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AND ITS DISCONTENTS"

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Social History and Its Discontents

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Powerful revisionist currents now flow through the disciplines of social science with regard to the relationship between politics and society. Emerging out of a variety of intellectual traditions -- Althusserian, Gramscian, Saussurian, as well as more conventional Weberian approaches -- the revisionism by no means makes up a unified stream. But it is interesting that in spite of their disparate origins, each current represents itself in the form of a restoration; the "new institutionalism," the new project to "bring the state back in," the new history and sociology of the law, and, most prominently, the recent "linguistic turn" emphasizing discursive, textual, or "cultural" artifacts, all claim to be restoring "politics"¹ to its proper explanatory role in the analysis of human affairs.² A substantial consensus has now crystallized across disciplinary boundaries, which views these revisionist currents as part and parcel of a paradigmatic shift in academic discourse itself. "Culture," language, institutions, the state -- that is, the primary elements of the political side of human existence -- have been elevated to the central position in revisionist explanatory models significantly undermining the authority of "the social" or "society" as the privileged, objective ground of social scientific explanation. And this "dissolution of the social"³ presages, it is thought, nothing less than the dissolution of the dominant modes of interpretation, both liberal and marxist, which have informed social analysis for most of this century and much of the last.

This older tradition of social analysis had itself emerged as a paradigmatic revision of sorts. It developed in opposition to an original historiography which measured historical significance strictly in terms of formal political change effected through the intentional acts of elite historical figures. When we consider that this original historiography narrated institutional histories, histories of sovereign states, legal histories, and intellectual histories, then the new revisionism appears very much like a restoration. The question which arises, of course, is whether the

long diversion through a tradition predicated on social rather than political determination made any difference. Has social science experienced something akin to an Hegelian revolution, generating synthetic insights from both the political-institutional approach and the sociological approaches? Or have we simply come full circle, returning to the point of departure after a long and fruitless detour away from "the political"? Few, if any, of the participants in these new revisionist currents would claim to be merely reinstating a history of the high politics of a narrow spectrum of elites. But over the past decade, the call to repoliticize social science has moved from a position fully sympathetic to the contributions made within the sociological framework to a position actively dismissive of the sociological framework itself. Within the historical profession, for example, the revisionist problematic has shifted from "why does social history ignore politics?" to "why should political historians have to look at society?"⁴ And the answer to the latter seems increasingly to be that they need not.

We propose to examine the claims of the new revisionism in the context of the historiography of popular politics in 19th century England. It is useful to begin here, because the three-stage process of revision occurred in this context over a remarkably short span of less than 30 years. This temporal compression (made possible because the Anglo-American history profession remained for so long impregnable to more sociological approaches already holding sway over other academic disciplines) has brought the debates into impressive conceptual focus. In part this is because the competing paradigms are often both defended and criticized most persuasively by one and the same person who has changed position over the course of a career.

Gareth Stedman Jones presents an exemplary case in point. His early work was formulated quite self-consciously from the point of view of a social historian, while his more recent work has made up one of the most forceful and influential

statements of the new revisionism.⁵ "Rethinking Chartism," published in 1983 in the significantly titled collection of essays, Languages of Class, announced Stedman Jones' shift away from a sociological methodology which viewed class as an ontological reality in favor of a methodological linguistics which viewed class as a discursive construction. The ambition of the article was to move discussions of Chartism away from questions relating to the social location of its support in order to bring the "politics" of Chartism "to the fore." His method aimed at freeing Chartism of "the a priori assumptions of historians about its social meaning" through the application of a "non-referential conception of language to the study of Chartist speeches and writings."⁶

Stedman Jones' argument, however, is more ambitious than simply redressing an imbalance; the thrust of his analysis of the political language of Chartism calls into question the relevance of its social context altogether.

We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place. What we must therefore do is to study the production of interest, identification, grievance and aspiration within political languages themselves.⁷

And here the radical nature of his argument becomes apparent. Stedman Jones' contention of the political determination ("prefiguring") of interest and identity seriously erodes the importance of "social context" to political analysis. His contentions, in other words, have quite subversively called into question the very social historical project upon which his early work was premised.

This article seeks to interrogate the claim that the new discursive-political history has made a progressive break with an older "new social history." Specifically, we attempt to investigate the claim made by Stedman Jones and others that the explanatory power of politics has been rescued from the reductions of the "new social history" by way of a critical reading of his own work within

each paradigm. While sympathetic with its commitment to political analysis, we feel that the revisionist project itself betrays reductionist tendencies as subversive of the integrity of the political as that of the social historical methodology it seeks to transcend. Through comparing the two projects, re-tracing the critical path through which the new revisionism has reached its present position, we hope to suggest both where the new revisionism went wrong and how it might be righted.

* * * * *

The "new social history" informing the early work of Stedman Jones first won academic acceptance in the mid-1960s. Inspired by the liberationist struggles which transformed political culture in Britain and America in the period between the British Labour Party's election in 1945 and Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974 -- the Labour Party's post-war success in Britain, the civil rights movement in the United States, colonial nationalisms, the anti-war and student movements, the feminist movement -- an increasingly numerous and influential body of historians struggled to theorize political practice in ways that encompassed mass movements, ways that could allow for an actively participatory vision of politics. Historiographical attention shifted accordingly, not just in favor of what were perceived to be the past equivalents of contemporary radicalisms (e.g., Levellers and Chartists, populists and suffragists) but also to questions about popular mobilization as opposed to the calculations of elites. This new social history was distinguished for shifting historiographical inquiry about past politics to the social constituencies with which political movements identified themselves, in the belief that this constituted at least as crucial a context for analyzing politics past and present as the "high" political maneuverings of elites which had heretofore defined the parameters of the political.

The literature produced by this historiographical generation, therefore, was preeminently concerned with the problem of politics. Far from displacing political with social inquiry, it sought to "re-think the political." In place of the earlier restriction of politics to formal political institutions or ideologies understood as disembodied sets of ideas, this literature aimed its inquiry at the reciprocal relationship between a political movement and its popular base of support.⁸ "The social" as a category was meant to denominate what a simple textual investigation of political statements and programs never could: namely, that which the individual subject actively brings to the political relationship, that part of the individual's subjectivity (her or his pieties, loyalties, things held to be sacred, true or objectively given) which exists **prior** to, and is therefore irreducible to, his or her subsequent identification with a particular political program or language. Social analysis redefined politics, then, as the inevitably problematic attempt to bridge this irreducible gap between the subject and the politics with which it identified. Politics involved the difficult process of persuasively designating the identity of a social constituency in the terms of a political movement with which it does not **naturally** coincide. In the historiography of 19th century England, this redefinition of politics in relational terms was manifest in the first attempts⁹ to write a political history of the working class rather than a narrowly conceived institutional history of the labour movement. And the resulting scholarship was both methodologically innovative and empirically rich.¹⁰

In practice, however, integrating the social and formal political narratives proved exceptionally difficult. So long as the focus of attention remained on "heroic" popular struggles, the "new social history," at its best, suggested the socially structured imperatives for political actions which remained off-stage. (In this regard, even E.P. Thompson's study set the social stage of material deprivation and cultural solidarity which made Chartism possible rather than

analyzing the difficult process of mobilizing and then sustaining a popular base of support.¹¹⁾ At its worst, the "new social history" reified the **priority** of "the social" as the cause of political identifications. This unfortunate theoretical gesture eliminated the problem of political mobilization altogether by collapsing formal political language and its institutional embodiment into their social determinations. The essential discrepancy distinguishing all political movements from their constituent bases of support was crudely elided once "the social" was transformed into the causal source of political subjectivity. The practice of politics was reduced to a problem of epistemology and whatever remained of political language and institutions was reduced to the status of a mere formality, a secondary recognition, representation, or reflection of a social identity which was already there.

However, when the attentions of the first generation social historians were directed to non-socialist/conservative ideological formations (such as characterized popular politics in Britain during the second half of the 19th century), politics did occupy, albeit fleetingly, the center stage of analysis. Most notable in this regard was the labour aristocracy thesis, elaborated by Eric Hobsbawm, which bore the burden of explaining precisely how a conservative, imperialist politics could mobilize a working class constituency with which it was not **naturally** identified.¹²⁾ For a moment, that is, the irreducible break in continuity defining any relationship between a political movement and its "social" constituency -- the discontinuity or gap which is the very source of politics -- was restored via a sophisticated social analysis. But to the extent that "the social" remained reified as the **natural and therefore true** source of political subjectivity, the non-natural, conventional identifications of a conservative working class politics could only be understood as a form of false consciousness imposed from without, rather than the very form of politics itself. The constitutive gap between a socially

defined constituency and its political identifications was portrayed as if it marked the difference between fact and fiction; it was rendered as though it were the product of an error or manipulative deceit rather than the very essence of politics as such.

The mid-1970s witnessed a rebellion within the ranks of a younger generation of social historians (of whom Gareth Stedman Jones was one) precisely over this tendency to dismiss conservative working class politics as "false" to popular interests, as aberrant contradictions of the social determination of politics. In the increasingly dreary political climate of the 1970s, the undeniably popular appeal of contemporary conservatisms which culminated in Thatcherism and Reaganism made it less and less plausible (and certainly less politically astute) to ignore historically effective conservative politics as aberrant forms of false consciousness. This second generation of social historians set out therefore to take popular conservatism seriously. The literature produced by this younger group of historians formed the first sustained critique of the tendency within the old "new social history" to ignore, deny or evade the importance of politics.¹³ Strangely enough, however, the strategy for rescuing politics from the condescension of a theory of false consciousness was to authenticate it, in one manner or another, by referring it back to objective, non-political social conditions. The popular liberalism, patriotism, imperialism and political passivity of mid to late Victorian working people were thereby explained away as rational responses on the part of workers to wage differentials, work experience and culture, neighborhood experience, the stabilization of capitalist labor relations, etc. -- that is to say, rational responses to objective (not to say exclusively economic) social conditions of a mature and apparently permanent capitalist economy. More often than not, this literature, which proposed to take popular politics more seriously, paradoxically

ended up collapsing it back into its social determinations in a manner quite analogous to the first generation of social historians.

Symptomatic of the fate of the political in such studies is Stedman Jones' analysis of popular conservatism in "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class." Against "standard interpretations" of the period as dominated by the "the rise of Labour and the mounting pressure for social reform," Stedman Jones insists that social historians concede that the majority of workers were not socialists, while the eventual formation of a working-class party had more to do with defending existing trade union privileges, than working-class aspirations for control of state and nation.¹⁴ The real problematic of the period then becomes the absence of "class war" or a combative class politics by the end of the 19th century, contrary to the expectations of contemporary observers across the political spectrum. Many of these contemporaries anticipated Lenin's invocation of false consciousness in attributing socialism's failure to materialize to "a wave of imperialism [which] has swept over the country." Popular euphoria at the relief of Mafeking, former republicans' expressions of allegiance to the monarchy, the popularity of music halls over socialist lecturns were all perceived as manifestations of an imperial turn to popular political aspirations which dashed socialist hopes as it propelled the Conservative Party to electoral victory.¹⁵

Stedman Jones insists, however, that this failure of socialism, while it had political symptoms, was not a political event -- i.e. it was not due to the political victory of conservatism in wresting popular support away from socialist alternatives. Rather conservatism's "popularity" was a symptom of the de-politicization of working class culture after the defeat of the Charter: "What Mafeking and other imperial celebrations portended was not so much the predominance of the wrong politics among the mass of London workers, but rather

their estrangement from political activity as such." Imperialism's appeal did not represent the political victory of conservatism, but rather the collapse of popular political ambition altogether. "Loyalism," in short, "was a product of apathy."¹⁶

Popular conservatism in all its manifestations was not, therefore, "really" conservative, in the sense of involving the mobilization of working class support for conservative political principles. In support of this argument, Stedman Jones retraces ostensibly conservative political behavior on the part of workers to its genuinely social (which are juxtaposed to political) motivations. Mafeking celebrations were expressions of relieved concern for working-class soldiers at the front, rather than any "politically defined" support for the war or imperial aggression as such. Working class support for Conservative candidates in the "khaki election" of 1900 reflected "local and material" interests in defending housing and employment opportunities from the perceived threat of immigrant and foreign competition.¹⁷

The argument then shifts to the efforts of (primarily Liberal) middle-class philanthropists to "civilize" outcast London -- the assumption apparently being that workers would have to have been manipulated or "socially controlled" in order to genuinely embrace a conservative politics. Stedman Jones, therefore, refutes the possibility of such a genuinely popular conservatism by demonstrating that the working class was fundamentally impermeable to the political and cultural interventions of its social superiors. Here again, while the working classes of this period were clearly not revolutionary, neither were they affected by this civilizing missionary onslaught: "The results of fifty years of Christian missionary activity had been insignificant." Church attendance, like voting Conservative, "was generally for material reasons." Temperance made little inroad into working-class culture in London, although the provincial story was one of greater success. And workers deployed the fruits of what thrift they managed "to

demonstrate self-respect" in the form of elaborate funerals and Sunday-best suits, rather than in accordance with middle-class-valued "calculations of utility."¹⁸

Popular conservatism is thusly dismissed; in its place Stedman Jones posits as the dominant characteristic of working class consciousness of the period a widespread apathy with regards to political matters, an apathy incapable of generating a socialist will to power and superficially vulnerable (as opposed to genuinely attracted) to the romantic enticements of Empire, Crown and Toryism. The origins of this apathy were in themselves partly political -- a defensive retreat by the working class after the traumatic defeat of the Charter, a resigned political acceptance of the permanence of industrial capitalism. However, the bulk of Stedman Jones' characteristically artful analysis rests on social factors. The social conditions which had nurtured radical and Chartist politics during the first half of the nineteenth century -- the "work-centred" culture of the London artisanate -- were being eroded during the second half of the century. De-skilling, sweating, and provincial competition threatened the position of the shrinking force of skilled labor, which "became increasingly defensive and concerned to protect itself from below as much as from above."¹⁹ The shifting social geography of work and leisure also undermined the institutional practices which had characterized working class politics during the Chartist period. Skilled workers were increasingly likely to commute to work from the suburbs, which lessened their contacts after work with their immediate co-workers. As wives increasingly withdrew from waged labor outside the home, the latter was more and more likely to become "a depoliticized haven." Leisure time increased with the shortening of the legal work-day, but the most popular beneficiary of working class leisure, the pub, "would no longer be the trade pub near the workplace, but the 'local'." With neighbors of different trades, pub conversation was less likely to turn to "trade

matters, more likely to reflect common interests, politics to a certain extent, but more often, sport and entertainment."²⁰

The "common interests" and sensibilities around which this new working-class culture was constructed are highlighted in the popular appeal of music-hall entertainments. The "sham opulence" of the halls themselves afforded temporary escape from the material deprivations of working-class experience. At the same time, the entertainments were "strongly rooted in the realities of working-class life." The class system was the subject of irony and criticism; however, while "not considered to be just," it was accepted as inevitable. Fatalism, in fact, was the dominant theme of the entertainments, a characteristic of working-class culture attributed to high levels of unemployment which characterized London working-class existence.²¹

And it is this fatalism which functions in Stedman Jones' argument to exonerate the late Victorian working class of "genuine" attachment to the conservative principles by which it was periodically mobilized. For Stedman Jones (writing as a social historian) does not differ from his predecessors in assuming that a genuine popular conservatism would be "false" to popular interests, and could therefore only come into existence as a result of bourgeois manipulation. In the place of the successful seduction of working class loyalties by bourgeois politics, he contests the "sincerity" of popular conservative commitments. This is precisely the point in Stedman Jones' argument that politics gets sacrificed to its social context, and it is somewhat ironic that the price of social reductionism is highest when the politics are most unsavory. His argument, of course, shares with other arguments based on the possibility of an authentic political expression, the difficulty of documenting the **absence** of sincerity. Stedman Jones ultimately has to deprive the working class of this conservative period of political agency altogether in order to make his case; in place of the active appropriation of

conservative identifications, he posits a structurally determined deformation, a concession to the power of advanced industrial capitalism and the mind-numbing affects of poverty.

In support of this latter, Stedman Jones approvingly cites Mayhew's assessment of the political potential, or lack thereof, endemic to the material deprivations characteristic of working class experience:

Where the means of sustenance and comfort are fixed, the human being becomes conscious of what he has to depend upon. If, however his means be uncertain -- abundant at one time, and deficient at another -- a spirit of speculation or gambling with the future will be induced, and the individual gets to believe in "luck" and "fate" as the arbiters of his happiness rather than to look upon himself as 'the architect of his fortunes' -- trusting to 'chance' rather than his own powers and foresight to relieve him at the hour of necessity.²²

There are references throughout the article to the "local and material" character of working-class concerns; explicit support for larger political issues, such as imperialism, is interpreted as "passive acquiescence"; the protections afforded by pension funds and friendly societies are considered "too abstract and intangible" to attract the investments of working families "whose whole efforts were concentrated on getting through the week ahead without being beset by disaster"; politics in general is referred to as too "abstract and remote" to interest the typical working man; in short the social conditions of working class existence during the second half of the 19th century had so shrunken the imaginative capacity of working people, so compressed their "horizons of possibility" as to preclude political ambitions altogether.²³ In place of political action, there emerged the "culture of consolation" epitomized by the music hall, and eventually a labourist politics bent on welfare not power.²⁴

All of which is to suggest that the early Stedman Jones exonerated the British working class of conservatism at the expense of the political capacities of working people themselves. The sociological framework which informed his

analysis is salvaged only at the sacrifice of the genuine piety of popular attachment to Empire and Crown, religion and respectability. For while working class experience might generate an apathetic withdrawal from political aspirations, the only positive political loyalties it might generate would be socialist. The converse, of course, is that a genuine "autonomous" non-socialist politics could never effectively give expression to working class experience. Stedman Jones restores, in other words, a perfect continuity between the socially defined subject and the politics with which he or she is identified. He thereby defuses the contradictions of false consciousness implied in the labour aristocracy thesis, but only by denying that the discrepancy between a working class politics and its social constituency really exists.

And in this respect Hobsbawm's analyses of conservative working class politics have always been more satisfying than Stedman Jones'. For while Hobsbawm may have reduced this constitutive discrepancy to the status of an externally imposed error or manipulative deceit, he nevertheless has always been attuned to its real political effects. Stedman Jones, on the other hand, eliminates the discrepancy completely by suggesting that it was an illusory difference between what working people said (cynical expressions of support for empire, Liberal philanthropy, Toryism, etc.) and what they really meant (rational responses to social conditions) when they said it. This configuration of the problem flattens politics to the status of an adequate expression of authentic social conditions and in the process obscures the real insight of the labour aristocracy thesis: namely, that politics is not a matter of adequate expression, that politics is the designation of a human relationship between a constituency and a political movement which are not by nature coincident and which are, therefore, never fully identical to one another.²⁵

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In the decade between writing "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics" and "Rethinking Chartism," Stedman Jones' theoretical framework underwent a striking reversal. Perhaps as a result of Mrs. Thatcher's increasingly impregnable hold on popular support, Stedman Jones has come to accept, circa 1983, the authenticity of the other-than-material imaginings of popular constituencies. Properly frustrated by sociological imperatives which voided popular politics of its content, the Stedman Jones of "Rethinking Chartism" now insists that the analysis of political movements must begin with the formal content of political discourse.²⁶

Exhibiting the theoretical integrity which required his social historical methodology to engage with the aberrantly conservative working class culture in the late 19th century, Stedman Jones directs his anti-sociological attentions towards one of the most heroic and radical political moments in the history of the British working class -- Chartism. Chartism was both politically militant and strikingly homogeneous in social terms -- the combination of which has facilitated the interpretation of the movement as a (albeit immature) stage in the working class's political evolution towards socialism. According to Stedman Jones, however, this social interpretation of Chartism has tended "to neglect the political form of the movement and thus to render obscure and inconsequential the reasoning that underlay the demand for the Charter."²⁷ The results have been destructive of a coherent understanding of Chartism's origins and the timing of its collapse. For Chartism was explicitly about **political** power -- universal suffrage was prescribed as the solution to the socio-economic problems of "the people." And this forthrightly political content of Chartism betrays what Stedman Jones finds to be a gross inconsistency in the social historical approach. For, neither the

prescription nor its beneficiaries, correspond to the political aspirations which a properly "class conscious" working class should exhibit, according to the sociological framework informing the bulk of social historical analysis. Stedman Jones, in other words, has discovered in Chartism an incoherence, a contradictory gulf between a political movement and the socially defined constituency with which it is putatively identified very much like the more obvious contradiction implicit in the labour aristocracy thesis concerning late nineteenth century popular conservatism. And "Rethinking Chartism" is his attempt to resolve this contradiction implicit in sociological approaches to Chartist political behavior just as "Working Class Culture" was an attempt to resolve the contradictory discrepancies riddling the labour aristocracy thesis.

Freed of the imperatives of the sociological framework (imperatives which necessitated that he restore the perfect coherence of political subjectivity by collapsing it back into its social determinations) Stedman Jones now diffuses the incoherence by attributing it to the illusory effects of the sociological prejudices of historians themselves. The "axiomatic presumption" that "economic power is the cause and political power the effect" has blinded social historians to the fact that Chartism is part and parcel of a larger discursive tradition of radical politics which predates the the social and economic transformations of the industrial revolution. According to Stedman Jones, this temporal priority of radical discourse demonstrates that the language of Chartism cannot be explained as the epiphenomenal effect, or representation, of prior social identities and economic interests. On the contrary, the language itself must have causal priority; it must itself be considered the causal source of the subject's identity and interest. Language, according to Stedman Jones, "prefigures" or "creates" subjective needs and demands which it then "orchestrates."²⁸ Hence there is no need to refer outside of language to some objective ground determining the subject. The

individual subject is whole, coherent and self-identical because it is determined entirely within the circle of language. To discover the identity of the subject one merely has to examine the "text" of the Chartist program. Hence Stedman Jones claims "Rethinking Chartism" to be the analytical application of a "non-referential conception of language to the study of Chartist speeches and writing...exploring the systematic relationships between the terms and propositions within the language rather than setting particular propositions into direct relation to a putative experiential reality of which they are assumed to be the expression."²⁹

Chartist language "was first and foremost a vocabulary of political exclusion whatever the social character of those excluded." As such "it could never be the ideology of a specific class." That Chartism's adherents were predominantly working class was a function of the inclusion of the middle classes in the political nation in 1832 rather than the progress of class formation.³⁰ The radical as opposed to "class" character of the Chartist analysis was its prescription of essentially political solutions to the social problems of its adherents -- in particular, the monopolization of political power by "idlers" was blamed for obstructing the "fair" reward of labor ("the distinction was not primarily between ruling and exploited classes in an economic sense, but rather between the beneficiaries and the victims of corruption and monopoly political power"),³¹ the solution to which was of course the extension of the franchise to "the people." The middle classes were suspect in this analysis not for their economic role but for their exercise of political power in a selfish and immoral manner (factory owners who supported the Charter, for example, were revered). Chartism owed its popular purchase during the 1830s to state policies which more than matched its suspicions, policies which "did indeed signify the most consequential attempt to dismantle or transform the decentralized treatment of problems of crime, poverty and social order characteristic of the eighteenth century state":

The New Poor Law, and the assisted migration of southern paupers to northern towns, both of which were considered part of a plot to lower wages by means of centralized non-representative state bodies, the Municipal Corporations Act and the extension of the police system, which effectively excluded the working classes from participation in local government, the refusal of factory legislation, the denial of protection to the handloom weavers, and the attack upon trade unions, could all be seen in Fielden's words as part of "the highroad to tyranny" . . . ³²

Conversely, Chartism lost credibility when, in the 1840s, state policies ceased to conform to its cynical expectations. Government attentions not only shifted to what were perceived as less sinister areas of legislation (e.g. public education and sanitation), but a series of Acts were passed by a non-democratic Parliament directed at precisely those sorts of immoral abuses of the economic system that Chartism would have expected it to defend. The Mines Act of 1842, the Joint Stock Company Act, the Bank Charter Act, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Factory Act and Ten Hours Act dealt a massive blow to "the radical conception of the corrupt, unrepresentative and self-interested state," which "proved fatal to the conviction and self-certainty of the language of Chartism, especially in the period after 1842, when some real measure of prosperity returned to the economy."³³ The political stabilization of the 1850s and 60s, particularly the incorporation of the working classes in the Liberal Party, then, does not require reference to changes in the social composition or economic situation of the working classes which characterize the social interpretation advanced in Stedman Jones' earlier work. Liberalism represented the political Establishment's appropriation of the moral and political critique of Chartism, thereby making itself Chartism's natural heir. Hence there is no need to treat the language of Chartism as the "symbolic or anachronistic" representation of an external social reality.³⁴

However, while Stedman Jones reclaims the explanation of Chartism's rise and fall from reduction to socio-economic changes associated with the industrial revolution, his own explanations rely on reference to changes in the posture of the

state which are quite obviously **external to the language of Chartism**. It turns out to be these extra-linguistic changes in the state which drive the narrative of "Rethinking Chartism." Far from providing a "non-referential" treatment of Chartist language in which the language itself constitutes the subject, Stedman Jones has told the story of Chartism as a language which more or less adequately represented the prevailing structure of the state, and which then became anachronistic once that state structure changed:

Once the evidence suggested that real reform was possible within the unreformed system, that the state did not wholly correspond to the radical picture...then radical ideology could be expected to lose purchase...Chartism began to fail when a gulf opened up between its premises and the perceptions of its constituency.³⁵

If, in other words, we take his narrative seriously, it is the subject's perceptions of the objective reality which determine their appropriation of a particular political language and not the language which determines the identity of the political subject.

* * * *

Stedman Jones' story does not therefore do what it claims to be doing. At the end of his narrative he once again encounters what all his scholarly efforts have been mobilized to explain away, namely a gulf or discrepancy between the premises of a political program and the actual subjectivity of the constituency with which it is identified. The only way he can diffuse the discrepancy is to violate his declared linguistic method and appeal to the extra-linguistic fact of the state. He must call upon the state at the last minute as a kind of deus ex machina to explain the break in continuity between a political program and the constituency it supposedly "created."

And this disparity between Stedman Jones' declared method and the actual scholarship produced may prove to be the most interesting aspect of "Rethinking Chartism."³⁶ For, it finds a telling analogue in the scholarship predicated on social determinism such as the original labour aristocracy thesis. Both frameworks start out from premises which propose the perfect continuity between an individual's political subjectivity and the politics with which he or she comes to be identified (the sociological approach by collapsing subjectivity into its social determinations and the discursive-political approach by collapsing it into its linguistic determinations). But the deployment of these premises in empirical case studies generates aberrant examples of discontinuity between the subject and its political identifications, discontinuities which can only be resolved by violating the premises with which the argument began. The sociology must call on the political, just as the structural linguistics must call upon extra-linguistic facts as their respective aces-in-the-hole to restore coherence to their shattered narratives.³⁷

Both the new discursive-political history and the history predicated on social determinism hold in common an impatient resistance to the ambivalence implied in the discontinuity inhering between a political movement and the constituency which it has mobilised. To paraphrase Paul de Man, the implied function of both the sociological and the discursive-political methods is to do away at all costs with this ambivalence which makes a movement irreducible to its constituency and a constituency irreducible to the movement with which it is identified.³⁸ What we have been suggesting is that it is this very ambivalence, this fundamental discrepancy constitutive of all political relationships which gives politics its generative, creative power. And therefore, it is the steadfast avoidance of this irreducible gap which accounts for the downgrading of politics in so much scholarship.

In the case of Stedman Jones, this avoidance takes the special form of a resistance to the referential, metaphorical function of language -- a resistance clearly in evidence when he states categorically that language is "non-referential" and "pre-figurative." To our minds, the aim of a critical linguistics (particularly as manifested in the so-called deconstructive approaches) is directed precisely against this transfer which would make language itself the prefigurative stable source of meaning and identity. The procedure of a critical linguistics, far from denying the referentiality of language, raises its referential function to the center stage of analysis.³⁹ For no part of language, even down to the word, exists as a meaningful unit in and of itself; it must always consist of the designation of one thing in terms of something else, the identification of one thing in terms of something different. There is, therefore, an ineradicable ambiguity or difference, running like a fault line between between the "name" and the "thing named." A fault line which represents the **potential** instability of any conventional identification of one thing in the terms of another with which it has no a priori, natural connection.⁴⁰ This gap inhabiting the very structure of language corresponds exactly to the gap distinguishing a constituency from the politics with which it comes to be identified.

When the two methods, sociological and discursive-political, actually confront the presence of the break in continuity distinguishing a political subject from its politics, they portray it as if it were a temporary aberration imposed from without, as if it were a momentary violation of the natural order of things. And by portraying it in these terms they both ensure that the complexity of political relations will not be taken seriously. For in each case the individual subject, him or herself, is considered to exist as a stable, fixed entity prior to the ambiguities which the aberrant relation imposes.

This, then, is the common error of method which leads to the denial or evasion of the political; it is the failure to begin analysis by taking the subject seriously as an entity which is always already shot through with the complexities, ambivalences and instabilities that the structure of political relations implies. The problem with the old new social history was not that it collapsed political language, institutions, or ideology back into the social. (Indeed, as the labour aristocracy thesis indicates the constitutive force of an autonomous politics is often all too present in sociological approaches.⁴¹) Rather, the problem was that it collapsed the subject (her or himself) into its social circumstances. "The social" was (perhaps more often than not) reified into the causal source of subjective political identities, transforming the subject, in turn, into a fixed, self-identical, and therefore knowable entity.⁴² The recent revisionist attempts, epitomized in the work of Gareth Stedman Jones, to treat political languages as if they were the autonomous, prefigurative sources of political subjectivity, commit exactly the same error. The subject is collapsed into its linguistic circumstances lending it the coherence and stability of an inert object.

The "individual" subject is not inert. It is agent exactly to the degree that it is already imbued with the complex ambivalences of political relations prior to its "situation" in any particular set of social or linguistic circumstances. The double irony here is that it was social analysis which first posited this complexity of the individual subject. And as long as the new discursive-political revision suppresses the complexity, it will not restore politics to the analysis of human affairs. It will continue to refine the strategies through which the problem of politics has always been avoided.

Footnotes

1 Most of the work within this revisionist project defines "politics" in terms of formal political institutions, ideas, and movements. The social history project against which it is constructed, however, was also very much about "politics," if understood in the broader sense of the relations of power operating in the social formation as a whole. As should become obvious in the course of our argument we do not share either the revisionists' nonpolitical depiction of their social historical forerunners, nor their own claims to have "politicized" the analysis of popular culture of the social order.

2 The "linguistic turn" has pride of place among the other currents, for it is possible to argue that the various socio-economic reductionisms were in fact modeled upon a precritical linguistics which viewed language as the secondary, symbolic representation, reflection, paraphrase, etc. of a primary reality. Just as the "linguistic turn" seeks to give some measure of autonomy and constitutive authority to language, so the other revisionist currents seek to give autonomy and authority to institutions, to the state, and to the law. The literature involved in each of these projects is already enormous and much of the work does not fit neatly within the categories mentioned, but for examples of the "New Institutionalism" and the related project to "bring the state back in" see the excellent work of Jonathan Zeitlin, for example, "Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: A Contradictory Relationship," in S. Tolliday and J. Zeitlin (eds.), Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives (1984), and Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization," in Past and Present, 108 (August 1985), pp. 133-76; see the very influential work of Theda Skocpol which criticizes both marxist and liberal methods for reducing the state to a mere representation of an underlying socio-economic essence: "Bringing the State Back In," Items (SSRC), 36:1-2 (June, 1982), 1-8; "Bringing the State Back In': Strategies of Analysis in the Current Research," in Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 6-37; "Political Response to Capitalist Crisis: Neo-Marxist Theories of the State and the Case of the New Deal," Politics and Society 10 (1980), pp.155-201; and Michael Mann, The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) for a comparable critique of "society-centered" explanations of power; the return to institutional and "state-centered" approaches can also be seen in the revival of interest in Karl Polanyi's work. See his The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time (Boston, 1957) which offers a compelling critique of socio-economic reductionism, and see Fred Block and Margaret R. Somers, "Beyond the Economistic Fallacy: The Holistic Science of Karl Polanyi," in Skocpol (ed.), Vision and Method in Historical Sociology (Cambridge, 1984), 47-84. See also the introductory piece by Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg in their edited volume, Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) for a critique of socio-economic reductionism from a political science point of view; and Charles Tilly, Big Structures, Large Processes, and Huge Comparisons (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1984) for a critique of the reification of "society" into the ontological ground of social science explanation, and see Tilly's earlier work which

anticipates some of the recent discussion concerning the state as an autonomous actor, for example, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Tilly (ed.), The Formation of National States in Western Europe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3-83. Two excellent examples of the new history of the law in British History are Joanna Innes and John Styles, "The Crime Wave: Recent Writing on Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth Century England," in The Journal of British Studies 25 (1986), 380-435, and the introductory piece in John Brewer and John Styles (eds.), An Ungovernable People: The English and Their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (London: Hutchinson, 1980). Both are formulated as critiques of earlier histories which tended to reduce the law to the status of an expression of socio-economic determinations or to the status of a tool wielded by the dominant social class. From the neo-marxist traditions of Gramscian and Althusserian interpretation see the excellent and important early essay by Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics," Social History 5 (1980), 249-72; and Bob Jessop, The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods (New York: New York University Press, 1982). For an exemplary theoretical work on the linguistic or discursive approach to politics (which in fact comes out of an earlier engagement with Althusser and Gramsci) see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (London: Verso, 1985).

3 The term is from Scott Lash and John Urry, "The Dissolution of the Social?" in Mark Wardell and Stephen Turner (eds.), Sociological Theory in Transition (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), pp. 95-109.

4 This shift from sympathy to antipathy for the sociological approach can be detected conceptually, for instance, in the shift from notions of the relative autonomy of the state (associated with Althusser's original formulations) to recent considerations of the state as a fully autonomous, self-determining actor. For discussions favorable to this shift see the aforementioned work of Skocpol and see Fred Block, "Beyond Relative Autonomy." The shift might also be registered biographically, for instance in the careers of scholars whose early work was framed self-consciously by the sociological method and whose later work, often in the mode of a self-critique, took critical aim at that method. An exemplary figure whose work is extremely challenging in both its old sociological guise and its more recent post-sociological guise, is Ernesto Laclau. See his earlier work in Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory (London: New Left Books, 1977) and his later collaborative effort with Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. The quote is borrowed from Eley and Nield, "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?" which was formulated in a manner quite sympathetic to the contributions of a social history.

5 Stedman Jones outlines his intellectual trajectory in his introduction to Languages of Class (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), a collection of his essays, of which "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class" (pp. 179-238, originally published in the Journal of Social History 7, 4 (Summer 1974)) typifies the social historical approach to popular politics, while "Rethinking Chartism" (pp. 90-178) presents Stedman Jones' critique of this approach in the historiography on Chartism.

6 Ibid., p. 21.

7 Ibid., pp. 22, 24.

8 We want to stress the importance of this theoretical contribution. Politics comes into existence only as a reciprocal relationship, the appropriate model or metaphor for which is the relationship between a party or movement and the constituency with which it is identified.

9 By "first attempts," we mean first attempts made within the mainstream academy. Non-academic marxist historians had since the turn of the century been sketching out the plausible redefinitions of politics, positing it as a relationship between a base of support and the institutional and ideological forms with which that base was identified. The most important theorist in this regard was obviously Gramsci. But see Perry Anderson's Considerations On Western Marxism (London: Verso, 1976) for an interesting and useful introduction to the large literatures of marxist social analysis produced outside of the academy.

10 The works of E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm stand out most notably. See their respective classics: The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1963) and Labouring Men (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964).

11 If Thompson is guilty of this charge, particularly with respect to The Making, he has always remained theoretically attuned to relational quality of politics. One only has to read the prefatory remarks in The Making to see this. So, it is incomprehensible to us that his work has recently been characterized as typical of reductionist marxism.

12 The most influential formulation of this argument in British history is in Eric Hobsbawm, "The Labour Aristocracy," Labouring Men.

13 The literature produced by this younger generation was often of the highest quality: see for example, Robert Q. Gray, The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Geoffrey Crossick, An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society (London: Croom and Helm, 1978); Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working Class Culture"; and see also the interesting exchange between Alistair Reid and H. F. Moorehouse published in the pages of Social History from January 1978 to October 1979.

14 Stedman Jones, Languages of Class, pp. 237-38.

15 Ibid., pp. 179-80.

16 Ibid., p. 182.

17 Ibid., pp. 180-1.

18 Ibid., pp. 196-200.

19 Ibid., p. 215.

20 Ibid., p. 220.

21 The connections posed between unemployment and political apathy, however, have ramifications far beyond London -- according to Stedman Jones, the

values of the music hall "reflected the general development of the English working class after 1870" (p. 235).

22 Mayhew, London Labour, vol. 2, 325; cited in Stedman Jones, Languages of Class, p. 234.

23 Stedman Jones, Languages of Class, pp. 180, 181, 196, 202, 214, 215.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 237-8.

25 See Nietzsche's early formulation of this: "...what matters with words is never truth, never the adequate expression...one designates only the relations of things to man, and to express them one calls on the boldest metaphors." In The Portable Nietzsche, Walter Kaufmann (trans. and ed.), (Middlesex: Penguin 1976), pp. 45-6.

26 "In contrast to the prevalent social-historical approach to chartism, whose starting point is some conception of class or occupational consciousness, it [this essay] argues that the ideology of Chartism cannot be constructed in abstraction from its linguistic form. An analysis of Chartist ideology must start from what Chartists actually said or wrote, the terms in which they addressed each other or their opponents," Stedman Jones, Languages of Class, p. 94. At the root of Stedman Jones' disillusion with the sociological framework surely lies the consolidation of Mrs. Thatcher's hold on popular support in Britain and the failure of Labour to adequately contest her appeal, taken on board theoretically as indicative of the power of politics and the fragility of social experience in the formation of popular political consciousness.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 24, 105.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 174-5.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7, 176-7.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

36 We do not mean to criticize the disparity as a simpleminded inconsistency on Stedman Jones' part. Indeed it is due to the discrepancy, this contradiction running through his argument, that he raises the most interesting issue concerning the changing mode of the political relation between the state and popular groups.

37 Few have recognized the systematic disparity between the method and empirical statements of scholarship premised on the social determination of

political subjectivity. E.P. Thompson, however, was in this regard as in many others exceptional. As long ago as 1963, in the famous preface to The Making of the English Working Class, he noted that this paradoxical disparity may have been the defining trait of sociological determinisms: "There is today an ever present temptation to suppose that class is a thing ... assumed to have a real existence, defined as so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce a class consciousness which 'it' ought to have (but seldom does have) if 'it' were properly aware of its real interests. There is a cultural [political] superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural [political] lags and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, or sect, or theorist who discloses class consciousness not as it is, but as it ought to be" (p. 10).

38 Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Blindness," in Blindness and Insight (London: Methuen and Co., 1983), p. 111.

39 de Man, "Resistance to Theory," in his Resistance to Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), pp. 6-11.

40 We owe a large debt to de Man's literary theory which is just as much a theory of politics and ideology. In particular we have borrowed from "Resistance to Theory," and his essays on Nietzsche and Rousseau collected in Allegories of Reading (New Haven: Yale, 1979) and "The Rhetoric of Blindness."

41 In fact, the history of social analysis is littered with comparable examples of scholarly work which, starting out from the most rigorous of social determinisms, ends up with entirely political explanations. See E.P. Thompson's early critique of this tendency in both marxist and parsonian sociology, in The Making, pp. 10-12. And see Eley and Nield, "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?" for a really fascinating juxtaposition of British marxist historians who represent the revolutionary German SPD as normal historical development with German liberal historians who represent the reformist Labour Party of England as the model of normal development -- each group of social historians explaining the absence of normal development in their own national context by reference to some manipulative, political intervention from above (e.g., labour aristocracy, leninist party, repressive state apparatus, etc.). See Eley, "Joining Two Histories: The SPD and the German Working Class 1860-1914," in From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), pp. 171-199 for a further elaboration of this phenomenon in German historiography.

42 This reification of the priority of the social into causal priority may vitiate much scholarship, but it is not necessary to social analysis. Social analysis, as we understand it to have been deployed by its best practitioners, does not designate any categorical difference between a phenomenol social identity and its epiphenomenol political representation. "The social" merely designates the fact that the individual subject is already imbued with prior loyalties, pieties, etc., before her or his identification with a particular politics. It designates a contingent temporal priority -- a priority which far from radically separating the social from politics, implies that the subject is already actively political and that therefore any particular politics which seeks to mobilise his or her support will have to refer back to that political agency and persuasively take it into account. The first error of method is to suppose that this "referring back" functions as a principle of representation -- for that supposition reinstates the categorical distinction between

politics and society, between language and reality which the social analysis put into question in the first place. "The social" then, is not that part of human existence which is determined outside of language or politics. It is a concept which designates precisely those conventions of language which are the most deeply rooted, which appear after long usage to be valid, obligatory and true to people -- what Gramsci called the organic component of the social order and what Marx called the "mode of production." An example of the social -- that peculiar form of property relations in which property is conventionally **designated** in terms of capital, that strange mode of production in which the meaning and value of most, if not all, things is measured in terms of one common **denominator**, money. Does it still need to be said, so many years after Althusser's contributions, that by the concept "mode of production" Marx meant precisely to subvert the notion that people are economically **rather than politically** determined? See a brief discussion of the gross misreading of Marx in David Mayfield, "State or Society: Three Essays on the Contradictions in the State Theory" CSST Working Paper (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, forthcoming).

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