

Softcore Solipsism

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Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991).

James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993).

IN 1963, E.P. THOMPSON roared onto the terrain of class analysis like an invading army.¹ Descending from the heights of literary criticism and biography, he daringly attacked on two fronts, machine-gunning mechanistic Marxism at the same time as he cannonaded conservative condescension. At least for England from the 1780s to the 1830s, he swept the field, persuading a wide range of readers that something he called the "making" of a working class occurred through a sustained series of struggles and convincing the rest that they now had a new, seductive leftist thesis to combat. With a literary historian's panache, Thompson mustered an extraordinary range of evidence for his thesis, drawing connections between political philosophy and popular culture, enormously broadening the conception of relevant texts, giving popular utterances and crowd actions a literary standing they had rarely achieved before. His victorious vision of class formation in England inspired numerous historians of other western countries to search for parallel constructions in their own territories and periods, so much so that the phrase "making of the working class" acquired the immortality of a cliché.

Like European appropriation of Asian and African territories, Thompson's conquest of British class analysis laid down a terrible burden for his successors. Just as anticolonial leaders once felt obliged to advertise their own democratic commitments while condemning the actual operation of French or British democracy, in order to demonstrate their own advance over previous understandings today's leftist historians feel compelled to reject Thompson's account of

¹E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963).

class formation without ceding popular history's terrain to Whig self-congratulation or Tory disdain. Declining confidence in the capacity of organized parties and militant workers to check the power of states and capital, much less to bring about just and prosperous regimes, encourages the same historians to turn inward for consolation, seeking hope in improved critical understanding rather than expanded capacity for collective action. As faith in revolution fell, faith in deconstruction rose.

Both Patrick Joyce and James Vernon, the objects of this essay, have sought refuge from Marxist realism in linguistic analysis, Joyce fretfully and Vernon with shrill bravado. Each proposes his own interpretation of English popular culture and its creeds as an alternative to the Thompsonian history of class formation. In the baker's dozen of essays that fill his *Visions of the People*, Joyce explores a wide variety of materials recording political discourse, popular literature, slogans, demands, theatre, dialect, and much more, asking to what extent their uses set workers off from other people and to what degree they conveyed direct awareness of class difference as a formative experience and source of grievances. Joyce concentrates on Lancashire and the North between 1848 and 1914, eventually concluding with great unease that something like widely-shared class consciousness began to emerge not in Thompson's 1790s but toward World War I.

Vernon's *Politics and the People*, for its part, takes on all of England from 1815 to 1867, but uses as recurrent points of reference his close doctoral-dissertation studies of public politics in Boston, Lewes, South Devon, Tower Hamlets, and Oldham. Although his announced period overlaps the one examined by Thompson (whose "early savaging" of Vernon's work the preface mentions), Vernon does not aim his empirical investigation at Thompson's account of political action between 1815 and 1832. Instead he looks chiefly at post-Reform politics to document his claim that for ordinary English people the public sphere, far from opening to democratic participation, actually narrowed dramatically between 1832 and 1867.

Despite avoiding direct confrontation with Thompson's treatment of 1780 to 1832, Joyce and Vernon both seek self-consciously to displace Thompsonian analysis of class formation. They do so by means of three manoeuvres: denial that economic experience shapes class consciousness; insistence on the variety of economic and social experience; embedding of all meaningful experience in language. In so doing, each makes two further moves he does not quite recognize, and therefore does not bother to defend. The first is to adopt radical individualism, an assumption that the only significant historical events or causes consist of mental states and their alterations. The second is to doubt the intersubjective verifiability of statements about social life. Together, the two moves take them into the territory of softcore solipsism.

Hardcore solipsism, a venerable philosophical doctrine, denies the possibility of any knowledge beyond that of the knower's own individual experience. According to hardcore solipsism, all efforts to communicate, persuade, explain, much less accumulate collective knowledge, face insuperable barriers. No consistent believer

in hardcore solipsism could pretend to write authoritative historical analyses. Joyce and Vernon opt for softcore solipsism by recognizing, however uncertainly, collective actors, by claiming to know something about what 19th-century workers thought, by treating language as subject to systematic analysis, and by persisting in the effort — useless according to strict solipsistic doctrine — to teach others their interpretations of British history. Fixed on the task of refuting Thompson and his ilk, furthermore, they centre their analyses on questions of consciousness, on knowing what different groups of ordinary people actually thought at various times in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the process, they abandon agency, cause, and effect except in so far as conscious deliberation causes individual action.

The abandonment of agency extends to Joyce's and Vernon's prose, which abounds in weak verbs and passive voice. A characteristic series of evasions appears in Vernon's introduction to his analysis of print as a means of control:

Of course the danger was that this language with its appeals to a new rational public could be, as indeed it was, appropriated by radicals to demand that all those possessing reason should be included as citizens of the official political nation. Central to this discourse was the post-Enlightenment perception of print as the universal tool of reason, an ideal form for rational political debate that was available to all. However, I hope to show in this chapter that print was far from universal, instead it was used to reconstitute the public political sphere in an evermore restrictive fashion, excluding groups believed to be 'irrational' like women and the illiterate poor from public political debate. (105)

The passage immediately raises the question: whodunnit? *Who* used print to reconstitute the public political sphere, and why? Vernon supplies no answer. We begin to understand why his book's very first epigraph comes from Michel Foucault.

Vernon's and Joyce's occultation of agency separates them from conventional historical narrative, in which limited numbers of well-defined, motivated actors, situated in specific places and times, express their ideas and impulses in visible actions which produce discernible consequences, those consequences typically being the objects of explanation. Conventional narrative entails not only claims to reasonably reliable knowledge of actors, motives, ideas, impulses, actions, and consequences but also a) postulation of actors and action as more or less self-contained, b) imputation of cause and effect within the narrative sequence. Softcore solipsism makes most of these elements difficult, and a denial of agency makes them impossible.

Vernon and Joyce also rule out alternative modes of social-scientific analysis, which require less access to other people's consciousness as well as allowing actors, actions, and environment to interact continuously, but demand even stronger conceptions of causal connection. Either solipsism or the denial of agency suffices to command rejection of these forms of social analysis. In short, the Joyce-Vernon philosophical position obliterates any possibility of historical explanation. It also

undermines any grounds they might propose for accepting the validity of their analyses in preference to Thompson's or anyone else's.

As a practical matter, Joyce and Vernon pour much of their effort into twinned enterprises: 1) identifying alternative discourses to those of class; 2) finding new sorts of evidence to illustrate those discourses. Neither enterprise, however, advances any rationale for believing its results. Hardcore or softcore, solipsism lays on its advocates the burden of proof that what they are saying deserves more attention than the chattering of birds. Vernon and Joyce shrug off that burden almost without comment. About the closest either comes is in the admission on Vernon's penultimate page:

This, of course, leaves me open to the accusation that, by turning the triumphant teleologies of the dominant narratives of English political history on their head, I have simply provided a different, if equally dogmatic, narrative which also closes down other interpretive possibilities — the closure of the public political sphere merely replacing the forward march of labour and the triumph of Liberal democracy. Clearly, I can not deny the possibility of such a reading, although I may want to add the obligatory academic qualifications and caveats, stressing the slow uneven and incomplete nature of the closure of politics. Or, more truthfully if less properly, I could claim that it was never my intention to close down other readings, but that in subjects as well studied as nineteenth-century English politics only the most novel and bold (some would say foolhardy) of narratives can break the interpretive log-jam, opening up the space for a multiplicity of other readings. (338)

Behind the statement's brash opportunism glowers despair at the possibility of using evidence to adjudicate the relative validity of competing historical accounts. Without relative truth claims backed by systematic evidence, Vernon apparently senses, history slumps into literary criticism. If historical analysis consists of nothing but language games, of course, one game is as good as another. Thus the objective of academic effort reduces to the provision of multiple perspectives on ultimately indeterminate events. In this view, Vernon and Joyce break sharply with the realist epistemology and ontology of E.P. Thompson. (In the face of this sort of negation, Thompson told me a few years ago that he had long disapproved of my penchant for social science but now saw that despite my failings we both stood on the same — realist — side of a widening, dangerous divide.)

Joyce and Vernon nevertheless remain captives of Thompson to a far greater degree than they acknowledge. First, they focus on the explication of plebeian consciousness in a very Thompsonian manner. Second, they rely on the assembly of numerous texts — now defined with the great breadth to which Thompson accustomed us — to substantiate that explication of consciousness. They engage in Thompsonian hermeneutics. Thompson must take the credit or blame for the sheer power of his argument and practical example, as well as for his own tendency to centre his rare methodological discussions on the relationship between experience and consciousness. Thompson thereby undermined one of his own most

important teachings. For it was Thompson above all who argued that class was not an individual state of mind, not even the collective mentality of a single group, but a dynamic, contested relationship among sets of people.

Anyone who adopts language as the analytic base for the treatment of class should, in fact, immediately recognize the significance of Thompson's teaching. Language is a deeply social medium, heavily dependent on interpersonal negotiation and creation. In solitary confinement, humans never learn to speak. The minimum set for the study of language consists not of a single thinking individual, but of two persons in communication with each other. To the degree that the linguistic turn brought historians toward solipsism, it led entirely in the wrong direction.

Historians do not wander alone through the epistemological and ontological wilderness. Social scientists and historians alike have frequently made the same mistake: interpreting social relations as if they were individual attributes. The program many social scientists call methodological individualism makes a virtue of just a procedure. In the analysis of work and labour markets, economists have commonly supposed that people's jobs and incomes resulted directly from their individual human capital through the impersonal operation of something mysterious called the market (sometimes attenuated, but only attenuated, by the preferences of workers and employers). But the organization of jobs, work, and compensation actually centres on constantly-renegotiated relations between workers and employers. Ethnicity and nationality likewise consist not of individual characteristics but of labelled connections among people. The individualization of identity causes great confusion in social analysis.

Identities in general reside in interpersonal relations, which is why the possession of multiple identities — highly problematic in an individualistic perspective — poses so little practical difficulty to most human beings. (The only people I have ever met who had more or less unitary identities were either psychiatric patients or fanatics, or both.) To be a daughter is to live in a certain relationship to a parent, to be a slave is to endure a certain relation to a master, to be a citizen is to hold certain rights and obligations *vis à vis* a specific state, to belong to a working class is to share with other people a certain relation to capitalists. Precisely: when he insisted on class as a relation among groups, E.P. Thompson rejected its reduction to individual characteristics, including individual consciousness. Alas, historians did not hear him well, any more than social scientists in general have understood the centrality of transactions, not individuals, in social life. Language, culture, identity, and class all reside not in single minds but in dynamic, contingent, negotiated relations among human beings.

Patrick Joyce has not gotten the message. Although at one point he remarks that "the sense of class is defined in relation to, and usually over and against, other classes" (11), he soon abandons his relational insight. Joyce tortures himself on a rack of his own manufacture: he stretches himself to the breaking point among believing that class matters, that class is not everything, that class does not exist,

that what other people have thought to be class was actually populism. At several points he even reaches for an idealist world in which doctrines contend more or less independently of human agents or minds; on three separate pages (14, 96, and 332), for example, he approvingly quotes Fredric Jameson, via James Epstein, as saying that “the dialogue of class struggle is (normally) one in which two opposed discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code.”

Joyce’s epistemological and ontological hesitation encumbers a crucial early passage:

That is to say, if class ‘position’ is not considered in the light of the very problematic nature of proletarianisation, then one is led to ask in what respect is the phenomenon to hand a matter of ‘working-class consciousness’ (presumably an outlook based on the perception of workers’ shared experience as manual proletarians), rather than cultural and political traditions *per se*, or extra-proletarian identifications such as ‘the people,’ or the primary producers. Of course, we can define class as we like, in terms as cultural as we wish, but we should be aware that we are doing this, and that this will change one of the major meanings of class, both within Marxism and beyond it. (4)

Translation: a working class exists to the extent that manufacturing wage-earners share angry awareness of their condition, an awareness stemming directly from participation in similar labour processes. To the degree that workers draw shared awareness from symbols, experiences, traditions, and influences other than their similar conditions of work, they do not form a class. (This view motivates his rejection of Eric Hobsbawm’s evidence for working-class formation during the later 19th century: “Because manual workers chose to wear cloth caps and support football teams,” Joyce remarks, “it does not follow that they saw the social order in terms of class.” [8]) But since labour processes actually changed so variously, no possible homogeneity could result from working conditions. Joyce quickly censors this last argument, recognizing its base-superstructure implication that if labour processes were uniform, so too would be class and class consciousness. He can’t make up his mind.

At book’s end, Joyce is still fretting over the correct terms to describe what he has found. “Perhaps,” he remarks,

in line with the emphasis on discourse evident in this book, it is better to talk of a ‘master narrative’ rather than of a ‘master identity,’ though it does in fact seem the case that the labouring poor of the industrial England of the time interpreted this narrative in a remarkably uniform way, making out of it what is here called a dominant tradition. (331)

That dominant tradition, he continues, concerns “an excluded and virtuous people doing battle in its pilgrim’s progress against the forces of privilege, faction, darkness and ignorance. ‘The people’ itself, as has been seen, could variously be seen as ‘the poor,’ ‘the labouring poor,’ even ‘the working classes.’” (332) Joyce then toys indecisively with the possibility that the tradition represents a class’s

shared consciousness, even if it does not embody class consciousness. By this time he has greatly enriched our knowledge of 19th-century popular culture, but by most standards he has also documented the salience of working-class identities in relation to employers, landlords, merchants, and aristocrats. Relational rather than solipsistic views of class, politics, and identities would have greatly clarified Joyce's visions of the people.

Fortunately for our enlightenment, Joyce confines most of his tortured indecision over these matters to the introduction and conclusion of his *Visions of the People*. Joyce serves his readers a doubt sandwich: a hearty slab of old-fashioned research between two layers of uncertainty. Between the dubious beginning and end, he offers a knowledgeable tour of 19th century working-class collective life in Lancashire and adjacent regions. He undertakes a survey of the forms and appeals of working-class leadership, investigates the deliberate employment of class terminology in political appeals, sketches the range of prevalent political analyses from radicalism through classical populism to Liberalism, reviews ideas forwarded or accepted by textile workers, turns to the distinguishing markers of working-class culture, calls attention to public representations of past and present, examines popular language, art, ballads, dialect literature, and theatre — in short, lays out an array of material of which any social historian could be proud, and which the rest of us can plunder to our profit.

Joyce shows (at least to my inexperienced eyes) that, far from appealing only to false consciousness, both Tories and Liberals offered programs that resonated with genuine working-class preoccupations, indeed adapted and publicized their appeals in order to garner working-class support. He provides a telling account, for example, of Gladstone's great themes, moral entitlement and masses against the classes, showing how they resonated with everyday concerns. More generally, he displays the richness of ideas, locutions, and practices identifying working people with nation, class, and region, not to mention the ease with which ordinary people participated in these multiple identities.

James Vernon offers a similar sense of richness, but pursues a more consistent, forceful, and surprising argument than Joyce. His sandwich differs from Joyce's; between an introduction and conclusion boldly stating very broad claims, Vernon presents eight dense and valuable chapters describing his five parliamentary constituencies, intermittently pausing to remind readers of the general argument. He documents the modest increase in the electorate occasioned by the 1832 Reform Act, the slight redistribution of electors among social categories at that point, the formal exclusion of women from local and parliamentary politics, the construction of civic spaces and monuments for the display of mass involvement in public politics, authorities' attempts to fashion municipal ceremonies into manifestations of allegiance to the regime, the expanded use of print media in politics, print's partial supersession of nonverbal iconography and of oratory, the increasing crystallization of party boundaries and doctrines, struggles among radicals, reformers, and manipulators for control of the local organizational apparatus of

government and party, the emergence and containment of temperance-seeking women as a political force, the displacement of torchlight processions and other rough out-of-doors performances by orderly public gatherings, the salience and dramatization of political leaders, and much more. Before closing, Vernon devotes a chapter to arguing that “popular constitutionalism” — the emphasis on rights of freeborn Englishmen and related ideas — remained the “master narrative” of English politics at least through 1867. He thus picks up the clue concerning narratives Joyce placed in his own conclusions. Vernon’s analysis of popular constitutionalism, however, leads him to the conclusion that ordinary people assumed social and political identities which “are not done justice by Patrick Joyce’s ‘family of populisms.’” (297) Those identities included religious affiliation, attachment to the crown, and a shifting variety of other ties.

Implicitly, Vernon also breaks with Joyce’s analysis in another important regard. While Joyce accepts the now-standard postmodernist argument that the embedding of social experience in language blocks any escape from linguistic analysis, Vernon invokes a number of non-linguistic elements: buildings, monuments, public spaces, partisan colours, ribbons, and other nonverbal markers of political relations. He neither argues that their meanings reside entirely in discourse nor subordinates them to language. *On the contrary, he declares that “civic landscapes can be read as cultural texts in themselves, texts of equal significance to the ceremonies and other symbolic practices that were staged upon them.”* (49) What is more, he treats the size and location of civic buildings and ceremonies as themselves conveying information about local politics. Reaching out like Thompson and Joyce for a vast range of cultural material, he bursts through ostensibly unbreachable linguistic barriers to reliable knowledge that Joyce and many more thoroughgoing postmodernists have stressed.

Vernon eventually takes the histories of his five constituencies to show a radical narrowing of political participation, hence of democracy, between the two reforms acts of 1832 and 1867. By political participation, however, he means subjectivity, something like a sense of empowerment. Politics, for Vernon, takes a very subjective form:

The point is not that the nineteenth-century political subject had confounded the postmodern critique of the autonomous, rational, centred individual, but that it pretended it had, addressing people as though their identities were stable and coherent. Of course that was, and still is, the business (even the purpose) of politics. It is not just that we need politics to make sense of the often very chaotic world around us, but that it is arguably impossible to create a politics capable of attracting popular support which does seek to transcend differences both within and between decentred individual and collective actors with some kind of unifying identity. (335)

(Challenge: find the agents in that passage!) Politics exists, according to this account, in order to provide individuals with a sense of identity.

Repeatedly, Vernon glosses his findings as demonstrating the constriction of political participation in this subjectivist sense. Speaking of a shift from oral to print culture, for example, he summarizes his argument in this way:

Citizenship of the political nation was provisional upon the possession of reason, virtue, and independence, and therefore mass political participation had to occur within the private realm of the home, a setting conducive to rational political debate and thought, unlike the often passionate and emotive public arena of the streets. Therefore, unlike the often passionate and emotive public arena of the streets. Therefore, despite all the legislation which historians have traditionally seen as heralding a brave new world of mass democratic politics — the electoral reforms of 1832, 1867, and 1884, the reduction and eventual abolition of stamp duties, the 'anti-corruption' legislation, the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872 — this period witnessed a marked decline in people's ability to shape the political appeals available to them as the official political subject was redefined in the image of print. (107)

Several important observations lurk in this dark passage. First, the version of liberalism promulgated by such thinkers as John Stuart Mill did presume a level of civic competence that justified exclusion of incompetent, immoral, and dependent persons from public power. Second, fashioning of durable organizational and ideological connections between local and national politics generally standardizes the identities, interests, programs, and forms of action that have currency; it therefore frustrates some identities, interests, programs, and forms of action. Third, the formation of national parties and their production of a self-promoting literature favour official lines and give party activists an augmented interest in suppressing idiosyncrasy, diversity, and dissent. Finally, bargaining over rights usually suppresses some previously-available forms of behaviour as it ratifies others, as when workers gained the legal right to strike at the price of abandoning a wide range of threatening or retaliatory tactics and accepting the state's jurisdiction over the declaration, conduct, and settlement of strikes. Yet Vernon's dismissal of "mass democratic politics" gains its main force from his concentration on subjectivities, on the opportunity for each individual to place her personal desires on the public agenda, or at least to find a match between her own preoccupations and portions of the public agenda. Democracy, in this view, inheres in self-expression. Since Vernon claims his analysis shows that "The invention of democracy in England was then a sham" (336), we had better remember what definition of democracy he has in mind.

By other quite defensible criteria, after all, Britain did democratize during the 19th century, indeed served as a pioneer and model of democratization. Let us leave aside formal standards such as the number of voters and substantive standards such as equalization of living standards, although both point in a mildly democratic direction over the century as a whole. Drawing on widely-held notions of democracy, let us say that a state is democratic to the degree that: 1) it installs broad, equal rights and obligations of citizenship; 2) citizens collectively exercise effec-

tive control over the policies and personnel of government; 3) citizens enjoy protection against arbitrary action by agents of the state. By such standards, no completely democratic state has ever existed, and most of the contemporary world's states fall far short of democracy. Nevertheless, if the rights and obligations of citizenship broaden and/or equalize, if collective control over governmental policies and personnel increase, or if protections against arbitrary action extend, the state in question democratizes. According to these criteria, the very evidence of ordinary people's increasing, if contained, involvement in nationally-connected politics that Vernon presents so well establishes a modest but real increase in democracy.

Does that dispose of the question? Of course not. For Vernon is raising profound questions about democratic regimes, perhaps more profound than he acknowledges. At what cost to autonomy, spontaneity, and diversity do ordinary people become involved in the politics of parties, elections, patriotism, interest groups, and public policy? Is the experience of meaningful democratic participation only possible at a small scale, in the absence of large state bureaucracies? Many anarchists, libertarians, socialists, and political philosophers have thought so. If Vernon had chosen to frame his analysis as a contribution to democratic theory rather than as a dispute with previous accounts of 19th-century British history, we could all have benefited from his frank engagement with the great philosophical issues. His adoption of softcore solipsism, however, blinded him to that opportunity.

A pity. With talented researchers like Patrick Joyce and James Vernon at work, labour history will survive, even prosper in spite of philosophical debilitation. But it will cumulate faster and more effectively if a renewed realism, however linguistic or historicist, prevails.