves produced by capitalist growth.

Stedman Jones, with these kinds of premisses in mind, increases the catalogue of criticisms of Foster, though more theoretically based. The simplicity of the False/True consciousness schema leads to the oversimplification of the move from trade union consciousness to revolutionary. For example, even if it can be shown that something more than trade union consciousness was at work, it is not necessarily an instance of revolutionary will. This, argues Stedman Jones, has to be determined by the content of the demands in question. And the demand for the Ten Hours Bill can hardly pose as revolutionary. Moreover, in principle, the idea of the marxist party is so central to Lenin's concept and so clearly anachronistic to Foster's object that radical leaders unjustifiably become 'vanguard', and too much is made to hang on the rather intangible factor of intellectual conviction as the decisive, new political element after 1830. Factors such as conviction, or even absence of sectionalism, do not themselves indicate a revolutionary will.

Without wishing to disagree with many of Stedman Jones' points, it is important, I think, to examine why the Leninist problematic and that of alienation might be seen to be compatible. Both share a formal schema of 'stages' in a progression to an ideologically free consciousness which serves as a teleological end from which to categorise previous stages. Such a schema will inevitably tend, therefore, to reduce ideology to just false or distorted consciousness, and thus be unable to recognise, especially for this historical period, that 1) there can be different forms of ideology having their own specific conditions of existence. 2) That there is no simple qualitative progression from ideology to non-ideology, even under the 'external' pressure of politics. And 3) that there therefore can be different degrees of 'falsity', or, better, that since ideology is a relation of people to their real conditions, it is as true as it is false. Political ideas are capable of having effect at all levels of the structure of a social formation and so cannot be reduced to the internal development of one of those levels: consciousness or ideology.

There is, however, a good reason why such a conception persists: both ideology and politics are often implicitly defined as the effects of the progression of the economy. From my account of Foster's argument, it is clear that he sees the economic level as determining both politics and ideology: the existence of class consciousness in Oldham alone of the three towns is the result of the development of the contradictions of capitalist relations as expressed in the internal problems of the cotton industry.

This seems to be inconsistent. Is the existence of class consciousness determined by the 'decisive factor' of intellectual conviction, or by the stage of the mode of production? Although Foster hangs a lot on the former notion, we have seen that it is untenable in any 'hard' sense. However, it seems in the end that it is this latter factor, operating independently of the progression of consciousness, which posits the need



for an equivalence to its own combustible state at other levels of society. As yet, though, the ambiguity is only sufficient to change some of the emphases.

It is in his explanation of liberalisation that the methodological ambiguity becomes a contradiction. Liberalisation, for Foster, is the conscious response by the bourgeoisie to de-fuse insurgent class consciousness. On the one hand, this personalist argument is seen in terms of the political appropriation of working class demands and the consequent absence of an independent socialist programme. (It does not seem to occur to Foster that the ease with which such demands were appropriated calls into question their revolutionary content and the class consciousness of those who held them. Surely, here, an analysis of Chartism would have clarified the issue?) Above all, such an approach is taken further when he argues that the success of the bourgeoisie was fundamentally secured by the deliberate creation of a labour aristocracy. I have discussed the basis of this notion: a tiny minority of the labour movement are 'bought off', 'through the market', and entrusted with positions of privileged authority in the structure of Oldham's industry. Stedman Jones asserts that this conception is a structural rather than a 'betrayal' theory of incorporation. And the grounds for this claim subsist in the Leninist theory of a necessary staged development into monopoly and imperialism: a process supposedly inherent in the mechanisms of capitalist growth. Foster accepts this position.

One needn't accept this theory in its entirety to say, with Stedman Jones, that the solution to the 'crisis' was only the re-stabilisation of the labour process on the basis of modern industry. Such an economic position is open to Foster: some of his other claims are similar in outlook. Nevertheless, and paradoxically, the fact of re-stabilisation through the creation of a labour aristocracy and liberal ideology, is primarily, for Foster, the product of a conscious counter-offensive by the bourgeoisie, necessary primarily to offset an impending revolutionary situation. This is further implied by his assertion about the existence of revolutionary consciousness.

Foster's analysis of the two 'moments', then, has, at the least, paradoxical results. The moment of class consciousness, apparently explained by 'intellectual conviction', is at a deeper level given by the critical contradiction between the forces and relations of production. The moment of liberalisation, however, is not the further development of capitalist structures of industry, but rather is the product of a direct political response on the part of individuals of the bourgeois class.

But for the obstinate persistence of the whole problematic of false consciousness/revolutionary consciousness, such ambiguities need not arise. It would be more plausible to ascribe the contradictory content and movement of early working class politics to the very fact that it was 'early', operating under the general instability of the formation of industrial capitalism. It would be further possible to attribute liberalisation in a non-voluntaristic manner to the growing stabilisation of the social formation without resort to the dubious category of labour aristocracy. Dubious, that is, in so far as it is used in a functionalist way\*.

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\* See Note at end of Section.

That problematic is, however, central to his case: without the claim that revolutionary consciousness existed, there would be no need to revert to a 'conspiracy' theory of ruling class manoeuvre as an explanation of its defeat. It seems that a false problem has been set up, and one depending on the correspondence of a progressive dialectic of consciousness with the underlying movement of the social totality, in particular, the economic structure. It is the assumption that, whatever the phenomenal prominence of politics or the economy, the two form an essential and unproblematic unity, that is responsible for the arbitrary resort to now the one explanation, then to the other. This conception, despite other differences, is shared by the 'alienation' and the Leninist frameworks. Frameworks which use this assumption tend to structure their arguments towards a 'necessary' or teleological end (revolutionary consciousness, for example, or the supersession of alienation, or the idea that capitalism is inherently incapable of survival).

Such teleology is common to historicist explanation, but in this variant we also seem to have an example of what Poulantzas has termed the 'invariable duo' of historicism,<sup>11</sup> the combination of the seemingly opposed terms of the couplet: economism/voluntarism. This dualism is not only in the alternations between economic necessity and political freedom of response, it enters into the very concepts employed. The labour aristocracy, for instance, is both the product of political design and the expression of a certain stage in capitalist development. Ideology is the necessary result of a capitalist system (false consciousness), yet is prevented from becoming 'true' under requisite maturity of the economic contradiction by the imposition of bourgeois class values. Such definitions are possible only if one conceives of a social formation as an expressive unity. The difficulty is, however, that being dependent on that conception, these definitions cannot then be used as the 'concrete' justifications of such a conception. Therein lies the theoretical obstacle of projects such as that of 'Class Struggle'.

#### From Liberalisation to General Strike

Foster's latest articles<sup>12</sup> on the general strike of 1926 compare interestingly with his book. Once again the concept of a labour aristocracy as a means of social control is the organising thread. The Nineteenth century labour aristocracy, according to Foster, explains the combination of political backwardness and organisational advance in the working class. Under conditions of crisis for British capitalism in the international market, and in the unique circumstances of the First World War, there occurred, however, a massive increase in union membership, accompanied by widespread industrial militancy. Coupled with this was a marked politicisation of sections of the working class, as instanced in the shop stewards movement, and the later organisation around the defence of the young Soviet Union, embodied in the Councils of Action, 1920.

Foster charts the development of this conflict situation from 'above' as well as below: the stability of the British economy, above all of finance (i.e. Banking) capital, absolutely required an ideological counter-offensive in order to prepare for an attack on wage levels (this, in turn, necessitated by the Gold Standard policy and the chronic state of Britain's basic industry, especially coal). To create such conditions, the ruling class could no longer employ the classical labour aristocracy manoeuvre: splitting the working class by buying off its leaders through the market. Rather, the policy appropriate to conditions of mass unionisation was a process of incorporation of union leaders, and thus those class organisations. Parallel to this was the attempt to de-politicise the newly-successful political wing of the movement by 'educating Labour' to be a constitutional, non-militant, parliamentary organisation. As in the last

century, the initial moves in this process were directed at the accommodation of certain political demands: Lloyd George's 'social imperialist'<sup>13</sup> welfare policies. Such a two-pronged attack - the de-politicisation of union activity and the incorporation of labour's political party - became the main (and successful) ruling class strategy.

The 'Baldwinian' policy did not, however, have an easy passage. Apart from the relative divergence within the ruling class and government (notably Churchill's position), over the question of a 'soft' line, it was above all the massive resistance of the working class which led to the eventual adoption of 'hard' tactics during the general strike itself. If the leaders capitulated to the temptations of 'education', the rank-and-file of the class showed, once again, their fierce class resilience, something which, Foster remarks in Class Struggle, although often existing as false consciousness, nevertheless contains the 'trigger' which could set off fundamental opposition to the capitalist system.<sup>14</sup>

I have presented this thesis schematically because, at root, it is a fairly simple one. And one that is clearly operative in Class Struggle. Given certain critical economic factors and a resurgence of political class consciousness, the ruling class deliberately de-fuse the situation by the adoption of a (different but recognisably) labour aristocracy strategy. The result, although by no means guaranteed (Foster's stress<sup>15</sup>), is nevertheless the maintenance of bourgeois class domination. One factor clearly more important in the 1920s than in the 1850s, is the role - and for Foster, the directly class-functional role - of the State. This element, he argues, was recognised by the men of the Councils of Action, but forgotten by labour leaders in the six years of growing collaborationist ideology up to 1926. The reason for the intensity of the struggle of that year, it is implied, was that many ordinary workers had remembered. In his shorter article in Marxism Today, it is principally this theme of the class nature of the state and the resilience of rank-and-file consciousness which is put forward as the 'lesson' to be learnt from those years.

These arguments help to clarify the presuppositions of John Foster's work in general. Ideology and politics (the state), operating through mechanisms of economic control (labour aristocracy phases 1 & 2), are the means by which the bourgeoisie maintains class power in crisis situations which are, to a large extent, 'given' by the economic contradiction, and which depresses the tendency of the working class to aspire to revolutionary consciousness. It is the task of marxists, it would seem to follow, to lay bare these mechanisms.

Such a political orientation depends on certain theoretical premisses, some of which I have outlined. In the later articles, it is even more clear that in the book that, for Foster, there can be no conception of ideology or politics which is not functionalist. Moreover the functions which they perform are the expressions of the very logic of capitalist development. It would seem important, therefore, to try to relate any criticisms of this analysis of a particular conjuncture, to some theoretical alternatives.

The ascription of revolutionary consciousness to the working class seems exaggerated. That there was a militant economism, and among certain sections, a socialist outlook (say, the shop stewards' leaders), is undeniable. But, as Hinton,<sup>16</sup> for example, makes clear, this was far from a general movement of the class: sectionalism and patriotism even in militant cities such as Glasgow, remained predominant. By the time of the Councils of Action, such militancy had been broken (by the disappearance of the conditions upon which craft militancy rested - dilution, for example - or by the large-scale post-war unemployment), or had of itself died out.



It seems unlikely that, whatever the importance of the Councils for consciously political militants, it cannot be easily merged with war-time economism, just as the latter was not quite the 'same' phenomenon as the syndicalist-inspired unrest of 1910-14. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that the participants in such struggles went over in large numbers to the cause of the Soviets. Greater numbers opposed British intervention, but that was a different demand: Ramsay MacDonald supported it.

The extremely close connection of state and ruling class during World War One was, by definition, a unique circumstance. The state in capitalist formations does indeed work in the interests of capitalism, but in general there is no simple correlation between class and state, either in terms of personnel or in those of legislation. By Foster's own admission, the 'ruling' class was itself fragmented, and those in the Tory party who could roughly be said to be its 'representatives', if anything, more so. Foster's theoretical collapse of the political and economic levels of a social formation oversimplifies (in the clarity of conception of the 'Baldwinian' strategy, for instance, and its extension in time through very different politicians) the nature of the specificity of politics. To reject his a priori ruling class teleology while maintaining the determinateness of ideology and the state, especially in conjunctures of crisis such as the general strike, is quite compatible with the correct, but in itself misleading, slogan that the state is a class state. Whatever its own difficulties, Poulantzas' account of the political 'region'<sup>17</sup> is one attempt to theorise that compatibility.

A final point concerns the idea of a split between leaders and led of a class. This is entailed by Foster's second labour aristocracy thesis. It assumes a purity of consciousness in the 'rank-and-file' which is almost assumed to be natural - quite unjustifiably - to the future bearers of socialism. With such a conception there can be no room for the idea that ideology is an organic or structural part of the social formation, having a real basis<sup>18</sup> and a theoretical explanation. Instead, it is presupposed in Foster's general 'social control' approach, that reformism, economism, and sectionalism are artificially imposed from above by the buying off of labour leaders. On the contrary, and despite the greater militancy of the rank-and-file, labourist and syndicalist<sup>19</sup> ideologies were a constant feature of working class consciousness throughout the period, and none the less ideological for being militant. The gullibility of labour leaders (indeed the fact that they are leaders) is more likely to signify the general absence rather than the presence of a coherent counter-ideology or political practice.

#### A Note on the 'Labour Aristocracy'

It will be clear from my general argument that I leave open the possibility of there being a non-functionalist use of the term 'labour aristocracy'. Whatever else may be said of it, it cannot be a general category of analysis. Foster's writing, I have argued, hankers after such applicability. But, as Stedman Jones points out, the internal differentiation of the working class has been a regular feature of capitalism taking many specific forms. It seems evident, moreover, that no simple correspondence can be established between political practice or function and the degree of economic privilege (or, as Foster himself shows, emiseration).

The case for the 'labour aristocracy' as a historically specific cultural and economic formation has been argued by R.Q. Gray in an important recent book.<sup>20</sup> Consciously adopting a Gramscian approach, to questions of ideology and class position, Gray's account is an attempt to offer a marxist account of the phenomenon without the ambiguities of

previous marxist writers, deriving from a mechanical theoretical perspective. In spite of parenthetical qualifications, Gray does not include Foster in such a category, which does include, in part, Lenin and Hobsbawm.<sup>21</sup> While recognising Foster's contribution towards the acceptance of ideology's 'cultural' conditions of existence, my own view would not, ultimately, permit such an exception. Gray's account relies heavily on Foster's methodology (a statistically informed thesis about the political nature and 'place' of an economic phenomenon), while correctly avoiding the tendency towards a 'conspiracy' theory, and the consequent lack of an organic (structural) conception of hegemony which Foster's account often implies. The result is a well-argued theory of the quite specific cultural and political characteristics of a highly placed stratum of skilled manual workers in Victorian Edinburgh.

The thesis is a familiar one (respectability, aspiration to better housing, education, self-differentiation) which need not be repeated here. Gray's important qualification, however, should be noted. Just as the process of hegemony, despite being (to use an Althusserian phrase) structured in dominance, yet must be constantly re-negotiated, so a conception of the labour aristocracy and the 'corporate' consciousness of the mid-Victorian working class has to include the fact of class struggle, which was, at times, intense. This kind of stress runs against the theoretical grain of some of Foster's formulations. for example:

"For a whole half-century labour's class organisations remained virtually under ~~the~~ ~~same~~ control" (Skelly, ed. p. 24)

Explicitly Gramscian, Gray's contribution to marxist historiography is significant. Yet some doubts about the practice of marxist history remain. Gray insists on the need for further comparative material, because no general conclusions can be drawn from his study. When such material exists in bulk

"we can begin to write working class history as the history of any class must be written - by beginning from the life situation, the hopes and fears of members of the class" (Gray p. 190)

This Thompson-like formulation involves a concession to the methods and outlook of a separatist labour history which is curiously at odds with the presuppositions of Gray's own analysis. One thing a Gramscian view is committed to is the abandonment of piecemeal 'histories' in favour of a general, integrated and theoretical analysis of historical conjunctures. Whatever the difficulties - and none more so than assessing Gramsci's own philosophical pronouncements - of 'epistemologising' history, this retention of the rather naive idea that the validation of marxist concepts (or those of any other systematic body of ideas) awaits the unproblematic 'collection' of localised data is yet more difficult to establish theoretically. Perhaps it is time that the concept of an aristocracy of labour, something which has its origins in middle class Victorian parlance, and which, as subsequently theorised in 'social' history is open to a number of arbitrary or 'sociological' interpretations, should be dropped by marxists in favour of more general, comprehensive categories. The term could only unambiguously refer to an objective phenomenon (say, a historically specific category of the social division of labour) if the metaphorical and emotive character of the description ('aristocracy') were to be omitted. The latter element is, in effect, an ideological description taken from near-contemporary commentators, and derived from the attitudes of some of the agents at the time. While it is doubtful if such a restriction would satisfy those who employ the term, the confusing connotations of both economism ('conspiracy' theses), and subjectivism (definition by moral attitudes) might be avoided.

## SECTION FOUR

### SECTIONALISM AND POLITICS

Some of the weaknesses of both the 'economic' and 'labour' approaches to history have been pointed out. Neither the procedure which consists in 'reading off' social phenomena in terms of the motor of the economic structure and its changes, nor that which gives priority to the history of one class (here, the working class) in terms of the growth of its institutions and influences seems to me to be wholly adequate or specifically marxist. On the other hand it would seem to be obvious that the struggles of the working class, and therefore history from the point of view of that class, has a special place for marxists. If 'from the point of view of' is a formulation which is, theoretically speaking, misleading, it nevertheless poses the question of the political 'relevance' of marxist history in a way that cannot be simply dismissed with the brief rejection of 'labour' history. Even if such relevance is conceived to be the clear-sighted strategies gained from a scientific knowledge in which the notion of a 'special region' cannot be morally imported from outside the articulated structure undergoing analysis, then that claim itself still has a necessary political dimension. One way or another, we 'learn' from history, or at least from historical analysis.

This phrase has, however, been in different ways the justification for a number of extremely mechanistic political outlooks, some of which are, paradoxically, quite unhistorical. The erection of, for example, the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 as the unquestioned model of transition to socialism, has led to a dogmatic conception of the 'correct' strategy for a marxist party. The notion that the immanent revolutionary consciousness of the working class is repeatedly 'betrayed' by labour or socialist leaders is another instance. Whatever the form of the argument, these notions assume an essential similarity of historical conjunctures grounded in a teleological conception of the revolutionary situation (including revolutionary consciousness). This (perhaps natural) inclination is current at present in the interest shown by left-wing students and militants in the early years of British communism, where comparison of that period is often offered with both the contemporary situation in Russia, and the crisis of capitalism in Britain today.

In this context, James Hinton has made a significant contribution to our historical understanding. What is interesting in his work is the insistence that any political lessons which are to be learnt from that conjuncture can only be obtained by the assertion of the historical specificity. On the other hand, such a 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation' is still guided by the idea that we must have in our minds a conception of the appropriate conditions under which a successful Leninist politics is possible. This clearly holds directives for a historical study of such a conjuncture. It implies, for example, that any chronological account of 'the events', however rooted in the 'point of view' of the working class, is at best inadequate, at worst radically misguided. At the same time, it directs criticism towards those who wilfully abstract 'conclusions' which have no basis in a thoroughly historical appreciation of the situation. The first distortion, he suggests in his short book on the formation and tactics of the CPGB (written with Richard Hyman)<sup>1</sup>, can be found in Klugmann's official party history<sup>2</sup>: the second in the extreme 'Trotskyist' thesis that the CP betrays the revolutionary upsurge of the masses<sup>3</sup>. In a review of an



otherwise useful book on the origins of the British revolutionary movement<sup>4</sup>, Hinton makes clear that Walter Kendall's arbitrary 'rightist' view that the CPGB was from the first a diversionary creation of Moscow, nevertheless hangs on the same absence of a historical explanation. Both these shorter pieces, however, rest on conclusions about war-time militancy, which is the subject of Hinton's major book, The First Shop Stewards' Movement.

His thesis is, briefly speaking, that the war-time economy created industrial conditions (particularly the 'dilution' of skilled labour) under which the previously conservative craft traditions of engineers could become the vehicle of a new class militancy. Moreover, since the war-time struggle for economic demands arose in the rare situation in which the class function of a state machine 'servile' to capitalist interests could be transparently perceived, there existed the possibility of an advance from labourist or syndicalist to socialist politics within the working class. It was, above all, the assertion of genuinely rank-and-file activity (as opposed to bargaining by union executives) which made such a move possible. There is no unwarranted moral optimism in Hinton's position, however. The tension between craft and class only allowed definite possibilities, not certainties. The movement remained within sectional necessities of an economic nature (dilution), which, without the unlikely event of a dislocation between shop floor economism and socialist consciousness, greatly hindered the attempt to reach out beyond sectionalism to the (majority) unskilled workers. The revolutionary leaders of the shop stewards' movement undoubtedly considered their politics an adequate means of facilitating such a step, but, objectively, whether BSP or SLP<sup>5</sup>, such politics remained syndicalist, and thus, however militant, economic in orientation.

Unlikely too was the possibility of a 'revolutionary' conjuncture based on a handful of strategic but localised centres. In ostensibly the most inflammable of these, 'red' Clydeside, (though Hinton plausibly argues<sup>6</sup> that Sheffield, if less visibly so, was in fact the most successful for the shop stewards movement), the revolutionary leaders, helped by political divisions within Glasgow's socialist groupings, were fairly easily contained and outwitted by the state<sup>7</sup> in its attempt to facilitate a rapid and constant supply of war materials. The struggle over dilution was, after all, a defensive operation. With dilution clearly irresistible, the stewards main policy was to have a say in how the process was to be conducted: to enforce such a policy<sup>8</sup>, however, required a mobilisation of the whole class which was from the outset close to moonshine. Further, as long as people such as Maclean remained propagandists, by choice having nothing to do with what they saw as the Clyde Workers Committee's collaboration in imperialist war policies, there was little likelihood of a mass political response to force the issue. This separation of struggles assured that the very issue of the war remained secondary, and when occasionally it was in principle opposed, it was usually over the question of conscription: and conscription of skilled workers at that.

Having countered any romanticised pictures of these class struggles, it is, however, important to see that, for Hinton, they were neither inevitably limited, nor without great significance. On a number of occasions (to continue to exemplify Glasgow), an extension of struggles, based on but going beyond dilution, was feasible. If the general rent strike of 1915 has been falsely set up as such an occasion, the imprisonment and deportation of the CWC leaders in 1916 clearly became an issue of political consequence in itself, around which general working class protest could have been marshalled. In the event, not craft sectionalism

as such, but lingering political and inter-plant rivalry was, sadly, the predominant reason for the delay of a coordinated response. The opportunity of providing the kind of link-up of a wider political nature was lost, and potential of such overwhelming shows of deep-rooted if untheorised dissatisfaction with capitalism as the 40 hours strike of 1919, correspondingly less explosive.

Glasgow, then, led the movement in the early years of the war. The CWC, however, was not reconstituted until September 1917, and so the initiative for national momentum passed to other centres. The national strikes of May 1917 had little effect on the temporarily quiescent Glaswegian working class. There was nothing in essence, however, which distinguished the demands at issue in May from previous concerns on the Clyde. The proposed abolition of the Trade Card scheme which exempted craftsmen from military service exacerbated the bitterness between skilled and unskilled workers. In a context of the hostility of 'public opinion', unusually repressive policing, and inadequate national communication between strikers, Hinton implies, the upsurge of craft militancy here was in a sense bound to be temporary and unsuccessful. The main tangible result was a degree of recognition by the government and (a few) union executives of the necessary role and influence of shop floor committees.

The movement as a whole was by no means over. Hinton argues (as against Kendall) that the winter of 1917-18 saw its high water mark in terms of the capacity shown for political growth. In conditions of inflation and food shortages, the question of general conscription, and, importantly, the impact of the Bolshevik revolution, the movement concentrated its demands on wage-rates, a larger class perspective than the narrow (and by now unrealistic) aim to limit and control dilution. In Sheffield, for example, engineers voted 35-1 for a strike in support of a 12% wage rise for the unskilled. The growth in unionisation amongst latter sections were similarly based on general advances, and not simply on the response to craft privilege. In conjunction with the demand for a 12½% increase in bonus rates, workers threatened direct action against Geddes' Military Service Bill (January 1918), and motions of protest against the war and in support of the Bolsheviks were common to committees in different regions. Nothing, however, emerged from this potentially climacteric movement: the somewhat backward sections of the movement (this time Sheffield and Lancs) folded early in 1918, and under the threat of the German offensive rank-and-file support for militancy appeared to be dwindling. With the Allied counter-offensive, the armistice, and growing post-war conditions of unemployment and inflation, it was made extremely difficult for the shop stewards committees to continue in anything like their previous form. Undercut by political division and unclarity of conception about aims and strategy, the basis upon which the movement was formed no longer obtained.

This last argument is, to my mind, unsatisfactory. Whatever the important discussions about Russia current in militant circles, the movement remained syndicalist in approach. Despite its advantages over orthodox labourism, this rank-and-file tendency prevented the kind of effective national unity which is as much the product as the condition of a successful political dimension. As Hinton often points out, as late as 1919 (in Direct Action), Gallacher and Campbell at times confused the respective roles of a branch of the revolutionary party and a workers' soviet - itself conceived largely as a shop stewards committee. When a (belated) centralised body was formed, it took the title of National Administrative Council, and lacked any conception of the kind of political work which Hinton seems to think was a real possibility.

I wonder whether in fact this is the right question to pose with regard to a clearly economic practice? It was in Glasgow and Sheffield, we are told, that political protest against the war coincided with the militant wage struggles. Yet at the same time, the SWC quickly collapsed despite (or because of) continuing concern with craft privilege.<sup>9</sup> Workshop ballots in many towns against drastic action over the war confirmed the general over-optimism of leaders.<sup>10</sup> In Glasgow alone was there any real co-existence of strength between the workers committee and political movements. Yet the anti-war groups had always been strong, and the CWC, in the wake of the dilution question, not as strong as it once was. The significance of groups such as the Women's Peace Crusade and the support shown for John Maclean's election campaign, testifies to the existence of a general political conjuncture - yet by no means 'revolutionary' - which cannot be described as a moment or potential moment in the development of one movement, that of the Shop Stewards. That movement, it seems clear, was already in decline. Hinton, I am sure, would not accept a characterisation of his position to the effect that political conjuncture is derived from the immanent potentialities of only one section of the Left, but it does seem to me a tendency in his work, and perhaps his project, to overplay the 'potential' of the workers committees. Elsewhere of course, he provides adequate grounds for guarding against such a tendency. His account of 1917-18 would be one location of this ambiguity<sup>11</sup>.

In general, Hinton ascribes such ambiguity to the shop stewards movement itself, and since, I think, it is (within limits) a clear sighted analysis, the above points by no means deny the overall importance of his argument. In his pamphlet written with Hyman, Hinton contends, on the basis of his explanation of the shop stewards phenomenon, that the conditions for the formation of a mass communist party did not exist, especially in 1920-21, for the reasons indicated above. The conception that the CPGB was and ought to be such a party was widely held by its leaders and members. This mistaken conception led to a number of unclear policies: over the question of united fronts, for example, or towards the Labour Party, or on the nature of rank-and-file pressure groups such as the National Minority Movement. One result of this was the continual - and continuing - problem of the CP's self-definition as a communist party. In practice, though influential, the Party's industrial strategy was incapable of giving a clear 'line' throughout the 1920s and 1930s. This absence of internal consistency left the Party without political defences with which to argue against the evidently inappropriate directives of the Third International, such as the left turn of Stalin's 'third period'. This argument is not, however, aimed against the very idea of a CP at that period: on the contrary, such a party - but a 'vanguard' and not a 'mass' party - was necessary to prevent the experiences of many of those involved in the Shop Stewards Movement disappearing with that movement itself. And, conversely, that movement was the fundamental factor in the transition to sovietist from syndicalist ideas for a significant number of individual workers.

It has been recently asserted<sup>12</sup> that Hinton's work is a naive 'workerist' historiography, that it romantically and falsely elevates economic to the status of a politically mature - or at least potentially mature - stage through which revolutionary development necessarily passes. The argument in question is fairly easily and rightly dismissed by Hinton himself as a disingenuous 'political substitutionist' distortion of the argument of his book, the purpose of which was simply to analyse the contradictory tension between the economic and sectionalism, on the one hand, and the political intentions and possibilities, on the other, within the stewards movement. Since I would accept Hinton's 'rejoinder', I do not wish to agree with Monds. In conclusion, however,



I think it is worth pointing out the shifts in Hinton's case between the seemingly inevitable limitations of the craft/class contradictions, and the contention that in some sense the movement embodied a necessary stage in the more abstract progression from labourism to revolutionary sovietism. His proposition that this was in fact the case for many individuals is unexceptionable, but there is less substance in the implication that this was a tendency of the movement as such. Indeed, his own research suggests that the very term 'movement' is questionable (though 'phenomenon' would not be). An economic organisation(s), based specifically on engineers, under war-time conditions of production, with a marked periodic fluctuation in strength and continuity between as well as within regions, does not seem to me - whatever its uniqueness and importance for sections of the working class - the starting point for an analysis of the war-time conjuncture. To consciously or methodologically make it so is to risk a one-sided and teleological theory of that conjuncture. The shifts in Hinton's account are warranted by the internal ambiguity of what he considers to be the properties of the subject itself: yet the way in which he characterises such a discrepancy (the very formulation depends on Leninist tenets) relies on a conception of revolutionary potential and development read into the situation - however negatively - as a 'problem'. This problem, because of the 'real' tensions held within it, is apparently capable of explaining the every twist and turn of events up to the (predictable) acceptance of sovietism by some, and the lapse into quiescent labourism by more. It is a great merit of the account that few moments of doubt arise, but when they do (is the characterisation of 1917-18, the 'climactic' period, not something much more than a supposed development of a perhaps waning aspect of working class struggle? Was the 'experience' of the movement, as a specific movement any special reason for the adoption for revolutionary politics later?), they often rely on insights which Hinton himself has offered. Further, they direct that doubt towards the method by which the development of a section of the working class appears to be the key to the historical meaning of a conjuncture involving much more than that section, and therefore requiring a kind of an analysis that avoids the limitation of a sectional viewpoint. We are certainly dealing here with something more than labour history in Hinton's mode of procedure. Moreover, its rigorous qualification of the criteria for deriving revolutionary 'lessons' militates against arbitrary abstraction. Yet the argument itself is not free from a tendency to endow the phenomenon with immanent properties structured towards an abstractly defined possibility (the real revolutionary situation?) Nor is it free from the tendency to project from a section of labour on the general social conjuncture; and this suggests that, in general, social analysis demands such a perspective. In this essay, I have expressed dissatisfaction with such perspectives: their inadequacies are not entirely overcome in James Hinton's work.

SECTION FIVE

CULTURE OR IDEOLOGY?

Gareth Stedman Jones has provided one of the most successful examples of the kind of theoretically-structured history which I have been discussing. His intelligent combination of different aspects of current tendencies within marxism largely avoids the different dangers of purism and eclecticism. His uncompromising strictures on the 'poverty of empiricism', including labour history, at the same time rest upon (within limits) the kind of open-ended commitment to serious theoretical reflection which Althusser has with justification claimed is a necessary characteristic of scientific as opposed to ideological problematics.

Indeed, Stedman Jones' writings have assimilated some important features of Althusser's thought. "All great history", he has asserted "is structural history".<sup>1</sup> One of the aims of his book 'Outcast London' was to make connections between a 'new liberal problematic' and the material conditions underlying the problem that lay at its heart: that of 'casual labour' in London's east end in the later Nineteenth century. The use of the term 'problematic' here is explicitly Althusserian,<sup>2</sup> and Stedman Jones attempts in that book to demonstrate that such problematics construct 'false' problems. His own account is intended to be, not an alternative explanation of the 'same' phenomenon, but one which constructs a different (the real as opposed to an ideological) 'object' of investigation. I indicated in the Introduction that in certain respects an Althusserian position is compatible with Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In his paper on popular London culture, Stedman Jones recognises that ideology is not simply falsity, but can be seen as 'lived experience', having real conditions of existence, yet being structured, to a large extent, by ideas and values of, or to the advantage of, the dominant class. As in the work of Robbie Gray, the further (if less important for him than for Gray) stress that hegemony is neither guaranteed nor undifferentiated, enables Stedman Jones to develop analyses on the kind of theoretical basis which allowed him to successfully argue against the more contradictory aspects of Foster's book.

Stedman Jones' account of middle class responses to the question of poverty in London is not easy to summarise. There seems to have been three main stages in the formulation of the problem, each coinciding with a set of underlying economic conditions. The 'new liberal' outlook, expressed for instance by T.H. Green or Marshall, replaced the pessimism of the last representatives of Classical economics (Stuart Mill), with optimism about the prospects of improvement of, not just individuals, but of the 'working classes' as a whole. In the health of a British capitalism mothered by mid-Victorian morality, the possibility of guided individual ethical improvement seemed to them a real proposition. This philanthropic outlook was intimately connected with i) the national emergence of 'respectable' labour, and ii) the radical geographical separation of classes in London. Despite the physically observable poverty of London's working class, it was conceived by the middle class as a moral question of 'pauperism' - something assumed to be individually eradicable by (with some outside help) self-discipline and the general adoption of Smilesian values.

The boom, however, ended in 1873. Before this time, the problem of pauperisation - really one of casual labour - was seldom seen in economic context. London's industrial identity as a capital goods

centre had long declined, and was replaced by small-scale production, increasingly as 'finishing' for consumption. For the east end in particular, the disappearance of shipbuilding and textiles (silk) went without adequate replacement. Already by 1851, 86% of employers used less than ten men. 'Sweating' was widespread and intense. The finishing trades were distinctly seasonal, often in accordance with the high-class consumerism which marked the entertaining season in more fashionable districts of the city.

Casual work tended to reproduce itself in ever-intensifying cycles. For many reasons (familiarity with local works or foremen, the right 'time of asking', local credit, expense of travel, wives' compensatory market for home-produced articles, etc.), proximity to work was necessary, and despite the seasonal exodus to the country (hops, fruitpicking), casual employment was essentially immobile. The possibility of normal, 'respectable' methods of saving was clearly restricted, although, Stedman Jones argues, there was nothing anarchic about family budgeting. On the contrary, it had to be exceptionally tightly accounted (funerals, ever-demanding landlords, spreading resources, pawns, etc.). The moral totalitarianism of middle class philanthropists, it is implied, simply did not see, or necessarily distorted what they saw of, the cultural forms dictated by the economics of casualism.

The inherent uncertainty of such an existence was clearly intensified in the 'depressed' years of 1873-88. There was a decline and diversification in dock labour, and rural and Jewish immigration (needless to say, seen as the 'cause' of emiseration, not least by the working class), and a consequent, significant growth in under-, unemployment, and petty crime. De-housing schemes to make way for railway yards, dock development, slum clearance, warehouses and offices, had the (often inadvertent) effect, not of dispersing the poor, but of an even greater internal concentration in the east end. The availability of work and the cost of transport necessarily exacerbated the ever more vicious circle of casual labour and its impoverished surroundings.

In this situation, the east end became a larger blot on the middle class conscience. Theories of hereditary urban degeneration ('biologism') took over, in large part, from the individualism of a slightly more comfortable era. Such movements as the Charity Organisation Society and Octavia Hill's housing schemes followed the breakdown of depersonalisation of the philanthropic significance of 'the gift' which accompanied increasing poverty and residential segregation. The self-conscious aim of these movements was to re-establish contact between the receivers and donors of charity. They consisted of people whose professional approach and relatively more 'enlightened' recognition of the social conditions of poverty which took on a political dimension in their self-conception as preventors of social disruption. The predominant reaction to poverty in the 1880s was fear rather than guilt. The revival of militant politics in this period made the task urgent. Ironically, the mass unionisation of 1889-90 was welcomed by such people as in some degree an emergence from the dark underworld into the rational traditions of the artisanal union movement.

By and large, the reforming schemes failed; the rigorously enforced standards of housing, health, discipline, personal ethics, and, not least, costs, rendered the east end poor more 'inward looking'. There thus developed another change, argues Stedman Jones, in the outlook of influential sections of the middle class, from theories of pauperisation, through those of urban degeneration, to those of 'chronic poverty'. The beginnings of scientific surveys (Booth, for example) were to provide the basis for the re-assessment of the extent of poverty. The shift from general laissez-faire economic and moral conceptions, led by theorists such as Green and Marshall, signalled the emergence of a 'social imperialist'



solution which not uncommonly and unashamedly advocated labour colonies under state administration as the principle method. "Charity" policies would have to be abolished, as unsatisfactory. Once brought into the open, the question of the east London poor became less pressing for those classes who feared 'infection from below'. More objectively, the economic upswing, cheap transport, council-financed housing, and the consequent decentralisation of living quarters, helped reduce the 'problem' to Booth's categories A and B. With the bulk of the class (hopefully) on the lines of its respectable upper layers, what was left of the 'residuum' again took on the character of a 'social minority', rather than a general (and political) problem. Labour exchanges and the end of the Poor Law were not far away.

Stedman Jones' later analysis of working class cultural formations<sup>3</sup> depends on this history. I will briefly mention it here before returning to comment on his main work. A distinct cultural identity emerged in the later (1870-1900) Nineteenth century which was recognisably a general working class phenomenon, and not merely that of a fragment (the labour aristocracy, for example). This was clearly the product of circumstances outlined earlier: residential segregation, rejection of reform, etc. It was a culture fiercely resistant to the attempts of other classes to guide it (temperance, housing schemes, and so on). It was a new culture, born of fully industrialised capitalist society. Both artisanal traditions and the legacy of older cultural identities (cruel sports, pubs, 'St. Monday') gradually gave way to modern mass cultural phenomena: music hall, spectator sports, professional entertainers, the ever-present but much less interpersonal gambling, or railway excursions.

However, distinctive, and distinctively working class, it was, this culture was a-political, based on amusement and sport rather than the workplace, union, or socialist group. The upsurge of 'new unionism' very quickly evaporated. The economics of intermittent poverty gave the music hall, with its familiar 'comic realism' of the home and family, a definite 'compensatory' character. One can see here the creative cultural response of the class to its prevalent life-conditions. But, on the other hand, it was a deeply fatalistic and non-combative form of response, open to the ideologies of social imperialism (jingoism was a staple diet of the later music hall). Indeed, it embodied the kind of acceptance of the system, monarchy and Empire present in a seemingly different sphere of working class activity, namely the labourism of its political development.

From these bare bones it can be seen the general debt owed by Stedman Jones to what might be termed a Thomponian approach to working class culture. The close attention given to the 'phenomenal forms' of the culture (more than I can indicate here) emphasises the importance of the internal 'feel' of a culture. Nevertheless, Stedman Jones does not use this dimension as a touchstone or the rationale of his explanation. This, rather, is not to reconstruct a way of life so much as to structurally situate it as an ideological field specified by the changing patterns of relations at other, principally economic, levels of society. If he perhaps underestimates the positive aspects of the culture (its very imperviousness to the formidable morality which supported philanthropy), he has importantly stressed that 'ideology' as lived experience of real conditions inaccessible in toto to that experience, is no less ideological for being resistant to any one set of values. That this had negative implications for the strategies of economically-inclined political practice is also worth pointing out, even though (in this case) the price paid is a rather mechanistic conception of the (a-political) nature of working class culture and 'labourist' politics.

Taking the arguments of the book and article together, we find a unified account of the ideological forms appropriate to the specific conditions of middle class and working class London. It is not so easy, however, to locate Stedman Jones' place in the admittedly not exclusive series of positions I have drawn up as the 'context' of marxist historiography. The reservations which I will now make are therefore tentative, by no means fully worked through. Some of these points are made in an interesting review article by Karel Williams.<sup>4</sup>

The first point is, however, a general one, and not specific to Gareth Stedman Jones. There is a tendency, perhaps unavoidable in view of the need to escape a 'vulgar materialism', to separate the dimensions of 'cultural formation' and 'ideological direction' in a social configuration. No doubt this springs from the rejection of a 'social control' theory of ideology in favour of one explained in terms of 'lived experience'. Without denying the theoretical and political advances of such a conception, it is difficult to see how there can be a relatively detached procedure of identification of the terms of ideology with those of lived experience. The absence of a satisfactory theory of ideology should not be an excuse to evade the realisation that the two kinds of explanation, sets of concepts, are not of the same order. Whether there is, ultimately, a 'level' of explanation appropriate to each set is a further question; but, certainly, in some senses 'culture' and 'ideology' represent different, and to that extent opposed problematics.<sup>5</sup> 'Culture' is explained in terms of the responses suitable to a given set or development of economic and social factors. Though not reducible to those conditions, there appears to be an essential 'fit' between culture and society. And the task would then be to outline the salient underlying features, and simply chronicle or report the internal meaning of human relationships as various kinds of response to those features.

Now, if this description is accurate, it seems that i) an account of ideology as a 'problem' for analysis remains, whether to be left out altogether (Thompson), or to be, in the form of more or less intelligent guesses, tacked on to the basic 'culturalist' study (and this, to my mind, is the position in which Stedman Jones ends up). ii) Such an account still depends primarily on a historicist (and therefore not necessarily marxist) conception of the expressive nature of the social totality. In the marxist-inclined variant, cultural forms, despite their reputed autonomy, are materially - and therefore logically - dependent on the explanatory corpus of economic factors. My point here is not simply to rule out this conception as unmarxist because 'historicist'. Rather, it seems important to show that if one is concerned to adequately theorise ideology (a basic concept of marxism), then there are certain basic obstacles to an 'additive' combination of a structuralist and a culturalist explanation, because the two modes of analysis are antagonistic. The way forward from such a dilemma must be of concern to marxists.

The consequence of this, in Stedman Jones' work, is that, despite the extremely important space given over to the treatment of ideological concerns, there is, surprisingly, no systematic account of the concept he has in mind. The most important offshoot here is that his claim to provide an alternative and marxist problematic, as against an ideological one, is only a partial or formal commitment to an 'Althusserian' analysis. Of course, in the absence of concrete examples, we cannot be sure what such an analysis might look like, and therefore criticism on this point can only be negative! In the light of the explicit intention, however, it is one worth making.

Karel Williams has attempted to show some of the results of this absence in Stedman Jones' project. He suggests that we should try to locate the object of a marxist reading in terms of a 'terrain' of historical Knowledge, rather than as a series of 'revisions' within a well-defined 'context' of historical writing.<sup>6</sup> In 'Outcast London', such revisions might be within the 'standard of living' debate, or 'middle class attitudes towards the poor'. Now, while Stedman Jones has important things to say about these questions, he is really arguing for a different terrain, a different object of enquiry, from these unproblematically accepted 'problems', usually to be decided by the 'facts'. Clearly, the weight of empirical evidence in the text does not, of itself, disguise what Williams calls Stedman Jones' 'hard anti-revisionist intention',<sup>7</sup> and from the latter's declared anti-empiricism, we should not expect it to do so.

The anti-revisionist intention is to locate the systematic ideologies of middle class theorists to the 'problem' they constructed, then to show the real basis of their 'false' problem. This procedure of unmasking the real in the ideological is in fact the new terrain itself, the organising object of 'Outcast London'. While acknowledging that the organising framework is constitutive of the knowledge produced, and that this itself is part of the knowledge to be gained. I am not sure that Williams can argue that this new terrain - the couplet real/ideological - is of the same logical status as the terrain (to take his own example) of the 'standard of living debate'. For the moment, however, it is enough to say that a new problematic is intended, and that any empirical results are necessarily and not accidentally related to it.

One consequence is that ad hoc or individual revisionist criticisms (was London really a declining manufacturing centre? Was the middle class response really fear rather than guilt?) do not get to the core of the case.\* This is because the empiricism on which revisionism is based (exemplified in Popper's epistemology) is only capable of judging the adequacy of theories within frameworks, but not between different frameworks. Following Althusser, Williams sees this as the key factor in a 'reading' of a text (here, 'Outcast London'), and the question becomes 'does the text provide an adequate framework?' Any empirical or methodological problems one finds in 'Outcast London' depends on this question.

Williams proposes that the difficulties of the real/ideological problematic are signalled by a number of discrepancies. On an empirical level, Stedman Jones fails to satisfactorily explain how the concern about pauperism in the 1860s was any different from previous concerns. Further, we are only told that there was a change-over from anxiety about able-bodied pauperism to (in the 1880s) to that over 'chronic poverty'. In the absence of an explanation, this seems arbitrary, because such concerns in very important circles continued well into the Twentieth century. Such arbitrariness is not limited to the sphere of ideas. There is a lack of a national, historical explanation of casualism, and an inadequate identification of its economic motor. (Williams refers here to the crucial distinction between 'private' costs - those of the individual employers - and 'social' costs).

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\* These kinds of points seem to be infinitely extendable. From a labour history viewpoint, Royden Harrison (by no means a naive empiricism) centres his revisions<sup>9</sup> of this 'first-class' book on the absence of Dickensian insights in Stedman Jones' account, and for its omission of the point of view of the casual poor themselves.



Such objections relate to Stedman Jones' method of explanation. His discussion of the three problematics on which he focusses is 'impressionistic' (What precisely were the differences? Why are they distinct problematics?), as is his account of the internal pressures under which casual labour reproduces itself. In general, it is the adoption of different kinds of social scientific methods which allows this combination of different degrees of 'internal' and 'external' explanation. The best example of this would be the identification of the 'crisis' in bourgeois attitudes brought about by radical residential segregation and the consequent breakdown of the psychology of the 'gift'.<sup>8</sup> However, since this is in fact how the philanthropists themselves saw things, the explanation, which is theoretically linked to the anthropology of Mauss, is almost the same as the ideologies purported to be explained. Either these ideologies are in some sense correct interpretations of the real phenomena (something Stedman Jones is explicitly arguing against) or the method of explanation is faulty. It would seem to be impossible from this dilemma to 'demystify' such ideologies, and moreover, to account for their problematics as ideologies. Neither, in fact, has been adequately achieved. This epistemological insecurity of social science-based analyses, Williams concludes, require a systematic alternative along the lines of complex general (rather than 'concrete' or 'simple general') frameworks such as that of 'Capital'.

I do not wish to go into the possibility of an epistemologically 'secure' history which these last and perhaps inflated declarations demand. As Williams, thankfully, admits, that is something requiring much theoretical and practical work. It does seem to be the case, however, that the weaknesses of Stedman Jones' adoption of different ('sociological') methods of approach can be connected with his 'demystifying' problematic. For, whatever his intentions, he presupposes that there is a 'real' object from which the ideologies 'falsely' abstract. This also implies the possibility of a valid abstraction from that object. Williams suggests that this might be 'the tenth in misery', or some such indication of the true extent and cause of impoverishment. He is quick, though, to point out that such conceptions (it became the 'one-third') are equally open to different criteria which the 'real object' is in no position to distinguish between. Whether or not Stedman Jones is guilty of this conception or not (and the uncertainty about what might be his 'valid abstraction' is enough to throw doubt on that charge), is less important than the fact that the problematic of the real i) entails a 'demystificatory' mode of analysis which does not necessarily have different criteria of validation from its ideological and social scientific alternatives. ii) In such cases it may not even be possible, as Stedman Jones intends, to construct a different (non-ideological) object on theoretical grounds. iii) It involves a tendency to remain economistically based, which itself is bound up in the mechanicism/culturalism dichotomy, unable to consider the possibility of a complex articulation of different levels\*. If Williams is somewhat harsh and perhaps formalist in his assessment of Stedman Jones, his valuable contribution indicates that the absences or negative qualities of the latter's work are as theoretically significant as its undoubted positive qualities.

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\* Williams' own proposal is that an account of the real problem might stress that ideology (radical pessimism about the motivation to work) was, from the early C19 to the 1880s the relay between the economic (capitalism with wage-labour dominant) and the political (desire for the effective abolition of the Poor Law.) Stated as bluntly as this, one would certainly require a good deal of argument to be persuaded that this prospectus does, in fact, provide us with the required 'object'.

## CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this essay to locate the central importance of one general theoretical problem - 'ideology' - for marxist historians. One of the interesting things in current writings is that there is, not one, but many 'established' concepts of marxism which are undergoing critical re-examination.<sup>1</sup> My assumption has been that there is no way in which historians, in so far as they claim to be marxists, can be untouched by such debates, since even those who oppose the primacy of such 'abstract' or 'philosophical' discussions must do so with reference to certain rational criteria of justification and definite modes of argumentation. And, in many cases, it is just these which are in question. The success - indeed the possibility - of an analytically sound marxist historical method does, however, depend on their resolution. Obviously, such a process - whatever the uniqueness of the resultant 'knowledge' - is something which necessarily comes only from ongoing debate and research. To that extent, those writers I have discussed serve a positive function, if, in some respects, only by 'negative example'.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, to attempt an unproblematic 'conclusion' to a debate on even one such concept, would be a rash, if not theoretically mistaken enterprise.

REFERENCES

For those items with bracketed numbers, for example, Thompson (7), see Bibliography.

SECTION ONE

1. See Althusser (2), esp. Part I.; Hindess and Hirst (1975); and also Hindess 1973, 'The Use of Official Statistics in Social Science'. MacMillan, London and Hirst, 'Social Evolution and Sociological Categories'. These texts have good general bibliographies on questions of empiricism.
2. For more on these issues see WPCS 10 on 'Ideology', CCCS, Birmingham (forthcoming).
3. For Dobb see 'Studies in the Development of Capitalism' Routledge, London, Revised ed. 1963. See Also Hindess and Hirst (bib.) p. 265-6 for a critique of Dobb's so-called essentialism.  
For Hill, 'The English Revolution', Lawrence and Wishart, London 1940.  
For Hobsbawm, 'Labouring Men', Weidenfeld, London 1964.  
Parts of these texts display 'economistic' perspectives.
4. For Hilton see the 'Introduction' to 'The transition from Feudalism to Capitalism' New Left Books, 1975.  
For Hill see e.g. The World Turned Upside Down, Penguin 1974. or The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution, Panther ed. 1972.  
For Hobsbawm see e.g. Revolutionaries, Lawrence and Wishart London 1970.

These texts show an appreciation of the specificity 'relative autonomy' of the political and ideological 'superstructure'.

SECTION TWO

1. Thompson (1), p. 9.
2. See Bib.
3. Thompson (8).
4. K. Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, Weidenfeld, London 1971  
Thompson's review, see Thompson (9).
5. P. Anderson, Origins of the Present Crisis, New Left Review, 23.
6. T. Nairn, The Nature of the Labour Party, New Left Review, 27, 28.  
And The English Working Class, New Left Review, 24.
7. See esp. Thompson (4).
8. E.g. in R. Williams, The Long Revolution, Penguin ed., 1965. esp. Part I.
9. Thompson (5), p.
10. In Althusser (2), ch. 4.

11. E.J. Hobsbawm, *From Social History to the History of Society*, in Flinn and Smout (eds), Essays in Social History, OUP, 1974.
12. Roulantzas (1).
13. Thompson (1), ch. 11.

### SECTION THREE

1. Foster (1), p. 2.
2. Marxism cannot be enhanced by the simple addition of statistics. See e.g. Hindess (1973), Chap. 5.
3. E.g. by A.E. Musson in m/s to be published; and John Saville, Socialist Register, 1974.
4. This point is made by most critics.
5. Saville, op.cit.
6. Foster (1), p. 48.
7. Ibid. p. 131.
8. Ibid. p. 148.
9. Stedman Jones (3).
10. Poulantzas (1), p. 146.
11. See Bib.
12. Foster (3) p. 21. ' "Social Imperialism" was the direct expression of the labour aristocracy at this stage in its development'.
13. Foster (1) p. 6.
14. Foster (3) p. 31.
15. See esp. Hinton (1).
16. Poulantzas (1).
17. For a useful, if not necessarily marxist attempt at such an account, see H. Macleod, Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City, Croom Helm, London, 1974.
18. I do not wish to imply here that labourism and syndicalism can be equated. Far from it. Within syndicalism itself there were many rival theories. On the former point see, M. Jacques, The Consequences of the General Strike, in Skelley (ed), The General Strike, 1926, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1976. On the latter, see e.g. Pribicevic, The Shop Stewards Movement and Workers Control, 1910-26, Oxford 1969.
19. R.Q. Gray, The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh, Oxford 1976.
20. Lenin, see Bib. Hobsbawm see e.g. The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century Britain, in Labouring Men, Weidenfield, London, 1964.



SECTION FOUR

1. Hinton (3).
2. J. Klugmann, The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Vol. I, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1969.
3. E.g. B. Pearce, The Early Years of the CPGB, 1966.
4. W. Kendall, The British Revolutionary Movement 1900-21, Weidenfield, London, 1969.
5. BSP: British Socialist Party. SLP: Socialist Labour Party.
6. Hinton (1) ch. 5. esp. p. 162.
7. Hinton (2).
8. The policy included a demand for immediate workers control of the industry.
9. Hinton (1) pp. 262-3.
10. Ibid. pp. 261-7.
11. "The magnitude of the opportunity missed soon became apparent to some of the movements leaders and sympathisers" p. 267.  
"In the event the Government did not climb down and the revolution did not occur.....A closer look at the continuing internal weaknesses of the rank-and-file-movement reveals the justification for the Governments attitude". p. 261.
12. By J. M. nds, Workerist Historiography, New Left Review, 97.

SECTION FIVE

1. Stedman Jones (2) p. 115.
2. Stedman Jones (1) p. 16.
3. Stedman Jones (4)
4. K. Williams, Problematic History, Economy and Society, Vol. I. No. 4 1972.
5. For a useful discussion of this point see S. Hall, Culture, the Media, and the 'ideological effect', Open University Reader in Mass Communications (forthcoming).
6. Williams, op.cit. pp. 459, 460.
7. Ibid. p. 461.
8. Ibid. p. 465: Stedman Jones (1) pp. 251-2.
9. R. Harrison: Society for the Study of Labour History, Bulletin 19, 1972.

## CONCLUSION

1. See e.g. Hindess and Hirst, *Bib.*
2. The phrase is Perry Anderson's in an interesting attempt to bridge the dichotomy between marxist 'theory' and 'history', Lineages of the Absolutist State, (p. 7), and Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism, both New Left Books, London, 1974. The attempt is, in my own view, unsuccessful.

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5. Rejoinder to J. Wonda, New Left Review, 27.

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