

ALL KNEES
AND
ELBOWS OF
SUSCEPTIBILITY
AND REFUSAL

READING
HISTORY
FROM BELOW

BY ANTHONY ILES & TOM ROBERTS

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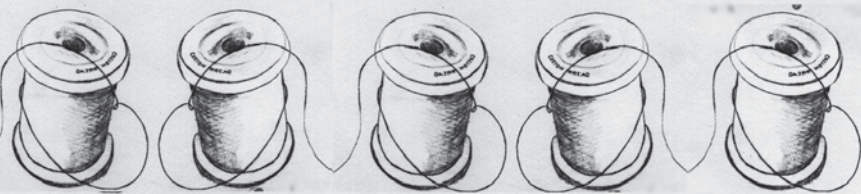
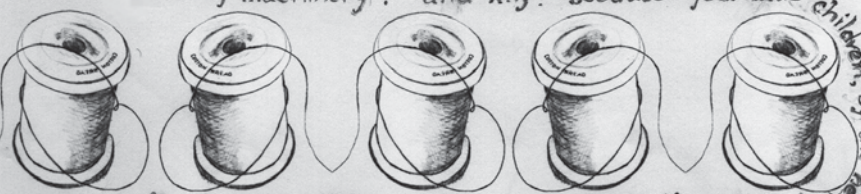
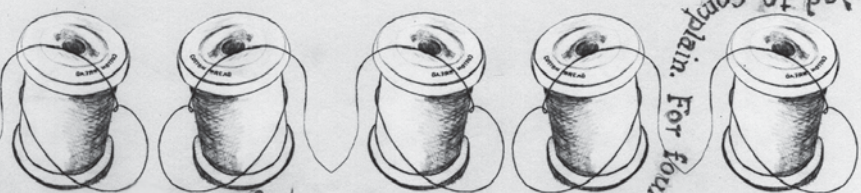
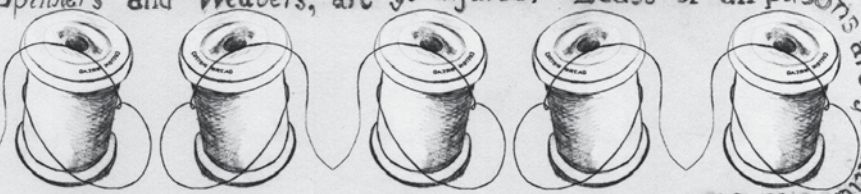
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Spinners and Weavers, are ye injured? Least of all persons are ye entitled to complain.



For four times your number are employed since the invention of machinery:--- and why? because your little children, by the help of machinery, can earn their own livelihood, and it is easy to rear a family.

MEMBERS UNLIMITED

The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.¹

The rich are named but not numbered, while the poor are numbered but not named.²

The question of who or what constitutes ‘the people’ and ‘the working class’ is a problematic object in any historical account because of the political investments which are always made in these categories. The very notion of a ‘people’ is usually circumscribed by national boundaries. A class implies a unity of interests and conditions, but also antagonism between (and within) classes. Here we explore the definition and redefinition of the working class and the complexity of class interests as developed in ‘history from below’. Of particular interest will be attempts to expand or redraw the limits of the working class and the questions these attempts raise.

What the expansion of the category of class reveals is the exclusion of a larger body of people from wider realms of public life than are commonly considered. In the longer view of history and of class, it is possible to trace an evolution of sovereignty which tells us much about the foundation of democracy upon exclusion, a part of the political body kept outside. During the English Revolution of 1640 two ideas of ‘the people’ emerged, with each side – parliamentarians

1 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Penguin, 1982, p.9.

2 Anonymous Pamphlet, 1790s.

and royalists – keen to invoke them for the sake of their legitimacy. Within this split were further divisions. On the parliamentary side there were conflicts between an emerging bourgeoisie and radical democrats. The reduction of democratic interest to those who held property, i.e. an interest in the land, versus a levelling democracy consisting in the manifold interests of those who lived and worked on the land was settled on the side of the former. These conflicting conceptions have fundamentally shaped modern political philosophy and statecraft in Europe, at least.

When we mention the people, we do not mean the confused promiscuous body of the people.³

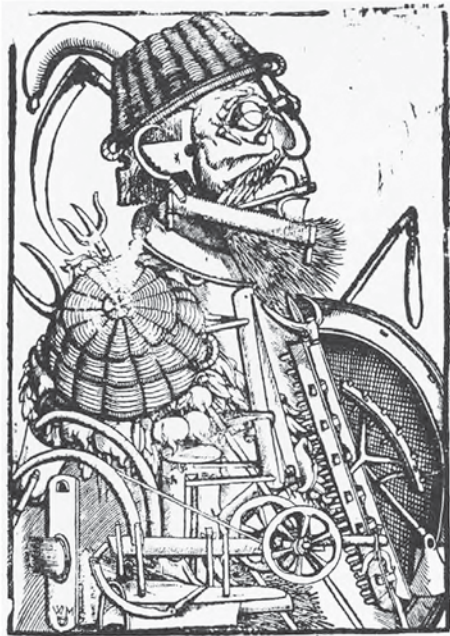
It was the experience of the period of civil war and challenges from all directions to state, church and law that shaped Thomas Hobbes' mechanistic theory of political sovereignty, which insisted on the necessity of centralised authority to safeguard a liberal state. In Hobbes' and some of his peers' conceptions (and in the famous illustration which accompanies his book, *Leviathan*), a mechanical understanding of the body is conflated with a smoothly running political regime.

In mechanical philosophy, the body is described by analogy with the machine, often with emphasis on its *inertia*. The body is conceived as brute matter, wholly divorced from any rational qualities: it does not know, does not want, does not

3 Marchamont Needham, mid 17th century political commentator. Quoted in Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, London: Penguin, 1991, p.60.



The working class rises, fully formed, from Glastonbury Tor at the appointed time – the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics.



16th century engraving of an agricultural labourer

feel. [...] the body is a conglomerate of mechanical motions that, lacking autonomous power operates on the basis of an external causation, in a play of attractions and aversions where everything is regulated as in an automaton.⁴

The human body and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine produced by capitalism.⁵

4 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch: Women, The Body And Primitive Accumulation*, New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

5 *Caliban and the Witch*, op. cit., p.146.

Christopher Hill shows how during this period two revolutions correspond to, but also exceed, these two powers grappling over a body to direct.

There were, we may oversimplify, two revolutions in mid-seventeenth century England. The one which succeeded established the sacred rights of property (abolition of feudal tenures, no arbitrary taxation), gave political power to the propertied (sovereignty of Parliament and common law, abolition of prerogative courts), and removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of the men of property – the protestant ethic. There was however, another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened. This might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have destabilised the state church and rejected the protestant ethic.⁶

William Walwyn noted of the Cavaliers and Roundheads 'their quarrel is all whose slaves the poor will be.'⁷

Against the Stalinist/Leninist orthodoxies with which the Communist Party of Great Britain was officially aligned can be countered the longer traditions of dissent, radicalism and revolution that historians from below had begun to unearth in the 1940s and gone on to read in the light of contemporary struggles. This had challenged Marxism's foundation in the modern project in a number of ways. Not only did the myths of linear history become somewhat fractured, but

6 *Ibid.*, p.15.

7 Quoted in Peter Linebaugh, 'Days of Villainy: a reply to two critics', *International Socialism Journal*, Issue 63, <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj63/linebaugh.htm>

also the centrality of the industrial proletariat to historical development is put into question. From Christopher Hill and Edward Bernstein's medieval communists to Eric Hobsbawm's 'social bandits', Peter Linebaugh's 'picaresque proletariat' and Silvia Federici's 'witches', tensions, ruptures and singularities are brought to bear upon the definition of the working class.

In the attention to detail that these historians carried out, from the discovery of hidden forms of work and hidden conflicts outside the workplace, we arrive with a picture of the proletariat embedded in struggles for control over both production, and reproduction – all those practices, including care-giving, that sustain life within capitalism, and in effect reproduce labour power.

Peter Linebaugh provides an image of the articulation of these different bodies in the vast augmentation of wealth that intensified throughout the 18th century:

The factory proletariat propelled the machines of industry; the slave plantation of the West Indies and the plundered indigenous peoples provided the commerce; the young, the unemployed, and the criminalized peopled the towns; the separate public and domestic spheres of women's endeavour reproduced the population on an enlarged scale. The working class was thus composed of waged artisans, criminalized unemployed, unwaged domestic workers as mothers and wives, slaves, and the indigenous and colonized.⁸

8 Peter Linebaugh, *Introduction to the works of Thomas Paine, Rights of Man and The Commonwealth*; <http://libcom.org/history/peter-linebaughs-new-introduction-works-thomas-paine>

Those who contributed to and/or opposed that vast accumulation of wealth were quite far from the heroic male white worker celebrated by socialist and communist parties in Europe. Politicising reproduction was a specific challenge to forms of western Marxism which had tended to focus on production as the privileged site of struggle, and reproduction as natural or passive. To pose antagonism within the reproduction of class society not only upset the naturalised understanding of who the proletariat were, but also what its stake in the abolition or continuation of capitalism, class, gender and race relations really meant.

Women, Witches, Workers

For Silvia Federici, women's history is not detached from that of men nor the social system of production which traditionally has been associated exclusively with men's labour. *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) is her study of the enclosure of the female body carried out through the demonisation of women as 'witches' in the 17th century. The book is also a polemic about the construction of race and gender as part of parallel forms of expropriation taking place in Europe, Africa and the Americas over the same historical period, and as Federici argues, this process of primitive accumulation took place not just in the past but continues in the present too.

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici like many of the historians from below, revisits the historical origins of capitalism – a 'counter-revolution that destroyed the possibilities that emerged from the anti-feudal struggle'.⁹ This is not a lament for a lost Eden, but a call for both an understanding

9 *Caliban and the Witch*, op. cit., p.21.

of the violence, exploitation and division at the heart of the capitalist project, and for us to imagine other possibilities at the present juncture. Much of her research was carried out as Federici was working as a teacher in Nigeria in 1984, where, under the auspices of a 'War Against Indiscipline' imposed by the Nigerian government and World Bank, Federici saw 'unfolding under my eyes processes very similar to those that I had studied' in *Caliban and the Witch*.

Whenever the capitalist system is threatened by a major economic crisis, the capitalist class has to launch a process of 'primitive accumulation': that is, a large-scale process of colonisation and enslavement, such as the one we are witnessing at present.¹⁰

In her study of primitive accumulation, Federici foregrounds the relationship of women and the enslaved peoples of the colonies to the reproduction of labour-power. In Europe, Federici argues that the process by which capitalism developed (and responded to its own crises, through state intervention) began to limit many women to the home and to domestic work, in order to maintain the labour-power of male workers through clothing, feeding, caring, cleaning, cooking. In this respect Federici's research was partly influenced by the work of Selma James. James co-authored the classic *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* with Maria Dalla Costa which launched the international

10 Ibid., p.104.

Wages for Housework Campaign in 1972.¹¹ James and Costa, Federici argues, understood women's unpaid housework as,

the effect of a social system of production that does not recognize the production and reproduction of the worker as a social-economic activity and a source of capital accumulation, but mystifies it instead as a natural resource or a personal service, while profiting from the wageless condition of the labor involved.¹²

The population decline of the 16th and 17th centuries in both Europe and European colonies, which was mostly the result of colonial plunder and dispossession, coupled with economic crisis, led the state to attack women's control over their own bodies by regulating sexuality, imposing discipline and criminalising early forms of birth control. At the same time women were increasingly seen as non-workers, and women's labour came to be 'defined as a natural resource, laying outside the sphere of market relations':

In pre-capitalist Europe women's subordination to men had been tempered by the fact that they had access to the commons and other communal assets, while in the new capitalist regime *women themselves became the commons*.¹³

11 Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The power of women and the subversion of the community*, 1972, <http://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james>

12 *Caliban and the Witch*, op., cit, p.7.

13 *Ibid.*, p.97.

It was not just the state and capital that produced this environment. Some male workers (for example craftsmen) were complicit, with the authorities, with keeping women out of the workplace and restricted to low paid cottage industry or domestic work. In this light, Federici questions and redraws the concept of wage-slavery: European working class women's situation, Federici asserts, was closer to a form of slavery than that of many male workers. Moreover, this led to a counter-productive 'self-alienation and dis-accumulation' of male worker's power and that of workers generally.

Federici notes that struggles over the wage and reproduction between European workers and employers were dependent upon the wealth generated by the brutality of slave labour in the Americas and the Caribbean. Other historians have also tracked the dispossession inherent in the founding of modern capitalism to stress the centrality of subjects other than the British working class. Peter Fryer:

Thus, at the dawn of the factory system in Britain, the trade in black slaves directly nourished several important industries and boomed precisely those four provincial towns that, in the 1801 census, ranked immediately after London: Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and Bristol [...] There is controversy about the extent to which the threefold profits of the triangular trade as a whole financed Britain's industrial revolution.¹⁴

14 Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London: Pluto Press, 1984, p.16.

As well as providing a crucial financial input, Federici shares with C.L.R. James the conviction that aspects of the labour process fundamental to capitalism originated in European colonies rather than in Europe itself. The plantation system that began to be imposed wholesale in the colonies in the 1650s prefigured not only the factory, but also the global assembly line along which exploited workers in Africa, Latin America and Asia produce commodities for the production and reproduction of labour power in Europe and America.

waged-work, rather than providing an alternative to slavery, was made to depend upon slavery for its own existence, as a means (like unpaid female labour) for the expansion of the unpaid part of the waged working-day.¹⁵

On the whole, European workers did not profit from slavery and importation of goods. They were subjected to disciplinary techniques first 'experimented with' on enslaved people in the plantations, and vice versa. It wasn't until the end of slavery that European wages rose and workers' organisations gained legitimacy. In the colonies any form of combination between the white maritime proletariat and slaves was guarded against through the production of racial division – for example laws to prevent interracial fraternisation and mixed childbirth.

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici argues that the witch hunts of the middle ages curtailed the possibilities for resistance to capitalism in both Europe and its colonies, paving the way for the expansion of capitalism by limiting and dividing the working class, peasantry and enslaved people.

15 *Caliban and the Witch*, op. cit., p.104.

primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of inequalities, hierarchies, divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves.¹⁶

The witch hunts facilitated the dispossession of the peasantry and the imposition of industrial work discipline. These forms of superstition and barbaric punishments were contiguous with the division of male and female workers, reduction of women to mothers or wives, and the propagation of racist and separatist ideologies. Federici contends that the witch hunts were not a simple 'movement from below' but a state-sponsored phenomenon; a tool mobilised to achieve conditions fertile for early capitalism.

Federici contextualises the accusations and confessions directed at women in terms of the political economy of the times. The accusations levelled against the 'witches' reveals a fear of class confrontation. Many of the accused were on public assistance, begged door-to-door or stole milk, food or wine. For Federici the records of the witch trials reveal the class struggle 'played out at the village level'.¹⁷ For Sheila Rowbotham, the 'mania' over accusations of witchcraft reveal a struggle over women's attempts to speak out and for themselves. While '[the peasant's wife] was like cattle, a means of production' whose labour at the same time gave her 'a degree of bargaining power', older women were excluded from production and sometimes took on an outsider's role in relation to the community.

When misfortune came people looked for someone to blame.

16 *Ibid.*, p.115.

17 *Ibid.*, p.171.

Old women who argued back were obvious targets. Reginald Scott in his *Discoverie* said the witches' chief fault was that 'they are scolds'. They could also be felt to be trying to gain powers or control which did not suit their station. Thus 'wise' and 'cunning' women became suspect.¹⁸

'Witches' were purportedly promised money in times of hardship by the Devil, money which subsequently turned to ashes – 'a detail perhaps related to the experience of superinflation at the time'.¹⁹ Ironically, Jean Bodin, a French rationalist and political theorist who wrote the first account of inflation, was a keen participant in witch trials, and was later accused of diabolical magic himself. Effectively, Federici suggests magic was invoked in order to dispel magic.

In the history of capitalism, 'going back' was a means of stepping forward [...] the devil functioned as a true servant of God [...]. He so well consolidated God's command over human affairs that with the advent of Newtonian physics, God would be able to retire [...].²⁰

Thus, by the late 17th and early 18th century witch hunts were ridiculed. They had served their purpose in the imposition of industrial capitalism: the displacement of the church and the establishment of *rational* bourgeoisies across Europe. The recordings of common crimes (theft, damage to property) replaced more superstitious accusations. As one French parliamentarian put it: 'One has ceased therefore to accuse

18 Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, London: Pluto Press, 1975, p.5.

19 *Caliban and the Witch*, op. cit., p.171.

20 *Ibid.*, p.203.

them of the uncertain in order to accuse them of the certain'.²¹ In Federici's account, women had led the way in battles against enclosure; so-called 'witches' may have been privy to secret gatherings co-ordinating peasant revolts. The witch hunts, through the vagueness of the accusations made against 'witches', were conducive to an atmosphere which allowed for the widespread suppression of dissent.

The witch hunts were an attack on female sexuality, particularly for older women, but also on homosexuality, collective sexuality, and relationships between people of different classes. Forms of social gathering, feasts and festivals, along with 'deviant' sexual practices such as masturbation, were banned as 'non-productive', threatening to the family and therefore dangerous to the capitalist project. As Federici points out, across Africa such practices are still often subject to state and communal repression.²² While in wealthy capitalist states, the demonisation of single mothers and sanctions on non-reproductive sex still sharpen during periods of economic crisis. Recently Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos have connected this fear of non-reproductive sex and its association with usury to the blame culture which has developed in the wake of the 2008 sub-prime loans crisis.

Recalling capitalism's bloody inauguration in the enclosures and witch hunts, and its most vicious moments since, sermons against the sin of usury have always implied that crises might be transcended in the determination of a boundary between that which is excessive and that which is proper. [...] Unlike

21 Ibid., p.205.

22 Ibid., p.194.

the debt that can be repaid, which in its repayment makes the future a calculable version of the present, usurious debt assumes the existence of an incalculable, unknowable – and, quite possibly inflationary – risk. In its malevolently construed history, usury has signified both unnatural generation and an obstacle to proper generation, not so much non-normative as abnormal. [...] the sin of usury was not only part of that medieval confluence that included the sins of sodomy and prostitution, sermons against gambling, the witch burnings, pogroms and anti-heresy trials.²³

In the Middle Ages the witch hunts provoked deep fear and alienation between men and women. Perhaps they inculcated self-regulation based on the fear of the trials and horrific ‘punishments’. Bodin: ‘We must spread terror among some by persecuting many’. In this way, says Federici, the witch hunts were an attack on all women: ‘it was not only the “deviant” woman, but the woman as such, that was put on trial’.²⁴

Rowbotham and Federici’s work establishes not only women’s claim to be included in *history*, but specifically locate the position of women in social relations of production, the development of capitalism and resistance to it.

The Enclosure of the Globe

Federici’s account rests on research carried out in South America on the relationship between the Conquest, the industrial revolution, and birth of world capitalism. Eduardo

23 Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos, ‘In Praise of Usura’, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/praise-usura>.

24 *Caliban and the Witch*, op. cit., p.185.

Galeano's bestselling history of Latin American conquest and the neo-imperialism which followed it, *The Open Veins of Latin America* (1973), argues that the riches 'discovered' in the New World, and the black and indigenous labour that dug them out of the land, underpinned the dawn of the era of capitalist production in Europe.

The Latin American colonies were discovered, conquered and colonized within the process of the expansion of commercial capitalism. [...] Neither Spain nor Portugal received the benefits of the sweeping advance of capitalist mercantilism, although it was their colonies that substantially supplied the gold and silver feeding this expansion. [...] It was in other parts of Europe that modern capitalism could be incubated, taking decisive advantage of the expropriation of primitive [sic] American peoples. The rape of accumulated treasure was followed by the systematic exploitation of the forced labour of Indians and abducted Africans in the mines.²⁵

In Galeano's words 'Spaniards owned the cow, but others drank the milk'. The Spanish may have overseen the initial process of conquest and primitive accumulation, but it was those European centres most advanced in banking and manufacture which reaped the rewards.

The metals taken from the new colonial dominions not only stimulated Europe's economic development; one may say that they made it possible.

25 Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America: five centuries of the pillage of a continent*, (Trans. Cedric Belfrage), London: Serpent's Tail, 2009, p.29.

The [Spanish] Crown was mortgaged. It owed nearly all of the silver shipments, before they arrived, to German, Genoese, Flemish, and Spanish bankers.²⁶

The narrative established by Galeano has become central to the left revival in Latin American politics of recent years. Both Lula and Chavez have referred to Galeano's research, and direct control of the revenues from mineral extraction in Venezuela and Brazil has been central to each of these figures' political power in the region. Chavez even went so far as to publicly hand Barack Obama a copy of Galeano's book. Nonetheless, Galeano's narrative is not anathema to classically national socialist agendas. A rhetoric of anti-imperialism, energy independence and nationalisation is paired with populism, homophobia and anti-semitism under Hugo Chavez's leadership.

What is emphasised in Federici, Fryer, C.L.R. James and others' related arguments is the way this understanding of colonial 'peripheries' as central to historical process undermines national histories and a key left narrative: that of the European working class as the motor of industrial development. This puts the so-called 'dignity of labour', historically celebrated by elements of the workers' movement, in question, but also pulls apart the certainties that had conscripted the spheres of operations for trade unions and communist or socialist parties within national boundaries.

E.P. Thompson's father, a Methodist clergyman and teacher in Bengal, had related the enclosures of the English countryside to those taking place simultaneously in Europe and its colonies:

26 *Ibid.*, both quotes p.23.

The same era that saw the English peasant expropriated from his common lands saw the Bengal peasant made a parasite in his own country.²⁷

Peter Linebaugh has taken this connection further, suggesting that not only were the expropriations in England and the colonies simultaneous and connected by the Atlantic trade, but also that there were solidarities between the expropriated proletariat on both sides of the Atlantic. The forms these solidarities took were complex and not always reciprocal. Linebaugh finds evidence of what he takes to be the expression of global solidarity in the action of commoners thrown off their land in England.

The leader of the Blacks and 15 of his Sooty Tribe appear'd, some in Coats made of Deer-Skins, others with Fur Caps, &c. all well armed and mounted: There were likewise at least 300 People assembled to see the Black Chief and his Sham Negroes [...].

I would put forward the fact that the poachers defended commoning, not just by disguising themselves but by disguising themselves as *Negroes*, and they did so at Farnham, near the heart of what became the quintessence of England as Jane Austen so gently wrote about it, or Gilbert White, the ornithologist, so carefully observed it, or William Cobbett, the

27 Edward J. Thompson, 'The Life of Charles. Lord Metcalfe', 1937 quoted in E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, London: Merlin Press, 1991, p.170.

radical journalist, so persistently fulminated about it.²⁸

C.L.R. James found in Haiti evidence of alliances between black slaves in revolt and stranded European seamen. Moreover, he set this against a background of proto-industrial conditions.

The slaves worked on the land, and, like the revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly planned and organised mass movement²⁹

The 'discovery' of a proletariat before the Industrial Revolution overturned the neat distinction between 'primitive' and civilised societies and the racism inherent in the idea of the former occupying static and the latter dynamic time. In revolutionary Haiti, C.L.R. James found both co-operation between many hands of labour and work refusal: a black revolutionary subject organised as collective labour in a proto-factory situation (the plantation) in combination with a force that stood outside of capitalist production and actively refused it (the maroons). This is in no way to say that the conditions experienced by slaves and the European proletariat were the same. James accepted the

28 Anonymous, *The History of the Blacks of Waltham in Hampshire*, (1723), quoted in Peter Linebaugh, 'Charters of Liberty in White Face and Black Face: Race, Slavery and the Commons', *Mute* Vol.2 Issue 2, 2006. p.76.

29 C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and The San Domingo Revolution*, London: Penguin, 2001, p.69.

Marxian distinction between proletarian work as formally 'free' labour and slaves as human commodities to be bought and sold, while detailing the systematic treatment of slaves as far more horrific than anything the European proletariat experienced. It is a polemic that has split communists throughout the 20th century and remains contentious today. Rather than abandoning the working class as some post-autonomist thinkers might pretend to today, James heads directly into this combination – attempting to understand the complexities of who the slaves were, and the forces that made them into a movement.

What was the intellectual level of these slaves? The planters, hating them, called them by every opprobrious name. 'The negroes,' says a memoir published in 1789, 'are unjust, cruel, barbarous, half-human, treacherous, deceitful, thieves, drunkards, proud, lazy, unclean, shameless, jealous to fury, and cowards.' It was by sentiments such as these that they strove to justify the abominable cruelties they practiced. And they took great pains that the negro should remain the brute beast they wanted him to be. 'The safety of the whites demands that we keep the negroes in the most profound ignorance. I have reached the stage of believing firmly that one must treat the negroes as one treats beasts.' Such is the opinion of the Governor of Martinique in a letter addressed to the Minister and such was the opinion of all colonists. Except for the Jews, who spared no energy in making Israelites of all their slaves, the majority of the colonists religiously kept all instruction, religious or otherwise, away from the slaves. [...]

Naturally there were all types of men among them, ranging from native chieftains, as was the father of Toussaint L'Ouverture, to

men who had been slaves in their own country [...]. The leaders of a revolution are usually those who have been able to profit by the cultural advantages of the system they are attacking, and the San Domingo revolution was no exception to this rule.³⁰

Luddites

The Luddites are a key social movement whose position on the cusp of pre-industrial and industrial capitalism remains contentious for historians of the workers' movement and Marxist historiography. Made up of artisans who sought to collectively protest against and resist the introduction of mechanised looms into the textile industry, their key tactic, for which they are still famous today, was the destruction of machinery.

The Luddites took their name from a youth called Ned Ludd who was alleged to have wrecked several machines in an industrial dispute. As the anonymous, mythic leader of a powerful rebellion, much celebrated in graffiti and song, Ned Ludd quickly became General or King Ludd.³¹ As Peter Linebaugh explains, the Luddites were most active in three areas: West Riding of Yorkshire (where croppers were threatened by the gig-mill or shearing machine), Nottinghamshire and the Midlands (where those who weave stockings – stockingsers – were being made redundant by the framework-knitting machine) and Lancashire (where cotton

30 *Ibid.*, p.13.

31 One of the most well-known songs, 'General Ludd's Triumph', is reproduced at the end of this chapter. That the Luddites continue to be the object of popular celebration and song is evident in the following video made for the televised children's history 'Horrible Histories' <http://youtu.be/IgBiGrpWNQU>

weavers were losing their jobs due to the introduction of the steam-driven loom).³² Where and when the movement began – in Scotland in 1810, or in Nottingham in 1811 – is a matter of some dispute. However, its 200th anniversary was widely celebrated in 2011 and 2012.³³

Though only mentioned in passing, the Luddites are central to the polemics within a key chapter of *Capital* Vol.I in which Karl Marx discusses the introduction of machinery and large-scale industry in England.

the Luddite movement, gave the anti-Jacobin government, composed of such people as Sidmouth and Castlereagh, a pretext for the most violent and reactionary measures. It took both time and experience before the workers learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which utilizes those instruments.³⁴

Marx points out in a footnote that this form of revolt continued even up until 1865. Rather than machine-breaking being an adolescent stage which workers would leave behind, we can point to its continuation throughout

32 Peter Linebaugh, *Ned Ludd & Queen Mab: Machine-Breaking, Romanticism, and the Several Commons of 1811-12*, Oakland: PM Press, 2012, p.10.

33 Luddites Bicentenary, <http://ludditebicentenary.blogspot.co.uk/> and the conference held 6 May 2011 at Birkbeck University of London, *The Luddites Without Condescension*, <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/05/the-luddites-without-condescension/>

34 Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol.I, London: Penguin, 1990, pp.554-555.

the 20th century and into the present.³⁵ We might continue Marx's list well past the assumed attenuation of this practice by briefly listing some successful deployments of similar measures for collective bargaining recently used by workers. In a spate of bossknappings, equipment hijacking and factory occupations in France which followed the 2008 crisis, in the UK at three Visteon plants in 2009, and all over parts of China, Bangladesh and Egypt throughout the beginning of the 21st century this tactic has seen a widespread resurgence.³⁶

On this point Marx does materialism poor service. It is evident that not only did the Luddites attack machines, but also their owners (in Yorkshire but not in Nottinghamshire), moreover, machines were attacked selectively, their wreckers

35 The IWW (International Workers of the World), a grass-roots US union, never ceased to advocate sabotage as the following pamphlet testifies Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage: the conscious withdrawal of the workers' industrial efficiency*, (1917), <http://archive.org/details/SabotageTheConsciousWithdrawalOfTheWorkersIndustrialEfficiency>

36 For a few sources on the recent continuation of similar tactics see: on the Visteon occupations; Alan Woodward, 'Ford Visteon Enfield Workers Occupation', 2009: <http://libcom.org/history/ford-visteon-enfield-workers-occupation-alan-woodward> and Anon, 'Report and reflections on the UK Ford-Visteon dispute 2009 - a post-Fordist struggle', <http://libcom.org/history/report-reflections-uk-ford-visteon-dispute-2009-post-fordist-struggle>; on bossknapping in France: Jeanne Neton & Peter Åström, 'How One Can Still Put Forward Demands When No Demands Can Be Satisfied', <http://communisation.net/How-one-can-still-put-forward?lang=fr>; on destructive strikes in Bangladesh, Anonymous, 'Strike, Riot and Fire amongst the Garment Workers: a working class revolt in Bangladesh', London: 56a Infoshop, 2006, <http://zinelibrary.info/strike-riot-and-fire-among-garment-workers-working-class-revolt-bangladesh-0>; Hossam el-Hamalawy's collection of links on bossknappings in Egypt: <http://www.diigo.com/user/elhamalawy/bossknapping>

discerning carefully between machines which manufactured ‘under-price or “cutup” work’.³⁷ So, while we might side with Marx in his exasperation over choosing one version of capitalism over another, the practice of machine-breaking was not unselective. It distinguished between tools and their uses, and its practice in the case of the Luddites directly affected the price and autonomy of the breakers’ labour and that of her class favourably (if only temporarily).

This is the lesson of the Luddites and part of the reason they continue to be of interest today. Presently few radicals would dispute the centrality of the social application of technology in capitalism, nor its importance to a future without capitalism. However, perhaps because in his treatment of this period Marx tries to draw out general rules about the capitalist use of machinery, he instrumentalises a social movement which has other things to teach us.

It’s possible that the similarity between recent tactics deployed in class struggle and the actions of the Luddites and their precursors have structural echoes – workers have recourse to such tactics as part of ‘desperate struggles’, often responding to lockouts from factories, mass layoffs, non-payment of wages or re-location of the means of production elsewhere. These forms of struggle have historically bookended a relatively short period of stable accumulation of capital with correlative successive gains in the living standards and working conditions for labour. In a situation when capital is in retreat or flight, the workers’ (soon to be non-workers) response may take the form of destructive revenge because they no longer have anything to gain from standard forms of negotiation. Instead, extracting short term

37 *The Making of the English Working Class*, op. cit., p.534.

material gains directly through extra-legal measures (riot, kidnap, taking the means of production hostage, looting) are seen and felt by workers to be their only options. In this respect the teleology attributed by many to Marx – of a transition to socialism through the gradual development of capitalist production – has become uncoupled from the reality of both workers' struggles and the conditions in which they struggle. What's posed in these forms of struggle is not gains within the productive circuit of capital, but social reproduction as a circuit which no longer necessarily passes through the capital-labour relation.

So, whilst Marx's historical reading of the Luddites is limiting, there are important points about the structural formation of the working class and its relationship to welfare, philanthropy and the wage to be drawn from it. After consigning the Luddites' tactics to history's dustbin by conflating the challenge it made to authority with the repression that it unleashed, Marx goes on to sketch a broader dynamic.

World history offers no spectacle more frightful than the gradual extinction of the English hand-loom weavers; this tragedy dragged on for decades, finally coming to an end in 1838. Many of the weavers died of starvation, many vegetated with their families for a long period on 21/2d. A day.³⁸

In a footnote on the same page Marx gives details of why exactly this was the case: 'The competition between hand-weaving and power-weaving in England was prolonged before the introduction of the Poor Law of 1834 by the fact

38 *Capital* Vol.I., op. cit., p.558.

that their wages, which had fallen considerably below the minimum could be supplemented with parish relief.' Karl Polanyi develops this point, arguing that the Speenhamland system of poor relief introduced in 1795 effectively blocked the development of a national labour market.

The justices of Berkshire, meeting at the Pelican Inn, in Speenhamland, near Newbury, on May 6, 1795, in a time of great distress, decided that subsidies in aid of wages should be granted in accordance to a scale dependent upon the price of bread, so that a minimum income should be assured to the poor *irrespective of their earnings*.³⁹

Whilst intended to provide some security to the poor and militate against the wild fluctuations in availability of work and regularity of wages under early capitalism, the effects were in some ways completely opposite. As Marx observes, wages could fall to almost nothing because workers' survival was assured under this system whether paid well or badly. This in turn removed any incentive for workers to apply pressure for wages to rise. As Polanyi points out, the Speenhamland system might well have provided a material base for both unemployed and employed workers to organise. However, the anti-combination laws and the restrictions on movement for workers tied to parish relief effectively

39 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2001, p.82.

prevented this.⁴⁰

Instead 'Speenhamland precipitated a social catastrophe.'⁴¹ Not only did wages stagnate, but so did workers. Moreover, the productivity of labour began to rapidly fall since the difference, to workers, between no work and work became more and more arbitrary.

Speenhamland was designed to prevent the proletarianization of the common people, or at least to slow it down. The outcome was merely the pauperization of the masses, who almost lost their human shape in the process. The Poor Law Reform of 1834 did away with this obstruction of the labor market: the 'right to live' was abolished.⁴²

Thus, Polanyi dates the emergence of industrial capitalism and the working class precisely to 1834.

Not until 1834 was a competitive labor market established in England; hence industrial capitalism as a social system cannot be said to have existed before that date. Yet almost simultaneously the self-protection of society set in: factory laws and social legislation, and a political and industrial working-

40 'If laborers had been free to combine for the furtherance of their interests, the allowance system might, of course, have had a contrary effect on standard wages: for trade union action would have been greatly helped by the relief of the unemployed implied in so liberal an administration of the Poor Law [...] Speenhamland might have had the effect of raising wages instead of depressing them as it actually did.' *Ibid.*, p.85.

41 *Ibid.*, p.102.

42 *Ibid.*, p.86.

class movement sprang into being.⁴³

The violence of the Poor Law Reform shocked the poor and the middle class, but henceforth, Polanyi argues, the last vestiges of Stuart paternalism were wiped away. Workers were now 'free' to move around the country seeking work, they were also 'free' to seek competitive wages and employers no longer had any excuse for not paying wages fit to reproduce workers.

However, workers were also free to live or die by the labour market (the wage or lack of it) and whilst this situation ushered in modern political movements (e.g. Chartism) and legislation, the ruling class brought in the workhouse and other more or less punitive philanthropic institutions to mediate between the poor and the brutality of the market mechanism, and workers still had no legitimate recourse to self-organisation, since trade unions were outlawed until 1871.

For Polanyi this crucial shift in the form of social reproduction ushered in conceptual transitions too.

It was in the decades following Speenhamland and the Poor Law Reform that the mind of man turned toward his own community with a new anguish of concern: the revolution which the justices of Berkshire had vainly attempted to stem and which the Poor Law Reform eventually freed shifted the vision of men toward their own collective being as if they had overlooked its presence before. A world was uncovered the very existence of which had not been suspected, that of the laws governing a complex society. Although the emergence of society in this new and distinctive sense happened in the economic

43 Ibid., p.87.

field, its reference was universal.⁴⁴

Polanyi points out that, by displacing the question of reproduction from the status of individual charity, the developing independence of labour poses the question of 'collective being' as a social question. However, as much as questions of bourgeois conceptual transformation are interesting, we could equally interest ourselves, as many radical historians have, in the continuities between self-conscious forms of struggle before and after the independence of labour Polanyi poses.

Wages, Welfare or Crime

To give a picture of the different class solidarities and alternative forms of welfare which flourished in the 18th century immediately before the point Polanyi marks as the true birth of the working classes, we have recourse to Peter Linebaugh's account of the Tyburn Riots against the Surgeons.

In the cooper's yard, the sawyer's pit, the apothecary's shop or brewer's house, master and man, if not doing the same job of work, cooperated to make the same product. In the paternalism characteristic of the period of manufacture, Capital and Labour did not oppose each other in inexorable contradiction. [...] Catastrophe came to the master and his journeyman alike. Often they joined together in the Friendly Society, Benefit Society or 'Box Club' to defend themselves against a precarious existence. [...] Mainly the money ensured members of a 'decent

44 Ibid., p.88.

funeral'. The Friendly Society and the struggles against the surgeons were the two forms of working-class cooperation in the face of death.⁴⁵

We will return to the question of welfare in the chapter on the Big Society. We foreground welfare here as an important aspect of the formation of the working class because it pertains to 'reproduction', the other side of the coin of 'production'. As Silvia Federici and numerous other feminists have pointed out, the working class would not be available for work without the unwaged work carried out to clothe, bathe, feed and birth them. Different forms of welfare not only composed the working class and made it available for work, it could be self-organised and reflect shared values as well as struggles for stability and autonomy. Welfare, state-administered or otherwise, is the meeting point of ideological and material reproduction, the aspirations of the ruling class for what it wants the labouring class to be and the measure of what is acceptable as means of reproduction by work. In the 18th century, there was a gulf between the wage and the practical question of how a person was to clothe, house and feed themselves, just as there is a gulf between the presentation of their lives and their own experience. Peter Linebaugh's formulation of a 'picaresque proletariat' is in many ways an attempt to bridge this gap which is also characterised by the gap between being in and being out of work, being defined as law-abiding worker or a disorderly criminal.

45 Peter Linebaugh, 'The Tyburn Riot Against the Surgeons', in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson and Cal Winslow, *Albion's Fatal Tree*, London: Penguin, 1977, p.83.

While the Picaro's stance towards the world is active and resourceful – qualities promoted by the literary forms that arose from the individuality of the protagonist – the proletarian as an individual is often left passive and dumb by the historical records, more like a drone or a brute. However, since the proletarian's experience in life is dominated by cooperative action in the production and reproduction of the world, it is within collective experience that his or her individuality is realized. That the world can be hostile and capricious the proletarian knows, but he or she also knows that this need not always be so, because it is the work of his hands and the labour of her body that have created it in the first place.⁴⁶

The argument is significant. In the past few labour historians had been daring enough as to nominate 18th century workers as 'proletarians'. Linebaugh's contention is that this was simply another way to silence and pacify a set of active individuals who collectively must be considered in class terms. Linebaugh builds on these observations to argue that this situation of indistinction and overlapping needs meant that crime was both a recourse for many in lieu of adequate wages, and a measure of class struggle in the absence of strikes or trade unions.

[One] type of solidarity expressed between the condemned and the Tyburn crowd, that of common experience of work, warns us against making too facile a separation between the criminal and the working class.⁴⁷

46 Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, op. cit., p.152.

47 Peter Linebaugh, *Albion's Fatal Tree*, op. cit., p.82

In many ways the analysis of the 18th century relationship between crime, law and class drew its point of departure from the category of the 'social bandit' developed by Eric Hobsbawm. He had initially developed an argument for the understanding of bandits as 'primitive' or 'archaic' forms of social agitation in a book entitled *Primitive Rebels* published in 1959. What had been understood previously by historians as isolated and episodic phenomena, Hobsbawm characterises as essentially social.

Individual rebelliousness is itself a socially neutral phenomenon, and consequently mirrors the divisions and struggles within society.⁴⁸

Arguing that contrary to the 'archaic' form such social protests took, they had been profligate in the last half of the 19th and whole of the 20th centuries, Hobsbawm's first book opened up an entire field of social history, and he revisited the subject in the 1960s in an immensely popular book simply entitled *Bandits* (1969). His effort to explain the complex through which 'social crimes' were sanctioned, and social criminals protected and romanticised in popular myth, attempted to both build connections and explain fundamental differences between these rebels and modern social movements. The mythical status and political construction of 'social bandits' is explored in our chapter on Authenticity and Ambiguity.

Meaning of the Artisan

What is clear from Linebaugh's description of the 18th

48 Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, New York: Norton, 1965, p.13.

century period of manufacture is that there were workers and there were employers, but their separation was not so simple. Their ties were complex, since wages were highly variable and customary workers in a trade often shared dependencies. So, whilst labour historians might be tempted to follow the radical cut described by Marx and elaborated upon by Polanyi which would consign to oblivion paternalism, custom and a less than modern division of labour, there are strong arguments for seeing the actuality in somewhat muddier but interconnected terms.

The destruction of farm implements by those working them on American plantations belongs to the story of Luddism, not just because they too were toolbreakers, but they were part of the Atlantic recomposition of textile labor-power. They grew cotton that was spun and woven in Lancashire. The story of the plantation slaves has been separated from the story of the Luddites. Whether [their] separation was owing to misleading distinctions between wage and slave labour or to artificial national or racial differences is unclear.⁴⁹

That Linebaugh and others' work in the 1960s and 1970s on the 18th century spoke so powerfully to their time and our own is because teleological narratives and stable ideals of a working class were quickly becoming contested history, and remain so today. Linebaugh's initial point of contestation is that historians looking back had bracketed off a part of the working class from recognition as such. In other cases we will

49 Peter Linebaugh, *Ned Ludd & Queen Mab: Machine-Breaking, Romanticism, and the Several Commons of 1811-12*, Oakland: PM Press, 2012, p.23.

see how the historical framework for existing movements could also be challenged productively.

In his essay 'The Myth of the Artisan', Jacques Rancière re-examines some common premises at work in French labour history and labour movements.

The works devoted to the labor and socialist movements in France make use of a widely accepted interpretive principle: the relationship between professional qualification (skill) and militant consciousness (militancy). According to this interpretation, the movement developed as the expression of a working-class culture and was based on the actions and attitudes of the most highly skilled workers. Technical ability and pride in work thus created the basis for early labor militancy and it was the Taylorist revolution that spelled the end of this militancy by imposing massive and bureaucratic forms, which led to the creation of a new working population lacking professional skills, collective traditions, and interest in their work.⁵⁰

Not only did this interpretation produce a historical myth by which craft skill would track militancy, but Rancière argues that this myth served to empower a particular labour aristocracy at the point at which their ownership of the struggle (and presumably certain workplace privileges) was threatened.

This supposed first axiom of labor militancy is most likely a belated interpretation, born of political necessity in some sections of the labor movement which, in order to fend off

50 Jacques Rancière, 'The Myth of the Artisan', *International Labor and Working Class History*, Number 24, Fall 1983, p.1.

new and competing militant forces, was led to harken back to a largely imaginary tradition of ‘authentic’ worker socialism.⁵¹

One of the hallmarks of the workers’ movement in this moment (the 1840s) was the celebration of work and sense of pride of craft expressed in verse, but Rancière questions this, invoking a logic of ‘inverse proportionality whereby the men who are loudest in singing the glory of work are those who have most intensely experienced the degeneration of that ideal.’⁵²

Rancière also questions the ‘stability’ of the identification of workers with their trades:

The term ‘artisan’ evokes for us a certain stability, a certain identification of an individual with a function. Yet identities are often misleading. [...] The same individual can be found self-employed in one trade, salaried in another, or hired as a clerk or peddler in a third. With the gaps in their time caused by unemployment or the off-seasons, with their businesses crumbling as soon as they are set up [...].⁵³

So, we can see class as a process, being made and remade. Questions of identity often manifest forms of idealism, there are problems with the historian taking them at face value and reproducing them, but, however ideal, they frequently become an operative force of containment regulating divisions in the working class, who can enter it, whose grievances are legitimate and whose are not.

Similar dynamics unfold in the discussions which have

51 *Ibid.*, p.1.

52 *Ibid.*, p.6.

53 *Ibid.*, p.5.

ensued within labour and social movements following an attempt by Occupy groups to work with unions to shut down ports on the west coast of the United States.

On November 2, Occupy Oakland shut down the port with a massive, unprecedented march of some 30,000 demonstrators, occupying the port to protest the bloody police attack on the Occupy encampment in front of Oakland City hall [...] It was also called in solidarity with the Longview longshore battle against EGT.⁵⁴

Retired Longshoreman, Jack Heyman's account of Occupy's November 2011 action takes labour historian Cal Winslow to task for reifying the radical history of longshore workers' union, the ILWU.

[Winslow] imparts his 'wisdom' from above in his CounterPunch article (7/25/12), 'Victory in Longview, A Year On: And Some Lessons From Occupy'. His 'lesson' is a justification for the ILWU union bureaucracy's betrayal of a hard-fought struggle from the bottom up and a gratuitous diatribe against longshore militants and their allied Occupy radicals who organized some of the most powerful labor solidarity actions in years. Tellingly, Winslow evidently did extensive interviews and used quotes from ILWU President Robert McEllrath, union staff and the police but none from working longshoremen, except Dan Coffman, president of

54 Jack Heyman, 'A Class Struggle Critique: The ILWU Longshore Struggle in Longview and Beyond', <http://www.transportworkers.org/node/90> Heyman's article responds critically to Cal Winslow, 'The ILWU Longshore Struggle in Longview and Beyond', <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/08/10/the-ilwu-longshore-struggle-in-longview-and-beyond/>

Longview Local 21.⁵⁵

Heyman attributes this to a split between ‘business unionists’ and ‘class struggle trades unionists’. As ports have become more technologised and labour forces smaller, union militants have been marginalised within their unions. Heyman relates this change to the need to work with broader social movements outside of the union membership.

The Occupy activists were trying to work closely with longshoremen in Longview, Portland and Oakland, less so in Seattle and L.A. Occupy was not cowed by bourgeois laws or cops, though some of the infantile anarchist pranks served no good purpose. Yes, there was some anger toward unions expressed but that was because they didn’t differentiate between union bureaucrats and the rank and file. I criticized that in my remarks at the Seattle forum when the bureaucratic heavies moved to break the meeting up. Besides Occupy is not one cohesive ideology. It had conflicting politics and practices. Its inchoate left populism and vague anti-capitalist rhetoric has attracted some young workers who want to fight. Winslow speaks for the bureaucrats who after getting in hot water early in the Fall did what their lawyers told them to do to avoid a fight at all costs.⁵⁶

What Heyman presents is the divisive efforts of a union bureaucracy attempting to manage an insular conversation over the organisation of work between themselves and the company management – to protect the best interests of

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

workers by preserving their authority to discuss and direct their own work. Yet, challenging capitalism is necessarily beyond the remit of this conversation and would threaten union power in the workplace or confuse it with aims other than protecting the workforce. The question of how to build connections between waged and unwaged struggles will be central to social movements in the present we inhabit.

Many of our historians recognised the processes by which divisions were enacted upon and among the working class in the development of capitalism. Raphael Samuel:

In a rather different direction progressivism has been undermined by a younger generation of Marxist historians. One may note, among labour historians, a shift in attention from 'heroic' periods of struggle, such as Chartism, to more subterranean forms of resistance; a renewal of Marxist interest in such divisive phenomena as the aristocracy of labour and the lumpen proletariat; an increased awareness of the contradictory phenomena involved in 'the battle of ideas'.⁵⁷

For Jacques Rancière, to study the making of a class is a process not just of finding and articulating commonalities and common antagonisms, but also of identifying critical differences:

The essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with

57 Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians 1880-1980', *New Left Review*, .Vol.1, No.120, March-April, 1990, p.95.

controversial figures of division.⁵⁸

The Worker, His Wife, Machines

An example of Rancière's attention to the production of divisions and antagonisms within the working class can be found in his 1975 essay for *Revoltes Logiques*, 'Off to the Exhibition...'. He assesses reports made by trade delegations to the Exposition Universelle of 1867, a spectacle, Rancière insists, which 'the workers perceive [...] as a product of their dispossession'. Through them he examines a meeting point of 'class and domestic power' which is both significant and somewhat self-defeating.

The workers remonstrate against employers' deployment of machines as a tool against their class while attacking their employers' efforts to introduce women into the workplace. Machines are attacked because they deskill the worker rather than free him from work time, therefore removing from the worker his power over his own production – his craft and intelligence – 'in order to produce a bit more, to produce regardless.'⁵⁹ Though the introduction of women into the workplace would cause wages to fall it is mainly attacked by male workers in these reports for threatening to remove the worker from his power over his domestic situation.

This is not only a matter of scandal judged by contemporary attitudes to gender equality in the workplace,

58 Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, (trans. Liz Heron), London and New York 1995, pp.32-3.

59 Shoemakers' report cited in 'Off to the Exhibition: The Worker, His Wife and the Machines', in *Staging the People*, Vol.I, London: Verso, 2011, p.68.

but could already at the time be understood as an outmoded attitude: only a few years later the Women's Union for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded recognised attempts to discriminate against female workers as the defence of privilege and sought to abolish all competition between male and female workers.⁶⁰

Rancière's presentation of these reports is at first sympathetic. Here, (albeit elite) workers pass judgement on their own conditions, in terms which correspond closely to Karl Marx's analysis on the introduction of machines, so challenging the emerging power of employers to reorganise work, catalyse competition and force downward pressure on the wage across all industries.⁶¹ The reports grasp the machine not as a 'cold-blooded monster to be destroyed' but rather, as Rancière's presentation goes to lengths to show, imagine a moral and social 'collective appropriation of the machines'.⁶² Nonetheless, Rancière also gives due attention to a contradiction: here the retort to one particular division of labour production marks a second division in the social reproduction of the working class itself.

While Rancière identifies this moment as a transition from 'corporative thinking' or 'Bonapartiste "socialism"' to a 'new revolutionary working class ideal', a contradiction in the class is not resolved, but rather carried over. In Rancière's somewhat reductive formulation, the foundation of this split is 'the power of the working man over his wife'. If the way forward is for the working class movement to retract from

60 See, Adrian Rifkin and Roger Thomas (Eds.), *Voices of the People*, New York: Routledge, 1988, p.14.

61 Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol.I Chapter 15.

62 *Staging the People*, Vol.I, op. cit., p.73.

the compact with bosses and move to open struggle over the means of production, towards either a revolutionary state or workers' control, this trajectory of productivism leaves these two powers – at work and at home – separated and unexamined parts of a never-to-be-whole.

The 1975 essay marks a crucial development in Rancière's thinking. Initially sympathetic to the threats to working class autonomy, he latterly recognised this as a problematic example by which proletarian resistance and power can be formed at the expense of other denigrated subjects I.e. women.⁶³ Henceforth, it will become impossible for the workers to affirm themselves as workers without reproducing inequality – for their gains will also be their losses – the workers' movement becomes only the movement of those who identify and wield power over other parties as men. The anti-work ethos which Rancière situates elsewhere on more individualistic terms finds, here, a structural rapport.

Similarly Sheila Rowbotham unpicks the complexity of male artisans' resistance to industry in Britain, emphasising traces of gender inequality and frustrated male domination among their often heroicised convictions. For some artisans it was not simply the brutality of factory conditions, low wages or the loss of their way of life, but also the break with men's authority in the home that drove hostility to the factory system:

Physical violence existed within the family but there it fitted into a customary pattern of relationships. In the factory it became symbolic of a new industrial relationship, the impersonal

63 Donald Reid, Introduction to *Proletarian Nights*, London: Verso, 2012, op. cit., pp.xxv-xxvi.

discipline of the cash nexus. In the factory, too, women and children were under the control of overseers and employers, not fathers and husbands. This meant the man's social control in the working class family was threatened [...] even the proud handloom weavers had to face the final humiliation of sending their daughters to the factories, or find their sons were courting factory girls. In one song [...] the father asks his son how he could fancy a factory worker.⁶⁴

Vanguardism

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson argued forcibly for a study of class as a relationship, that is as a historical relationship:

If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and in the end, this is its only definition.⁶⁵

Marx made the distinction between a 'class in itself' – a way of categorising people as having a common relation to the means of production – and a 'class for itself', that is, the active composition of class by people in terms of their shared interests, conditions and demands. In Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, these distinct categories are joined by

64 *Hidden from History*, op. cit., p.29.

65 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Penguin, 2003, p.11.

the very act of drawing up a 'class on paper' by the historian. In reconstructing the making of the working class, Thompson, and other historians, were insistent on their avoidance of the projection of the party line onto the working class. This was a break from the more 'vanguardist' forms of Marxist analysis, in which it was put forward that the party, the 'tendency', or the state apparatus could stand in and present itself as a cohering force for the motivations of the proletariat.

Vanguardism was a particular form of a common problem within historical reflection: what sociologists call 'homologies', or identifications between the position of the historian and his or her subject that might shave off the differences between their experiences and social position and bring into question the choice of subjects to study. Here, Dorothy Thompson is suspicious of a Labour Historian on his reading of Chartism:

Not all the histories of the movement make quite such specific demands on the past, but underlying nearly all is the attempt to draw a contemporary moral, and hence, almost inevitably, the historian identifies himself with one or other tendency or sect. The moralising and lesson-drawing have preceded, instead of following, deep research into the facts.⁶⁶

E.P. Thompson confers a retrospective degree of agency on his subjects in their own definition. But this doesn't mean that Thompson et al didn't find points of over-identification with their subjects, nor that they didn't indulge in some wishful thinking about the intentions of what was after all a complex

66 Dorothy Thompson, 'The Chartist Challenge', *New Reasoner*, Issue 8, Spring 1959, p.139.

body of people.

However, we should also remember that the accounts of workers which Thompson and others collect in their studies point to self-generated modes of class composition. These vary from accounts in which workers themselves come up with a subjective sense of their relationship to their bosses and between themselves, to attempts at a more objective and widespread analysis of their conditions.

Culturalism and Determination

E.P. Thompson's definition of class becomes most useful when we turn away from the vanguardist projection of desires onto the proletariat, or the dismissal of class struggle as a demonstrable tension in society, and begin instead to look at how people actually experience their social relationships in times when 'class consciousness' is not as publicly visible or self-evident, or when the wider labour movement appears to break down.

In suggesting that the working class was not just the 'product' of the Industrial Revolution, and touching on the continuity of thought and tradition from earlier periods, Thompson expands on the dimensions of class composition. Class is not simply an economic category – 'so many yards of raw material for industry' – but also a 'cultural' category (class actors are reflective upon their own conditions, they attempt to change them, they also argue amongst themselves as to how to change them):

Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the

identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. *If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.* We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law.⁶⁷

What Thompson seems close to saying is that culture, rather than being a ‘disinterested’ world of practices to be set apart from economic relations, is in fact a terrain of struggles over power amongst the relations within which the working class was directly and productively involved, despite not always having much of a stake in its official production. In this way, we can say that culture is, and was, thereby ‘interested’. But this is not the same as saying that culture is ultimately the product of economic determination; instead it is employed in a complex relationship, partly determined by material conditions and partly the attempt to overcome determination.

However different their judgements of value, conservative, radical, and socialist historians suggested the same equation: steam power and the cotton mill = new working class [...] [but] the making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history. It was not the spontaneous

67 *The Making of the English Working Class*, op. cit., p.9.

generation of the factory system. Nor should we think of an external force – the ‘industrial revolution’ – working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, and turning it out at the other end as a ‘fresh race of beings’.

The changing productive relations and working conditions of the Industrial Revolution were imposed, not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman – and the free-born Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him. The factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions. He was the object of massive religious indoctrination and the creator of political traditions [...] The working class made itself as much as it was made.⁶⁸

But equally this requires us to address how the everyday expression of social relationships is mediated in public culture, and what values the mediators of such expression. This means looking also at the institutions that consecrate and reproduce such mediation. As Neil Gray points out in a conversation with Marina Vishmidt, in social movements there is a tension between affirmation and negation:

[T]he notion that in any social movement there needs to be a clear identification of a position of exclusion or injustice, and that this identification is inevitably contradictory or antagonistic in the sense that the excluded group must frame their exclusion in relation to the dominant relation of capitalist hierarchy, patriarchy, race or class. This first moment of affirmation (or self-recognition), then leads to the second moment of negation

68 *The Making of the English Working Class*, op. cit., p.213.

whereby the very conditions that frame those hierarchies must be overturned in order to supersede those relations and divisions *per se*.⁶⁹

If, with Marx, we look toward the abolition of class, then we can see that when working people mobilise around the declaration of conditions and convictions held in common, this act of constituting a class can serve a contradictory function. On the one hand it can identify a condition to be overcome – a potential future; and on the other, particularly when mobilised by the state, political parties, trade unions, etc., it can serve to enact limits on such a collective overcoming of determination. If people mobilise less now on the basis of common convictions, then it is possible to understand these as movements which no longer apprehend class society as an arena in which any positive gains can be made.

To properly consider the formation of an expanded working class requires attention to detail where previously there was none. By pursuing this project, one does not find in a class an undifferentiated mass, but rather a variegated and active field of qualities, continuities and differences which in tumultuous times can arrive at shared interests. In Rancière's words this is because, 'there is no single "voice of the people"'. There are broken, polemical voices, each time dividing the identity they present.'⁷⁰

Here, hopefully we have established briefly the principle of division in three senses: (1) the foundational political

69 'The Economy of Abolition/Abolition of the Economy: Neil Gray in Exchange with Marina Vishmidt', *Variant*, issue 42, Winter 2011, <http://www.variant.org.uk/42texts/EconomyofAbolition.html>

70 Jacques Rancière, *Staging The People: The Proletarian and His Double*, London: Verso, 2011, p.12.

division between the sovereign citizenry whose reason stems from their ownership of property and an ‘unreasonable’ mob, (2) the distinction between a positive conception of multiplicity and difference, and the division into hierarchies that can develop between and within classes, and (3) the problem of the historian’s acceptance of purported divisions of status, technical ability, or enfranchisement and the need to probe deeper.

A study of what informed and shaped these maligned and ignored actors (in which ‘the below’ consisted) needs both the reconsideration of old sources read in a new light and the discovery of new ones. In the following chapter we focus on the question of sources which such historical work deployed.

General Ludd's Triumph

Anon., 'General Ludd's Triumph' to the tune of 'Poor Jack', excerpted in E.P. Thompson, *Making of The English Working Class*, p.534 and reproduced in full here, <http://campus.murraystate.edu/academic/faculty/kevin.binfield/songs.htm>

Chant no more your old rhymes
about bold Robin Hood, His feats
I but little admire / I will sing the
Achievements of General Ludd
Now the Hero of Nottinghamshire
/ Brave Ludd was to measures of
violence unused / Till his sufferings
became so severe / That at last to
defend his own Interest he rous'd
And for the great work did prepare

Now by force unsubdued, and by
threats undismay'd / Death itself
can't his ardour repress / The
presence of Armies can't make him
afraid / Nor impede his career of
success / Whilst the news of his
conquests is spread far and near
How his Enemies take the alarm
His courage, his fortitude, strikes
them with fear / For they dread his
Omnipotent Arm!

The guilty may fear, but no
vengeance he aims / At [the] honest
man's life or Estate / His wrath is
entirely confined to wide frames /
And to those that old prices abate
/ These Engines of mischief were
sentenced to die / By unanimous
vote of the Trade / And Ludd who
can all opposition defy / Was the
grand Executioner made

And when in the work of destruction
employed /He himself to no method
confines /By fire and by water
he gets them destroyed /For the
Elements aid his designs /Whether
guarded by Soldiers along the
Highway / Or closely secured in the
room /He shivers them up both by
night and by day /And nothing can
soften their doom

He may censure great Ludd's
disrespect for the Laws Who ne'er
for a moment reflects / That foul
Imposition alone was the cause
Which produced these unhappy
effects / Let the haughty no longer
the humble oppress / Then shall
Ludd sheath his conquering Sword /
His grievances instantly meet with
redress / Then peace will be quickly
restored

Let the wise and the great lend
their aid and advice / Nor e'er
their assistance withdraw / Till full
fashioned work at the old fashioned
price / Is established by Custom
and Law / Then the Trade when
this arduous contest is o'er / Shall
raise in full splendour its head / And
colting and cutting and squaring
no more / Shall deprive honest
workmen of bread.