ENGLISH RADICALISM IN THE
1790s

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I. Introduction

The 1790s was a very tumultuous period in English history. Spurred on by the French Revolution, massive political upheavals of working people* took place which raised the specter of revolution against the old order. Tumult involving working people was not itself unknown in England. Factions of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie had long called in and out of existence mobs drawn from the lower classes (for example the "Church and King" mobs) in order to repress their opponents. There also existed a long tradition of working people intermittently taking matters into their own hands. Wat Tyler led a major peasant revolt as early as 1381. The Levellers and Diggers, radical yeomen and artisans, challenged Cromwell's leadership of the anti-royalist forces in the English Civil War in the 1640s with demands for universal male suffrage, a completely democratic republic, and in some cases, economic equality.

In many ways, then, the radical movement of the 1790s was a continuation of these earlier movements and traditions. It was particularly tied to the reform agitation of the 1760s which had arisen over discontent with government corruption, high taxes, press gangs, the law, limited suffrage and depression. Though led mainly by middle class reformers, the movement of this period involved large numbers of working people. But the movement of the 1790s also represented an important break with that of the '60s, because though it began as a coalition of middle class reformers and working people, the movement soon came under the direction of artisans, wage-workers and small shopkeepers and traders.

*By "working people", I mean the artisans, wage-workers and peasants of this period who were not yet developed into a modern or coherent proletariat.
themselves, who became increasingly independent of the traditional middle class reform leadership both politically and organizationally. For the first time, an ongoing radical political movement in England was organized by and towards working people concerned with their own interests, a major break with the traditional exclusion from political life of what was by the '90s an embryo modern proletariat. It was also different from the earlier reform movement in that, under the influence of the French Revolution, the movement became Jacobin and in some cases insurrectionary in its attitude toward the English state.

Where did these changes spring from? Clearly, the French Revolution had an enormous ideological and inspirational impact in England. However, it would be a mistake to view these changes simply as the result of events in France. On the contrary, English working people's grievances and radicalism had a long history as described above. To some degree, the French Revolution called them again to life. In addition, the influence of the French Revolution found fertile ground in the economic and social changes occurring in England at this time. The 1790s stood at the take-off point of the English Industrial Revolution, a time when a coherent English working class with the beginnings of a class consciousness was just starting to develop. Working people were particularly anxious to involve themselves in political life on their own terms. As Edward Thompson remarks,

Too often events in England in the 1790s are seen only as a reflected glow from the storming of the Bastille. But the elements precipitated by the French example—the Dissenting and libertarian traditions—reach far
back into English history... the agitation of the 1790s... was not an agitation about France, although French events both inspired and bedevilled it. It was an English agitation, of impressive dimensions, for an English democracy (p. 102)*

II. The Development of Radical Ideology

The movement led by middle class reformers in the 1760s was not grounded in particularly radical or revolutionary thought. Rather, the movement attempted to portray itself as the representatives of the true status quo, harking to the "Rights of Englishmen" which they believed were represented by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and its impolitic constitution which supposedly reaffirmed the age old limits on royal power over English subjects. Some reformers went as far as to argue that these "rights" dated from pre-Roman, or at least pre-Norman times.

Though John Wilkes and other reform leaders argued that these rights were being subverted by the prevailing political policies and structures, their argument by its very nature accepted a great deal of the existing power structure: the rule of the Church, the King, the landed aristocracy and the commercial bourgeoisie. The other side of the coin was that the ideology of these middle class reform leaders accepted the exclusion of working people from political life, except as the battering ram of forces such as themselves. They hoped instead that the government might be run by more efficient and less corrupt middle and upper class politicians (p. 78-88).

*All citations, unless otherwise noted, are from Edward Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, New York, 1963.
Clearly, this ideology was not compatible with a role for working people greater than that of shock troops for other classes. As Thompson puts it, "For a plebian movement to arise it was essential to escape from these categories altogether and set forward far wider democratic claims" (P. 88). The French Revolution of 1789, with its complete break with tradition and wide involvement of the peasantry and sans-culottes of Paris did just that for English politics. The vehicle for this ideology in England was Tom Paine. Paine was himself an artisan (staymaker) who had left England in the mid-1770s to become a spokesman for the artisans, wage-workers and small farmers who were the backbone of the American revolution. His Common Sense, written in 1776, laid out in simple language the most radically republican arguments of the revolution and played perhaps the pivotal role in maintaining the morale for the revolutionary army.

By the '90s, Paine had returned to England, where he wrote the Rights of Man in 1791-2, which challenged in popular form Edmund Burke's denunciation of republicanism in general and the French Revolution in particular. In his pamphlet, Paine denounced the monarchy, hereditary rule and the landed gentry as parasitical and decadent. He ridiculed the idea that the English government did or should operate on any valid constitution from the past and rejected any arguments which called on such traditions as the authority for change. Human beings were basically rational and good, and had to order their lives according to their own needs, not those of past generations. In place of the existing political order, Paine advocated a radical political levelling based on universal male suffrage in the manner of the French Revo-
olution, with which Paine maintained a steadfast internationalist sympathy and solidary.

Paine, however, stopped considerably short of proposing a general economic levelling (socialism), despite the fact that his ideas seem to head in that direction. This limit on Paine's thought can be explained by the time in which he lived. Paine represented most of all the artisans, who at this juncture were experiencing a profound, but from the artisan's eyes, still unclear, transformation in status. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, most artisans were gradually losing their independent position and becoming increasingly proletarian. Yet, the demise of the artisans as independent small capitalists was not yet completed. While Paine and others could see the direction in which artisans were being taken, they were not at all convinced that it was impossible for them, given the appropriate economic and political reforms, to flourish in the new order as independent capitalist craftsmen. The program which Paine outlined to accomplish this goal was the dismantling of monopolistic Mercantilist policies in favor of laissez-faire capitalism. This step, together with appropriation of the land of the gentry and its distribution to the dispossessed yeomen, would make possible the development of an economy based on small farmers and artisans in which all working people could enjoy economic independence and dignity.

Because Paine could not yet see the existence of a modern industrial bourgeoisie or proletariat in distinct conflict, he did not appeal, as would later radicals, to a working class as such. Rather, he directed his arguments broadly toward all working
people and small capitalists who felt stifled by their exclusion from politics and their economic domination at the hands of the landed gentry and commercial bourgeoisie (pp. 89-96).

III. English Jacobin Organization

Paine was extremely well-received. Within a short time, his pamphlet sold an unprecedented 200,000 copies, probably the highest circulation of any single publication before it. All over England tens of thousands of English working people were attracted to the radical Jacobinism of Paine and the French Revolution, and for the first time such ideas found expression in organizations founded and run by working people themselves.

The most important of these organizations was the London Correspondence Society, led by Thomas Hardy (a shoemaker) and John Thelwall (a professional). It addressed a wide variety of political and economic themes, ranging from immediate demands such as universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, lower prices to support for the French Revolution and calls for a republican England, i.e., the issues originally articulated by Paine. At its height in 1794-5, the LCS was actually a federation of many local "divisions" which would meet together in and were guided by a democratically-elected central council, made up mainly of artisans and workers, along with middle class intellectuals sympathetic with the aims of the movement. The total membership in London at that time probably included a hard core of 2,000 and a paper membership of 10,000. The LCS served throughout the period of the 1790s agitation as the guiding force for hundreds of similar correspondence societies around the country, with which,
as its name implies, it kept in regular contact over political action and ideas.

After Paine fled to France in 1793 to avoid government prosecution, John Thelwall and Thomas Spence remained the main theorists of the LCS. Thelwall was a strict Painite radical and brilliant orator. Spence was closest to the working class movement of the 19th Century, arguing for agrarian socialism, the rights of women (alongside Mary Wollstonecraft), and probably best represented the revolutionary insurrectionist wing of the movement in London (pps. 152-162).

In many ways, the LCS was a model for later working class organizations in England. It was overwhelmingly composed of artisans, wage-workers and small tradesmen, very much the material from which the earlier English reform movement, the American revolution and the French Revolution was wrought. As an organization of the emerging working class it was rigorously democratic. The secretary of the organization was himself an artisan. The dues were purposely low to permit a wide membership among working people. Its meetings were often combined with social activities, but extremely serious when dealing with business, and were run in such a way as to encourage every member to participate in discussion and decision-making. Any hint of hierarchy or heavy-handedness was quickly quashed by the ever-vigilant and suspicious membership. (pps. 21-22).

The characteristics of the LCS were not unique among the societies. Among the most important English Jacobin groups was the Sheffield society. It was begun in 1791 by mechanics (skilled workers) based in the cutlery industry, over the issue of rising
prices, though it quickly adopted the overall Jacobin outlook. It included a few professionals, radical Methodists and Quakers, but was led by the journeymen and mechanics. At its height, the Sheffield society included thousands of members, and its activities ranged from self-education to opposing England's counter-revolutionary war against France which began in 1793. As with the LCS, at least some of its members considered insurrection, sometimes in conjunction with the French (pps. 149-151).

These and other similar societies, voicing the ideas expressed above, led the great upheavals in England in the '90s. For example, mechanics and sailors in Northern England demonstrated for democratic rights and in favor of the French Revolution in remarkably lucid Jacobin terms. As one upper class writer reported to William Wilberforce, and MP from Yorkshire regarding the situation in the Northern County of Durham in late 1792,

Considerable numbers in Bernard Castle have manifested disaffection to the constitution, and the words, "No King," "Liberty," and "Equality," have been written there upon the Market Cross. During the late disturbances amongst the keel men at Shields and Sunderland, General Lambton was thus addressed: "Have you read this little work of Tom Paines?" "No." Then read it --we like it much. You have a great estate General; we shall soon divide it amongst us." (p. 103)

Similar scenes were repeated throughout the country.

By the end of 1792, that section of the middle and upper class which had originally sympathized with the French Revolution in the belief that it was simply a long-overdue French version of the Glorious Revolution against an imperial rival, was becoming increasingly hostile to the French Revolution. In part, this hostility was based on events in France itself. The Revolution,
now under Jacobin leadership, was becoming increasingly radical, as signified by its declaration of a republic, its execution of Louis XVI and other royalists, its atheism and its threats to private property. The Revolution threatened to upset the balance of power in Europe. Most importantly, the English middle and upper classes were growing fearful at the rise of English Jacobinism, which it rightly declared was taking inspiration from their French comrades (pps. 105-7). As Thompson puts it, "...working men in villages and towns over the whole country of England claiming general rights for themselves. It was this -- and not the French terror -- which threw the propertied classes into panic." (p. 104).

Though the government responded to the increasing radicalization of the English working people with increased and often fierce repression, the general result was only to further aid the growth of the Jacobin movement. The societies made still deeper inroads among artisans and wage-workers, especially in Scotland, Sheffield and Norwich, largely over protests against economic conditions and demands for social remedies (pps. 119-123). Food riots became particularly widespread at this time. Despite their name, these "riots" were actually well-organized, disciplined and generally peaceful seizures of food by revolutionary crowds from farmers and merchants. The people would sell the confiscated food at what they considered reasonable prices and then delivered the proceeds to the original owners. These food seizures were as linked to the past as they were to the Jacobin present. To poor believed that the rich were obliged to ensure their survival, a notion clearly rooted in paternal feudal relations
which were being torn asunder by the enclosures and rise of a very a-personal capitalism (pps. 59-65).

1795 saw the height of popular actions, particularly in London. Between June and December, several mammoth demonstrations organized and led by the Jacobin LCS were held with an attendance of between 100,000-300,000 at each event. On October 29th, a crowd of 200,000 went as far as to physically mob the King's procession with demands of "No War," "No King." These huge rallies were not the riotous and undisciplined mobs of "Church and King," the hangman's procession, or Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. They were in reality disciplined, political events, which drew into conscious radical politics hundreds of thousands of working people, men, women, and children, for the first time in their own name, listening to their own speakers echo the words of Paine and Robespierre. (pps. 140-145).

The aftermath of this great upsurge was increasingly vicious repression and stepped up war with France, and the movement declined in strength as a result, its surviving leaders and organizations forced underground. The last gasp of the '90s upheavals came in 1797-8, as the remaining movement became increasingly radicalized and insurrectionary. The now-underground societies were connected with the rising of Scottish weavers at Tranent in 1797. The naval mutinies at Spithead and Nore in 1797, though due immediately to intolerable conditions in the navy, reflected the politics of English Jacobinism, and when the risings (what they thought was still) failed, a few mutinous ships made their way to republican France.

Perhaps most out of character with much of later English working class activity, the English Jacobins formed the United
Englishmen as a counterpart to the United Irishmen of Wolfe Tone's Irish uprising of 1798. And though it is not easy to determine, it seems that a number of English Jacobins seriously considered aid for what they hoped would be a French invasion of England, which they perceived not as conquest by another imperial power, but revolutionary internationalist republican liberation. (pp. 166-174).

All the events of 1797-8 mentioned above are reflected in an oath taken by some members of the Light Dragoons in Manchester in 1797 which even reflects an Irish accent:

In a ful Presence of God. I a.b. doo swear not to abey the Cornall but the...Peapell. Not the officers but the Committey of United Inglashmen...and to assist with arms as fare as lise in my power to estabilish a Republican Government in this Country and others and to assist the french on ther Landing to free this Contray (p. 170).

IV. Conclusion

The obvious question in surveying the 1790s is: why wasn't there an English revolution? Certainly the explanation is not, as one textbook argues, that "By the end of 1792 the British were firmly convinced that French Revolutionary ideas of Liberty were a great deal less attractive than their own" (D. Richards and J.W. Hunt, An Illustrated History of Modern Britain 1783-1964, London, 1965). On the contrary, we've seen that a mammoth Jacobin movement did exist through at least 1796, with great echoes for the next two years. Fierce government repression, together with war-imposed discipline played an important role in dampening the movement, but repression alone probably can't explain the demise of so great a movement. It is true that the British
ruling class was relatively strong, broad and flexible when compared with the hollow and bankrupt absolutism of Louis XVI. Yet, this does not explain why a powerful movement of working people were doomed to fail in overthrowing the existing order.

Thompson offers what he believes to be a key element in explaining the absense of an English Revolution in the '90s. In a nutshell, it is that the radicalism of the French Revolution after 1792 and of English Jacobinism in the same period, scared off most middle class reformers and the industrial bourgeoisie which had earlier on been sympathetic to the demise of Louis in France to to reform in England. Where in France, this class cleavage within the revolutionary movement came to the fore after the destruction of the ancien regime, in England it emerged before a cross-class revolutionary movement could develop. When the English Jacobin movement proceeded in a direction which encouraged the independent action of working people, and revolution in France threatened the British empire, the reform-minded English bourgeoisie lined up with the English ruling class rather than risk their property and order to a republican revolution dominated by working people. So while working people had made major strides in their own political development, they were similar to their French brother. and sister sans-culottes in that they were not quite yet a coherent modern proletariat, capable or holding, or in the case of England, taking power on their own. Ironically, English working people were strong enough to scare off the bourgeoisie, but too weak to succeed alone. As Thompson reiterates:
England differed from other European nations in this, that the flood-tide of counter-revolutionary feeling and discipline coincided with the flood-tide of the Industrial Revolution; as new techniques and forms of industrial organisation advanced, so political and social rights receded. The "natural" alliance between an impatient radically-minded industrial bourgeoisie and a formative proletariat was broken as soon as it was formed... If there was no revolution in England in the 1790s it was not because of Methodism but because the only alliance strong enough to effect it fell apart; after 1792 there were no Girondins to open the doors through which the Jacobins might come... the French Revolution consolidated Old Corruption by uniting landowners and manufacturers in a common panic; and the popular societies were too weak and too inexperienced to effect either revolution or reform on their own. (p. 177-8)

The defection of the English bourgeoisie presaged what would be the pattern of events for anti-feudal revolutions from that point on. Though revolutionary-minded bourgeoisies might desire and even attempt to overthrow the remnants of feudalism in order to win political power commensurate with its economic power, it would always retreat from revolution once the working class ceased to be an army of pawns and began to exercise its own power. The bourgeoisie correctly understood that the working class would not go as far as to make a revolution which overthrew the remaining bonds of feudalism only to peacefully return to the factories and leave power with the bourgeoisie. By 1848, this pattern became exceedingly clear.

Despite the fact that no revolution occurred in the 1790s in England, the movement of that decade had an enormous impact in the not too distant future on the creation of a modern working class culture. It left a tradition of revolutionary thought ranging from Paine to Wollstonecraft. Moreover, it left behind a cadre of activists in what was increasingly being molded by the Industrial Revolution into a proletariat. These workers remained
active in whatever way they could, and eventually took part in
the first trade union activity of the late Napoleonic and post­
war period, using the experience and organizational skills they
had developed in the 1790s.

Ironically, the destruction of the populist movement of the
1790s with its still vague class divisions and consciousness
(at least for working people), contributed to these later
developments. Isolated from more middle class elements of the
Jacobin movement, small groups of workers around the country
were forced to exist on their own in an underground fashion.
They became more aware of the rise of industrial capitalism and
its consequences for the further division between and separate
development of the classes from that point forward, what Thomp­
son calls an economic, political and cultural apartheid which
continues to this day. (pps. 177-182).

The reality of industrial capitalism in the early 19th
Century also made clear the downward direction (in terms of
status and independence) in which nearly all independent artisans
were heading, a fact which had an impact on working class ideas.
While Paine's words about political liberty still stirred working
class readers, his belief that industrial capitalism would pro­
vide opportunity for artisans rang less and less true as artisans
became mere appendages of the factory system. It was not long
before Paine's calls for political levelling and liberty were
joined by an equally powerful call for the economic democracy
of socialism.