

Gregory Claeys

**LIBERALISM AS RADICALISM:
THE PROBLEM OF CLASS AND THE LIMITS OF COLLECTIVISM IN
19TH CENTURY BRITISH REFORM MOVEMENTS**

What do we mean when we speak of 'radicalism' in reference to 19th century Britain? The word 'radical', in the sense of going to the root or origins of something, is in English quite old and can be used in a wide variety of contexts. Radicalism, however, is generally taken to be a product of the 19th century. The first use of the political meaning of 'radical' which the Oxford English Dictionary gives us, in fact, is in 1802.<1> To be a 'radical reformer' at this point meant in politics to seek extensive, 'radical' (but not revolutionary), parliamentary reform, and therewith to seek to curtail the power of the autocracy. Radicalism, then, principally means in this period the views or principles of this group of parliamentary reformers, and as such is one of the most important manifestations of 19th century British Liberalism. This, at any rate, is what the dictionaries and most texts on the subject will tell us, and it is this definition whose historical embodiment I will be most concerned to explore here.

But the wish to reduce the expenses of parliament, the corruptions of election and patronage, the predominance of the landed interest, and the burden of taxation was not all that 'radicalism' entailed in 19th century

Britain. These issues were important to those interested in reform at the beginning of the century, and they remained so at the end. But the reform of parliament itself, and particularly the extension of the franchise, which was the major demand of most reformers in this period, constitute only what we might term the 'narrow' definition of what radicalism was in 19th century Britain. In its strictest form this definition would exclude varieties of reform which are, on the one hand, essentially individual in character (as in teetotalism, and many types of religious reform and philanthropic endeavour), and, on the other, those which we would essentially term 'social' in nature, including campaigns to end adulteration of foods, against vaccination or prostitution or factory cruelty, in favour of animal liberation or divorce. Some prominent species of Victorian or early 19th century reformism thus fall outside of this typology, such a reform of the army and of local administration, the activities of the Peace Society or the efforts of the anti-slavery reformers.

In many of these cases parliament was the agency through which it was proposed change should take place, but this institution itself was not to be essentially altered in the process, even where it was the principle of arbitrary authority of man over man (and woman) which was at issue in slavery. Should we then include both individual and social modes of reform in a 'wide' definition of radicalism in reference to 19th century Britain? This can be effected without violating the historicity of the language of 'radicalism' itself if we accept the argument that the mentality of reform usually underlay the case for political change, and thus that most radicals were also reformers of various other types, though it is by no means true that most 'reformers' were also political radicals. Research for

penal reform, and for aid to climbing boys, prostitutes and murderers knew no one political position. To the contrary, reformism generally spanned a spectrum ranging from self-help to paternalism and from republicanism in politics to the truest of blue Toryism. Indeed, it was also possible (at least for a time) to be a 'Tory radical' and seek to curtail the whiggish and manufacturing interests of the middle class and their parliamentary activities. The wider definition of the mentality of radicalism, therefore, recognises that individuals sought to change themselves and their environments outside of parliament, but that this desire for change, which has so often led to the Victorian era being termed the 'age of improvement', was a part of the same process which produced the demand for parliamentary reform. Moral reform and the inner search for evidence of sin shared this much with political radicalism. Only in this sense of sharing a desire for individual improvement are the various forms of Victorian reform classifiable as a part of 'radicalism' generally, even if most types of both reform and radicalism sought alike to create a model human being who was temperate, humane and morally pure.

This article will concentrate upon introducing the phenomena and meanings implied in the narrow, political definition just given, but will conclude with an effort to suggest some of the relations between moral, individual self-improvement and political reform. Because my subject here is so large, covering a century of developments for which there is now a very extensive literature, I want to begin by offering a brief chronology of political radicalism during the period between 1780 and 1880, emphasising the key moments and essential changes in this development. Secondly, I will suggest that the most important general theme in the

history of nineteenth century British radicalism is the relationship between the working and middle class components within it, and here I will try to explore some of the ways in which the language of class helped to encourage or stifle the possibility of class alliance during this period. Next, some of the sources for the 'decline' of radicalism during the middle years of the century will be illuminated briefly. Finally, some of the relations between individual and political reform will be examined with particular reference to the writings of John Stuart Mill, who remains the bestknown of 19th century British radicals and who wrote at greatest length about the need to reconcile the two great reforming impulses of the age, the individual and the collective.

I

Firstly, then, let us briefly survey the range of phenomena, movements, institutions, ideas and individuals usually associated with British radicalism in the century between 1780 and 1880. The year chosen for my point of departure is far from arbitrary, for in 1780 was founded the Society for Constitutional Information, the organisation generally taken to be the 'parent' of middle class political organisation in Britain.<2> Although the term 'radical' is sometimes applied to the followers of John Wilkes and the 'Wilkes and liberty' movement of 1762-3, it was the SCI and the writings of its leader, Major John Cartwright (particularly Take Your Choice, 1776) which laid the foundations for the political reform movement of the next half century. Their demand for universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, vote by ballot and the abolition of plural voting in fact contained four of the six later points of the Chartists of the 1830s and 1840s

(who added equal electoral districts and the abolition of the property qualification). A decade later was founded the London Corresponding Society, usually interpreted as the first working class movement in England. Despite its jacobinism, however, its membership was drawn largely from tradesmen, mechanics and shopkeepers rather than the unskilled lower orders below them.<3> Their programme stressed the same essential reforms as had that of the SCI, though their attack on aristocratic misrule, over-taxation and other governmental and class abuses was sharper than Cartwright's and owed more to Thomas Paine.

The possibility of parliamentary reform at the end of the 18th century was prevented both by severe government repression in the mid-1790s and the progress of the war against France culminating in the victory at Waterloo in 1815. There was some revival of radicalism beginning around 1807, especially in London.<4> But two other developments were more important during the war. Firstly, the turn of the century saw severe famines, bread riots, and the beginnings of the breakdown of the poor relief system which had served Britain since the 16th century, which was accompanied by the publication of the most important anti-radical work of the 19th century, T.R. Malthus' Essay on Population, actually published in 1798 as a response to the utopian perfectionism of William Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793).<5> Secondly, this period (especially 1811-17) also saw the beginnings of organised resistance to new forms of machinery, particularly in the attacks by Luddites on steam looms in the north-east.<6> The ending of war and the period of economic prosperity which accompanied it induced a further strengthening of the reform movement, which grew almost uninterruptedly in its skills, organisation, and

ideological subtlety in the years between 1816 and 1832.<7> These are the years in which we see the emergence of all of the major groups which would seek working and middle class support during the 1830s and 1840s: philosophical radicalism, which emerged from the isolation of Bentham's study into London and then national politics under the leadership of James Mill, John Stuart Mill, and others; the middle class, non-Benthamite (and sometimes Whig) radicals who began under leaders like Burdett and would end as supporters of Cobden and Bright at mid-century; and the working class radicals led initially by William Cobbett, Henry Hunt, and others, some of whom were shunted off (at least temporarily) into Owenite socialism and/or trades' unionism in the 1830s and 1840s, but who were to form the backbone of the Chartist movement in the period 1835-50.<8> It is also during this period that we find the written basis of much later middle- and working class consciousness, from James Mill's Essay on Government (1824) and David Ricardo's Principles of Political Economy (1817) to Cobbett's Weekly Political Register (1802 - 36), Wooler's Black Dwarf (1817-24), Thomas Hodgskin's Labour Defended (1825) and Robert Owen's Report to the County of Lanark (1820). The passage of the 'Great Reform Act' (as it is still often termed) in 1832 marks a fundamental break in the history of 19th century political radicalism. Though there had often been stresses between middle class reformers, with their more limited aims for franchise reform, and working class reformers, who almost invariably supported universal manhood suffrage, these had been covered over in the years 1830-32. Instigated by the political unions which sprang up first in Birmingham in 1830 and then all over the country, an alliance of left-wing Whig-radicals (such as Durham and Brougham), philosophical radicals (like Roebuck and

Parkes) and working class reformers was effected which strongly helped in passing the bill into law in June 1832. The Act nearly doubled the electorate (from 435,000 to 813,000 out of an adult male population of 6 million), though it gave less power to the great towns by comparison with the more traditional boroughs and counties than is often assumed.<10> For our purposes, however, it is also important as the last secure point for some twenty years in which the middle and working class wings of the reform movement trusted one another and worked harmoniously together.<11> For important elements of the middle class reform movement, 1832 represented a watershed beyond which it was not prudent to pass. For most working class political radicals, however, it was both a defeat and a betrayal, and as such an important turning point in the development of antagonistic forms of class consciousness.

One of the first acts of the new government was the passage of the New Poor Law of 1834, which in combination with the suppression of trades' unions helped to lay the grounds for the emergence in 1836 of the Chartist movement, the most powerful working class reform movement in the 19th century.<12> The programme of the Chartists, as we have seen, bears a strong resemblance to the demands put forward by Cartwright in 1780, and the mechanism of organising millions of signatures in parliamentary petitions did not depart markedly from reform strategy in the previous half century. Part of what was novel to Chartism however was that some of its leaders had a new, sophisticated critique of political economy in which the manufacturing middle classes were identified as the opponents of the working classes as much as if not more than the traditional enemies of reformers, the aristocracy.<13> What effects this had on the language of class we will

see in a moment.

Despite its size, the pressure of uprisings, strikes, and the temporary possibility of an alliance with some types of middle class reformers in 1841-2, Chartism was not a short-term success. Sidetracked in its pursuit of a grandiose land allotment scheme, torn by struggles between its leaders, and circumvented by both early factory reforms, emigration and the passage of free trade in corn (1846), Chartism was by 1848 virtually dead, and the year of revolutions in Europe was a relatively quiet one in Britain.<14> Revivals were from time to time attempted up to 1858, but during the 1850s and mid-1860s political reform for the most part took second place to trades' unionism, economic co-operation and other forms of self-help.<15> In the mid-1860s, however, such organisations as the National Reform Union (1864), the Reform League (1864) and the London Working Men's Association (1865) helped to link both mercantile, middle class reformers and working class activists and to carry the Second Reform Act (1867), which extended the franchise once again, this time by some 82 %.<16> During the 1870s there was considerable working and middle class co-operation on such central reform issues as the land question, through such organisations as J.S. Mill's Land Tenure Reform Association (1870) and the later Land Nationalization Society (1881).<17> Beginning in the early 1880s, however, we also find the emergence of that new configuration of working class reform organisations which, often under the influence of the new forms of socialism represented by Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation as well as the collectivism of the Fabian Society, would help to shape British radicalism into a recognisably 20th century form. This new, more independent and more 'social' radicalism of the 1880s and later however represents an important departure from

the tradition we have considered so far, and hence suggests a suitable place to halt here.

II

Before considering how we should categorise and understand the language of radicalism, it would be useful to review some of the points of contention which historians have argued over in their interpretations of the period reviewed all too briefly so far.

Of these problems the most important as well as the most intractable is certainly the question of class and class consciousness. The debate on class has raged continuously since the publication in 1963 of E.P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class, though in outline many of its most contentious points were already present in Engels' Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844.^{<18>} Hence it has long been clear that the ways in which we think of 'class' will colour if not almost determine our categorisations of the rise and development of radicalism, its language and relations with other reform movements, etc.^{<19>} Given its complexity I cannot do any justice at all to the problem here, but will merely point to some of its various components, and then develop an account of one of these in the following section. The first part of this problem is the definition we should give to 'class' itself: is it a primarily 'objective' phenomenon, whose essence rests in productive relations or sources of income, or the possession of different amounts of wealth? Or is the way in which people perceive each other the primary basis of 'class'? Can one belong 'objectively' to one class and 'subjectively' to another, as might a highly-paid skilled artisan?

Secondly, how are we to define 'class consciousness'? In its original formulation class consciousness has of course much to do with the schema outlined by Marx and Engels in various works, and refers mainly to the development of solidarity among the proletariat during periods of capitalist crisis, leading to a complete split from the upper and middle classes and the revolutionary overthrow of the system of production. But it is clear that non-Marxists can also use the idea of 'class consciousness' in a sensible and non-dogmatic way, avoiding a teleological conception of social development while saying something meaningful about the ways in which the members of various social groups perceive themselves, others like them, and those whom they regard as belonging to different classes.

Thirdly, should we see the roots of radicalism as lying in the new forms of class relations produced by the introduction of the factory system, and in particular in the conflict between the industrial middle class and the industrial proletariat? This has been the dominant interpretation of early 19th century British radicalism up to the last decade or so.<20> Or should we reconsider the obvious presence of vast numbers of artisans and earlier forms of skilled and unskilled worker not only in Luddism and other early forms of 19th century struggle, but equally in Chartism, and argue that it is as a reaction to modernity and the industrial revolution by existing (rather than new) classes that radicalism mainly takes its shape and force? This interpretation is rapidly gaining in precedence amongst historians.<21>

Forthly, when we consider the relative peace which prevailed in class relations between 1850 and 1880, how ought we to assess the role of the various classes

themselves in contributing to this phenomenon? Are economic causes central to 'mid-Victorian stability and compromise', and if so is the privileged position of the 'labour aristocracy' of the wealthiest artisans vital to this stability?<22> Or are cultural considerations stronger, in which case we can ask the same question in relation to the 'adaptation', 'co-optation', or 'incorporation' of the proletariat as a whole, while concentrating upon such themes as 'deference' and 'respectability' in relation to religion, social customs, psychological emulation and the like.<23>

Without having to answer any of these questions, we can I think agree that there were in 19th century Britain at least three separate and contending class-related ideals of the good society which following Harold Perkin we can call the working class ideal, the aristocratic ideal, and the entrepreneurial ideal.<24> Since it is clear that the most profound consequence of the industrial revolution was the birth of a new form of class society profoundly different from earlier types, we must also acknowledge that the successful solidification of this society in the mid-Victorian era relied not only upon the economic and political successes of the middle class, the ability of the aristocracy to keep much of its power and social influence, and the successes and defeats alike of the working class. The triumph of the new society also required moral and ideologic as well as political and economic victories. In particular it required the acceptance of one world view, often loosely called 'Victorianism' (and lying closer to the entrepreneurial than the other ideals) by the majority, such that a common system of values governed social relations as a whole. Let us briefly consider, then, how an analysis of the language of class in this period helps us to see this process of accommodation taking

place, for this clarifies not only why and how the middle and working classes split from each other between 1832 and 1850, but also how they were able to reunite to a strong degree between 1850 and 1880.

The language of class was of course as much a product of the industrial revolution as the classes to which it referred. Prior to the beginning of the 19th century British social groups were described in terms of 'ranks', 'orders', 'degrees' and (with a more economic emphasis) 'interests'.^{<25>} While a system of social ranks was recognised by late 18th century radicals, the most common distinction drawn by them was between the aristocracy and 'the people'. This distinction is hence commonly used by both working and middle class radicals alike through the 1790s and into the early years of the 19th century. What destroyed this two-class model in the language of radicalism was firstly the reality of a new class of increasingly wealthy manufacturers who grew away from their former social associates and became increasingly conscious of a gulf between themselves and even the skilled (much less the unskilled) working classes. Many members of this new middle class were former artisans whose entrepreneurial talents had paid well during the wartime periode. But with their increasing wealth came new tastes in food, clothing and leisure activities. Servants and apprentices came to live outside their masters' houses, and members of different classes came far less (by comparison with the 18th century) to live in the same building or, finally, the same neighborhood. Hence inequality and physical distance underlay the sense of class distinction.^{<26>} Secondly, this distance was given tremendous assistance by the most important element in 19th century social thought, the new science of political economy. Smith's Wealth of Nations had expressed at least as great a

sense of mistrust for the selfish propensities of the mercantile middle classes as for the great landlords, but Ricardo's Principles of Political Economy portrayed the capitalist as the great friend of public opulence, but the landlord as the enemy of the common good through his wish to retain high rents and high corn prices, which kept wages high and hence diminished the profits which for Ricardo underlay economic growth generally.<27>

Ricardian political economy also alienated many working class writers through its insistence that the natural rate of wages was the subsistence level, and its rigid adherence to the Malthusian theory of population growth, which held that trades' unions and strikes could never raise the wages of the working classes, whose only hope was voluntary population restriction. If we consider for a moment only how the working classes came to see their own interests as divergent from those of the middle classes, however, an equally important contribution to working class consciousness came from the distinction between productive and unproductive labour made by many economists.<28> The distinction, however, could be used in various ways. On the one hand it was frequently deployed to distinguish between the 'working' or 'productive' and the 'idle' classes, where the latter mainly were the aristocracy, fundholders and others who lived from what we now term 'unearned income', in other words without actually having to work themselves. On the other hand some radical political economists used the distinction to include the manufacturing middle classes and capitalists, by defining 'productive labour' as those who laboured only with their hands, which hence classed the aristocracy and middle classes together as enemies of working class interests.

During the century between 1780 and 1880 it was the twenty years between 1830 and 1850 when this distinction between middle and working class interests was most frequently adverted to and acted upon. For the leading working class participants in the reform agitation of 1830-32, such as the leaders of the National Union of the Working Classes, who went on to be leaders of the Chartist movement as well, the Reform Act was a betrayal by the middle classes pure and simple. The Benthamites and mercantile parliamentary reformers became alike known as "sham Radicals" whose conception of the common good was in reality confined to the interests of their own class.<29> In addition the Chartists could call upon an essentially Owenite conception of competition in the economy, in which the interests of the middle classes could be demonstrated as opposite to those of the working classes.<30>

How did the middle classes perceive and speak of these new class divisions? Prejudice against aristocratic selfishness was extremely widespread, and the middle classes readily adopted new variations of an older prejudice against lazy, profligate and immoral landlords who reaped where they had never sowed. They rejected, of course, the insinuation that manufacturers or capitalists ought to group among the 'idle' or 'unproductive' classes, and instead pointed to what is often termed the 'abstinence theory of profit', where the capitalist's profit is justified by his sacrifice in not consuming his wealth immediately, but rather investing it and providing jobs and wealth for the long-term common good.<31> Hence the 'work ethic' underlay much middle as well as working class rhetoric throughout this period as well as later.

Although there were several attempts at alliance with

middle class radicals at various points during the Chartist movement, no real accommodation seemed possible in the years up to 1850. The middle classes were frightened by such insurrectionary attempts as the Newport uprising in 1839, and were strongly alienated by the language and actions of the most influential Chartist leader, Feargus O'Connor. The Chartists, on the other hand, usually failed to support and often attacked the main middle class reform organisation of the period, the Anti-Corn Law League.<32> The latter group, however, served as one of the main mechanisms of middle-class political consciousness in the years leading up to the middle of the century, propelling into the limelight such major figures as Richard Cobden and John Bright, and helping to bring in 1846 a substantial victory against the apparent interests of the landed aristocracy. By the early 1850s, thus, the middle classes had come to see themselves as a distinctive entity by comparison with the upper and working classes, even if there were obvious differences between the 'parcel-tying' shopkeepers of George Eliot's description and the great manufacturers who sought increasingly to legitimise their new wealth through the acquisition of landed estates and intermarriage with the aristocracy.<33>

III

Let me finally then give a brief account of the some bases of the relative social peace which prevailed in the years between 1850 and 1880. As I mentioned earlier, explanations for the decline of radicalism in this period range from the primarily economic i.e. higher average wages for substantial parts of the workforce, less competition because of emigration, the clear emergence of the labour aristocracy to the more

cultural, where the ideology of 'self-help', 'respectability' and moral improvement is usually held to have supplanted much earlier radical discourse. Neither of these two types of explanations need imply, however, that the decline in intensity of the parliamentary reform movement (and hence of radicalism generally) meant a disappearance of 'class consciousness' in either a general or an antagonistic sense. To the contrary, virtually all forms of class consciousness were compatible with a moderate reforming outlook, with trades unionism and even with emigration.<34>

What does decline, certainly, is the presence of a working class 'alternative' form of political economy in which progress within the existing economic system was deemed impossible and where hence the interests of the working and middle classes were held to be always and everywhere diametrically opposed. To this extent political economy played a vital role in accommodating the working classes to the values of hard work, thrift and perserverance which underlay what we now call capitalism. Aside from a small group of ex-Chartists who were socialists as well, many of whom made up the English branches of the First International after 1864, few even of those who were involved in political radicalism during these years challenged the idea of competition itself, or completely denied the utility of the capitalists or entrepreneur.<35>

To an important extent, however, the victory of those values which we now tend to term 'Victorian' had already been prepared by the central assumptions of working class radicalism during the previous half-century. As we have seen, the language so often used to distinguish between beneficial and malignant classes equated

'working' or 'productive' with 'good' and 'idle' or 'unproductive' with 'bad'. As an injunction, however, this meant only - as novels like Barchester Towers also emphasised - that all should work, that idleness was sinful as well as anti-social. This meant, however, that members of parliament might also be called (as the radical Richard Carlile once put it) "a working class", and even "the men who oppress us are a working class."³⁶ Most capitalists, factory owners, entrepreneurs and the overwhelming majority of the middle class did in fact work for their wealth, and hence could not on the whole be condemned in the terms predominantly used by working class radicals.

A lack of enthusiasm for parliamentary reform also resulted both from the fact that parliament showed itself capable (in the repeal of the Corn laws, the Factory acts, etc) of passing vital reforms without an extension of the suffrage to include the working classes or more of the middle classes. In this sense the beginnings of the movement of British legislation from the 'individualist' or laissez-faire stage to the 'collectivist' or interventionist stage help to inhibit much of the apparent need for parliamentary reform. So, too, did the failure of collective working class actions in the 1840s (and most notably Chartism and Owenism) make an emphasis upon 'self-help' through smaller organisations such as trades' unions, co-operatives and friendly societies more likely and attractive.

Whether or not its role in maintaining class peace was essential or not, there is little doubt that the creation of a labour aristocracy of skilled artisans helped to solidify the existing system of class relations. Members of this group had always played a vastly disproportionate role in working class political

activities, and composed the vast majority of trade union membership.<37> Amongst the working classes their social influence in leisure activities and patterns of lifestyle was also very great, and in that momentous moral revolution which extended evangelical ethical standards to most of Victorian society and imposed a new puritanism upon many it is clear that the labour aristocracy had much to do with the diffusion of the cult of 'respectability' to those below them on the social scale. In this sense the labour aristocracy played a central role in 'incorporating' the lower orders into the moral (if not political) ethos of the entrepreneurial ideal.

These factors did not engender the abolition of working and middle class political radicalism during these years, though they help to account for its diminished enthusiasm and less strident character. By the mid-1860s, however, the emphasis upon trades' unionism and economic self-help had again begun to assume a political form. It was primarily trade unionists who through the Reform League were able to persuade Bright and other middle class reformers in 1866 that urban household suffrage would not prove revolutionary.<38> Convincing the middle class was less difficult than it might seem, for the unions had shown themselves to be moderate in their industrial negotiations, liberal in their views of foreign affairs (the Russian question, Italian unification, the American civil war), and if anything more 'patriotic' than the middle class liberals led by Cobden and Bright.<39> That the Reform League could so easily be converted into a virtual adjunct of Gladstone's Liberal Party is in these circumstances hence scarcely surprising. Following 1867, however, came much legislation of great importance to the working classes, including the complete legal recognition of

trades unions (1871), the repeal of the Master and Servants Acts (1875), the Elementary Education Act (1870), Public Health Acts in 1872 and 1875, and the Artisans' Dwellings Act of 1876.

During the 1870s we also find the development of another form of radical reform movement in which both the working and middle classes could co-operate: the Land Reform movement. Despite the limited degree of prosperity during the mid-Victorian era, we now know that social mobility during this period was in fact slowing down, while the actual gap between the richest and poorest was widening considerably. Despite two reform acts, the aristocracy had in fact kept much of its economic as well as its social power, and if many younger sons and distant cousins could no longer live from the public purse once much of the system of 'Old Corruption' had been abolished, many other aristocrats grew very wealthy from the industrial revolution.<40> Nor was their social position ever questioned in any absolute sense; as Thackeray remarked, every middle class man liked to know a man of rank, and when the former grew wealthy enough, he tried to buy a landed estate to emulate the lifestyle of the latter, a trend which has indeed continued to the present day.

The Land Reform movement thus represents merely the renewed recognition that landed wealth was the basis of aristocratic power and influence. For the working classes the desire for land had never been far from the parliamentary reform movement, and both Owenism and, on a larger scale, Chartism, had sought to place their members on estates in the countryside as a means of removing them from the evils of industrial civilization.<41> For middle class radicals, land reform was in some ways an extension of the demand for free

trade in corn which had triumphed in 1846. What was demanded now was free trade in land itself, particularly through the abolition of the laws of primogeniture (by which estates passed to the eldest son) and entail (by which an estate could be legally kept intact despite even the indebtedness of its owners). Hence were founded such organisations as John Stuart Mill's Land Tenure Reform Association (1870), which went beyond even free trade in land to argue for the taxation of unearned increments of rent, and the later Land Nationalization Society (1881).^{<42>} Such themes would be intensively advertised by the mid-1880s, and finally linked, in the great revival of radicalism which took place during that decade, to the new socialist schemes of Hyndman, Morris and others, as well as given central position in the reform proposals of the Fabian Society.^{<43>}

IV

So far I have tried to offer an extremely condensed account of the major routes taken by working and middle class political radicalism during much of the 19th century, pointing out some of the major interpretative problems which have excited controversy among historians, and drawing attention to the importance of the language of class to the topic generally. If I have confined myself to this point to the more public, political side of what 'radicalism' was in 19th century Britain, I want in this final section to examine how, at least in the case of John Stuart Mill, political radicalism could be linked to individual and moral reform, and particularly to the doctrine of the cultivation of the individual personality.

To recognise such a clear connection between individual improvement and political reform in one writer is not of

course to deny that a relation between the two did not already generally exist. The same individuals (the cotton-spinners' leader John Doherty is a fine example) could often be found engaged either simultaneously or consecutively in trades' unionism, political reform, non-conformist, teetotalism, Owenism, and mechanics' institutes, not to mention phrenology, Mesmerism, nudism, fruit-juice drinking and a host of other such fashionable pursuits. Among the middle classes, anti-slavery activities were often combined with factory reforms, religious emancipation and various types of charity. The parliamentary reform movement was on the whole part of mainstream liberalism (and in this sense socialism is a more distant relation of radicalism) in its broadly individualist emphasis, to which it owed much to Benthamism. Hence the idea of individual improvement and that of social and political improvement were in fact never far apart, though popular enthusiasm for one or another extremes vacillated throughout the century.<44>

For more conservative writers, however, it was precisely the influence which the majority would come to wield in a reformed parliament which seemed to threaten the very basis of what made a civilised, cultured individual possible. From this point of view the goals of radicalism seemed antithetical to those of human progress. Variations on this theme can be found in many writers on the French Revolution, but the most important commentator to have stressed the potential, long-term cultural effects of majority rule was of course the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, whose Democracy in America (English edition, 1835 and 1840) singled out for criticism that cultural mediocrity which already seemed to mark American public life. Here, if the central political issue was that the majority might

deprive the minority of its liberty and rights, the principal social issue was that freedom of enquiry and opinion, long recognised in liberalism as the basis of individual and hence social moral and intellectual progress, might in turn be threatened by the pressures placed by the majority upon those who thought differently upon matters of all kinds. Here, then, was one of the most powerful and theoretically sophisticated arguments against radical parliamentary reform at mid-century: it would produce not only what one was called 'universal suffering and animal parliaments', but also an inferior form of human being.

Although he included himself among the Benthamite radical reformers, the young Stuart Mill also found himself sympathetic to this argument, and it is in his efforts to reconcile these beliefs that we can most clearly see how a marriage between political radicalism and the most extreme doctrine of self-improvement could be effected. Mill's attempt in this regard comes at the end of a long period in which a number of writers who began as political radicals came to adopt a romantic conception of the individual and shed their radicalism in the process. Amongst this group Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey are the most prominent examples, and Shelley the main exception.<45> Mill himself had begun life as a very orthodox Benthamite rationalist, but after a psychological crisis found himself attracted to the emotionalism of literature, poetry and aesthetics, and came to adopt the romantic conception of genius which, through Coleridge and others, was one of Germany's chief intellectual exports to Britain in the early 19th century.<46>

Mill's conception of individuality thus owed something to the rebellious, Promethean image of indefinite human

progress scaling the barriers of despotism, which had proven so popular on the continent and in such English productions as Shelley's Prometheus Unbound. <47> It owed more, however, to that methodical sense of painstaking truth-seeking which originated partly in the Puritan search for inner sin and religious truth whose desire for moral perfectibility was so vital to much radicalism and partly in the empiricism of British natural philosophy. Mixed with this, too, was a strong sense of social duty taken in part from Benthamite utilitarianism. Together these views produced the theory that since the progress of civilisation was dependent upon a culture which was itself mostly the product of individual geniuses, self-cultivation was a contribution to the common good.<48> Mill's efforts to safeguard the influence of the educated elite in national political life gave some of his writings a conservative tinge, e.g. through his scheme of plural voting in On Representative Government.<49>

Yet Mill remained a political reformer, and much more than this, sought to extend the vote to women (a proposal radicalism had not taken seriously up to that time) and even, towards the end of his life, embraced a type of co-operative socialism and indeed came to call himself a socialist.<50> Whether Mill actually succeeded in reconciling these diverse and often contradictory elements in his philosophy or not, the point for us is that he made the effort. In particular, he argued that radical parliamentary reform both produced and required individual improvement precisely because individuals needed participation in the political realm in order to realise their own personalities.<51> This idea, of course, goes back to Aristotle, but it is in its Millite form that the participatory ethos confronts the great 19th century developments of individualism and socialism

almost directly, as it does as well in the writings of the young Marx from the 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' to the 'Paris Manuscripts'.<52> Here, for Mill as for Marx, those who remained outside the political arena failed to express an essential part of themselves, and to develop this potentiality within them. If romantic individualism stressed the unique value of each personality, political individualism helped to recall the sociability which united all men and women, and which made their common endeavours fulfilling. If politics was one essential mode by which individuals pursued public virtue, their survival as creatures of virtue required their participation in the political process. In politics, more over, an essential element of the search for the autonomy of the self which was fundamental to romantic individualism was satisfied, for autonomy could only be achieved through an independence which had to be political as well as economic and intellectual. Here, hence, radicalism was no longer the democratic threat to the romantic self, but rather the fulfillment of its ethical ideals.

In summation, it can be argued that we find in Mill both a recipe for working class radical liberalism (and Mill was close to many of the trade union leaders who might be included under such a label) and a defense of the values and achievements of middle class political radicalism, which had always been anxious to defend itself against the overwhelming power of numbers which the working classes were able to muster on occasion. In Mill more than in most other individual thinkers we can see that the 'wide' definition of radicalism which was introduced earlier allows us to see the connections between, in this case, feminism, parliamentary reform, free trade, co-operation, land reform, religious freedom, colonial justice, and other causes. Despite the

important distinctions between working and middle class radicalism, Mill and others like him help us to see that there was often a unifying radical philosophy which bound both types together and, for most of the 19th century, kept the British radical reform movement more homogenous and more united than it might otherwise have been, or than radicalism often was on the Continent. Without the shared source and similarity of expression of values which existed in Victorian England, as well as British economic supremacy during the 19th century, the radical movement might indeed have followed an entirely different course.

Notes

- 1 Oxford English Dictionary (Compact edn., Oxford, 1971), II, p. 100. There is no satisfactory work on the etymological development of 'radical' and its cognates, though there are some useful remarks in G. de Bertier de Sauvigny, "Liberalism, Nationalism and Socialism: The Birth of Three Words", Review of Politics, 32 (1970), 147 - 66.
- 2 On some of the meanings of 'radicalism' in this period see Norbert Gossman, "Definitions of and Recent Writings on Modern British Radicalism, 1790-1914", British Studies Monitor, 4 (1973), 3 - 11. On 18th century British radicalism see in particular Simon Maccoby, English Radicalism 1762 - 1785. The Origins (London, 1955), H.T. Dickinson, Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth Century Britain (London, 1977), Caroline Robbins, The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthmen (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1959), G.S. Veitch, The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform (London, 1913), I.R. Christie, Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform: The Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760-1785 (London 1962), Georges Rude, Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1763 to 1774 (London, 1962), E.C. Black, The Association: British Extra-Parliamentary Organization 1769-1793 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963).
- 3 On this period see Albert Goodwin, The Friends of Liberty (London, 1979), and E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1963).
- 4 For recent work on this period see J. Anne Hone, For

the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796-1821 (Oxford, 1982), as well as the earlier research of J.M. Main, "Radical Westminster, 1807-1820", Historical Studies, 12 (1966), 186 - 204.

- 5 On Malthus see Patricia James, Population Malthus (London, 1979), and on Godwin, Don Locke, A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin (London, 1980). On poor relief in this period see especially J.R. Poynter, Society and Pauperism. English Ideas on Poor Relief 1795-1834 (London, 1969). The development of Malthusianism is dealt with in Kenneth Smith, The Malthusian Controversy (London, 1951).
- 6 See Frank Peel, The Risings of the Luddites (London, 1880), and Malcolm Thomis, The Luddites (Newton Abbot, 1970).
- 7 On the beginning of this period see R.J. White, Waterloo to Peterloo (London, 1957).
- 8 On Benthamism see in particular Elie Halevy, The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism (London, 1928) and William Thomas, The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817-1841 (Oxford, 1979). Also useful is Joseph Hamburger, James Mill and the Art of Revolution (New Haven, 1963). On Whig radicalism see William Harris, The History of the Radical Party in Parliament (London, 1885). Cobbett is well served by George Spater's recent William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend (Cambridge, 1982, 2 vols.). Henry Hunt is examined in John Belchem's "Henry Hunt and the Evolution of the Mass Platform", English Historical Review, 93 (1978), 739 - 73.

- 9 The best work on this is Michael Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (London, 1973).
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp.
- 11 On the beginnings of this divergence see, e.g., D. J. Rowe, "Class and Political Radicalism in London, 1831-32", *Historical Journal*, 13 (1970), 31 - 47.
- 12 On the new Poor Law and resistance to it see Nicholas C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement 1834-44* (Manchester, 1971).
- 13 For recent work on Chartism see James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson, eds., *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London, 1982). See also Asa Briggs, ed., *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959) in particular to the local diversity of Chartism.
- 14 On Chartism in 1848 see in particular David Goodway, *London Chartism* (Cambridge, 1982), and Henry Weisser, *April 10: Challenge and Response in England in 1848* (Washington D.C., 1984).
- 15 On this period generally see Trygve Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976).
- 16 See especially Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists* (London, 1965).
- 17 On Land reform see H.J. Perkin, "Land Reform and Class Conflict in Victorian Britain", in: John Butt and J.F. Clarke, eds., *The Victorians and Social Protest* (Newton Abbot, 1973), pp. 177-217, David

Martin, "Land Reform", in: Patricia Hollis, ed., Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England (London, 1974), pp. 131-58, Michael Lyons, "British Liberals and Irish Land: The Late Victorian Transformation", *Historian*, 45 (1983), 167-85, and F.M. L. Thompson, "Land and Politics in England in the Nineteenth Century", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 15 (1965), 23 - 44.

18 A good introduction to this debate is R.J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution 1780-1850* (London, 1979), or R.S. Neale, *Class in English History 1680-1850* (Oxford, 1981).

19 For the methodological debate around these issues see especially Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), and Gregor McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* (London, 1981). Much of this debate has revolved around E.P. Thompson's use of class in his *Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson's reply to some of his critics is in "The Poverty of Theory", in: *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978).

20 E.g., A.L. Morton and George Tate, *The British Labour Movement 1770-1920* (London, 1956).

21 See especially Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle. Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1982).

22 On the labour aristocracy debate see especially Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (London, 1976), and Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society* (London, 1978).

- 23 For this debate see, e.g., H.F. Moorhouse, "The Political Incorporation of the British Working Class", *Sociology*, 7 (1973), 341-59, J.M. Cousins and R.L. Davis, "'Working Class Incorporation' - A Historical Approach with Reference to the Mining Communities of S.E. Northumberland 1840-1890", in: Frank Parkin, ed., *The Social Analysis of Class Structure* (London, 1974), pp. 277-97.
- 24 See Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern British Society 1780-1880* (London, 1969), pp. 218-70.
- 25 On the origins of class language see Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth Century England", in: Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds., *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960), pp. 43 - 73.
- 26 On the development of physical distance between the various classes see Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1965), pp. 73 - 115.
- 27 For recent work on the development of political economy see Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983). A useful general survey is D.P. O'Brien, *The Classical Economists* (Oxford, 1975).
- 28 See my "The Reaction to Political Radicalism and the Popularization of Political Economy in early 19th Century Britain", in: Richard Whitely and Terry Shinn, eds., *Sociology of Science Yearbook*, 9 (1984).
- 29 See, e.g., Hetherington's *Twopenny Dispatch*, 10. September 1836.

- 30 On Owenism and political economy see J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britian and America (London, 1969), pp. 63 - 75.
- 31 See D.P. O'Brien, The Classical Economists, pp. 120-24.
- 32 See especially Lucy Brown, "The Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League", in: Asa Briggs, ed., Chartist Studies, pp. 342 - 71.
- 33 On the League see Norman McCord, The Anti-Corn Law League 1838 - 1846 (London, 1975). On middle class consciousness see Asa Briggs, "Middle Class Consciousness in English Politics, 1780-1846", Past and Present, 9 (1956), 65 - 74, Keith Robbins, "John Bright and the Middle Class in Politics", in: J. Garrard, D. Jarry, M. Goldsmith and A. Oldfield, eds. The Middle Class in Politics (London, 1978), pp. 14 - 34, John Garrard, "The Middle Classes and Nineteenth Century National and Local Politics", in: Ibid., pp. 35 - 66, Tom Nossiter, "The Middle Classes and Nineteenth Century Politics: Notes on the Literatur", in: Ibid., pp. 67 - 91, and Tom Nossiter, "Shopkeeper Radicalism in the 19th Century", in: T.J. Nossiter, A.H. Hanson, Stein Rokkan, eds., Imagination and Precision in the Social Sciences (London, 1972), pp. 407 - 38.
- 34 For a recent review of this theme, see my "The Triumph of Class-Conscious Reformism in British Radicalism, 1790-1860", Historical Journal, 26 (1983), 969 - 85.
- 35 On the decline of an alternative to political economy see R.V. Clements, "British Trade Unions and Popular

Political Economy 1850-1875", *Economic History Review* 2nd series, 14 (1961), 93 - 104. See however Perkin on mid-Victorian trade unions for the view that they did not merely succumb to orthodox economic theory, but rather "stood for principles which were incompatible with classical economics, and which derived entirely from the dissident working-class ideal: the fair day's wage, the right to work, the right to gain an adequate, guaranteed standards of living by it, the right to society's protection of their health, safety and even hours, and so on" (*The Origins of Modern English Society*, p. 404). On the International see generally Henry Collins, "Karl Marx, The International and the British Trade Union Movement", *Science and Society*, 26 (1962), 400-21, and Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement (London, 1962).

36 Gauntlet, 8. September 1833, 488.

37 For a recent survey of the character of early trades' unionism see E.H. Hunt, *British Labour History 1815-1914* (London, 1981), pp. 191-218.

38 On the 1867 Reform Act see Francis Herrick, "The Second Reform Movement in Britian 1850-1865", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9 (1948), 174 - 92, Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Politics and Ideology: the Reform Act of 1867", in: *Victorian Minds* (London, 1975), pp. 333-92, and Thomas Gallagher, "The Second Reform Movement, 1848-1867", *Albion*, 12 (1980), 147 - 63.

39 See Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, p. 402.

40 See W.D. Rubinstein, "The End of 'Old Corruption' in Britain 1780-1860", *Past and Present*, 101 (1983),

55 - 86.

- 41 On Chartist land schemes see in particular Alice Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company* (Newton Abbot, 1970). On the Owenite colonies see J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites*, pp. 151 - 94.
- 42 On working class involvement in such organisations see Royden Harrison, "The Land and Labour League", *Bulletin of the International Institute of Social History*, 8 (1953), 169 - 95.
- 43 Still useful on this period is Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (London, 1929), II, pp. 226 - 73. A more recent view is Stanley Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism* (London, 1973).
- 44 Some of the connecting links between such groups are discussed in Brian Harrison, "A Genealogy of Reform in Modern Britain", in: Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher, eds., *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform* (London, 1980), pp. 119 - 48.
- 45 For an overview of some of the relations between radicalism and romanticism see Howard Mumford Jones, *Romanticism and Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), pp. 228 - 60.
- 46 For recent work in this area see Rosemary Asthon, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860* (Cambridge, 1980).
- 47 On the romantic models beneath such imagery see Howard Mumford Jones, *Romanticism and Revolution*, pp. 243 - 8.

- 48 For a general treatment of aspects of this theme see, e.g., Edward Alexander, "Mill's Theory of Culture: the Wedding of Literature and Democracy", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 35 (1964), 75 - 88.
- 49 J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government* (London, 1948), pp. 276 - 92. See Willmoore Kendall and George Carly, "The 'Roster Device': J.S. Mill and Contemporary Elitism", *Western Political Quarterly*, 21 (1968), 20 - 39.
- 50 On Mill's socialism see in particular Claeys in Claeys, ed.
- 51 On the context of this theory see, e.g., Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 22 - 44.
- 52 For a comparison of these treatments, see Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill* (Cambridge, 1973).