

of non- and anti-Marxist historians. To take an example that we have already encountered, the notion that Britain, even when it was the “workshop of the world”, was far from a thoroughly bourgeois society has been a staple of non-Marxist British historiography for a long time. Anderson unwittingly appears to share the view held by many Jewish socialist garment workers in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s that the communist *Morgen Freiheit* and the social democratic *Jewish Daily Forward* told lies to the workers, but that the *Wall Street Journal* told the truth to the bosses. There may be another aspect to this problem. A tension has long existed in the Marxist tradition between Marxism as a self-contained and self-sustaining body of doctrine on one hand and as something that can and should help itself liberally to other schools of thought on the other. Anderson (and I) belong to the latter camp, but Anderson takes things to an extreme that is not often encountered.

I began this review in a sour mood, wondering whether Anderson was still smarting from the demolition job that Thompson did on him in “The Peculiarities of the English”. I was wrong. In the October 21, 1993, issue of the *London Review of Books*, Perry Anderson paid handsome tribute to Edward Thompson. It was a class act. Whatever one’s final assessment of the book, the arguments in *English Questions* were not driven by anger, spite, or an obsessive desire to have the last word.

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James Vernon — *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815–1867*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xviii, 429.

James Vernon’s monograph on English political culture between 1815 and 1867 is a provocative but ultimately frustrating book. Written from a postmodern perspective, Vernon examines the form and content of political language during these tempestuous decades, drawing his principal examples from a study of five parliamentary constituencies, namely Oldham, Tower Hamlets, Lewes, Boston, and Devon. Initially Vernon had intended to write a comparative study of these constituencies, whose social and economic structures were strikingly different and whose politics, one might presume, would register these differences. But Vernon quickly abandoned this enterprise “in order to avoid having to manufacture political differences to which I would then have to attach undue structural significance” (p. 11). In other words, Vernon rapidly rejected a research strategy that might commit him to a sociology of popular politics in which the themes of interest groups and class have routinely emerged. That would have contradicted the postmodern project in which language itself constitutes the political subject rather than being shaped by anterior realities. The result is that the five case studies, if one can call them that, fit rather oddly in a book that stridently seeks to avoid a referential methodology. Why, one might ask, if the central task is to deconstruct the commonalities of language that defined political identities, did Vernon persist with these micro-studies

at all? The only plausible explanation seems to be that Vernon's expansive definition of language, which thankfully avoids the lococentrism of other postmodern studies, merited such a step. If one is going to include symbol, ritual, and space in a definition of language, they have to be grounded somewhere.

Vernon makes high claims for his findings. He argues that the conventional historiography of late Hanoverian and Victorian politics is not only recklessly referential but suffused with a liberal-Marxist teleology that sees liberalism and democracy marching to the drum of party and class. In his view the period between 1815 and 1867 was one in which the institutionalization of politics (best exemplified by the rise of party and print culture) closed down political space and inhibited democratic potential. Yet the novelty of his thesis is surely forced. Most historians see the triumph of liberalism as an antidote to democracy rather than an inducement, making Britain one of the last of European industrial nations to embrace formal democracy at the ballot box. Moreover, those historians who still insist on the importance of class within the political terrain would not subscribe to any straightforward teleology that saw 1832 empower the middle class and 1867 or 1884–1885 their working-class counterparts. There is, in fact, a pretty weighty historical debate about why aristocratic forms of governance persisted in Victorian England and the degree to which interest politics and religion fractured and disassembled class solidarities. Vernon's claim to be breaking the "interpretive log-jam" of a triumphant teleology that stresses the "forward march of labour and the triumph of Liberal democracy" (p. 338) is thus ultimately pretentious.

Vernon's analysis of the "fall of public man [*sic*]" and the closure of the "constitution's radical libertarian democratic potential" (p. 336) is centrally related to the exclusion of women and to definitions of political subjectivity that privileged the propertied male citizen. Over the long term this argument is creditable, but it requires a more nuanced approach. Vernon stresses women's participation in the informal politics of the marketplace and their gradual exclusion from more associational modes of political organization, yet he ignores, most crucially, women's enhanced presence on the early mass platform and in the various clubs and societies associated with it. The emergence of women's political societies in 1819 in the wake of a broadening political frontier after the Napoleonic wars and their subsequent participation in reform and Chartist organizations is almost completely ignored. Moreover, no distinction is made between the essentially demotic interventions of crowd politics, with their implied reciprocity between rulers and ruled, and the democratizing experiments in popular political organization that grew apace after 1815, with no less than 500 Hampden clubs in existence in England and Scotland by 1817 and a mass membership approaching half a million. Indeed, the politics of the mass platform, the most central feature of popular political culture in the period of Vernon's book, is given only fitful analysis. Quite amazingly, no investigation is made into the rich vein of Home Office papers that illuminate the political semiology of such a mass movement. Vernon's sources are confined principally to the terrain of constituency politics, despite the proliferating diversity of political contention that spilled out beyond its confines. This is a serious drawback for a book that professes an expansive review of political language.

Indeed, it could be argued, *contra* Vernon, that the period up to the 1840s at least was a democratizing experience for ordinary men and women, arrested only in the years of triumphal liberalism that succeeded it. To readjust Vernon's chronology in this way would also cause one to reflect upon the constraints upon democratic space in this period. Vernon makes much of the constraining forces of party, and much more implausibly, the constraining influence of print. He routinely downplays the role of the state and the law in de-legitimizing radical democratic activity, despite the impressive evidence to the contrary. To suggest that this battery of sanctions was ineffectual because it did not stem the flow of "seditious" writings and speeches is to overlook the ingenuity and courage of radical printers and leaders in evading or defying the law, and the real constraints that such legislation placed upon democratic debate and organization. Eileen Yeo's account of the way in which the corresponding societies act influenced democratic practice within the Chartist movement, published in *The Chartist Experience* over a decade ago, is a telling reminder of the power of the state to define the parameters of political citizenship.

I do not wish to be unduly critical of this book. There are some useful sections on political and architectural space, upon Tory traditions of sociability, upon local hero-worship and its permutations particularly with respect to the Cobbettite tradition in Oldham. The chapter on the discourse of popular constitutionalism deserves close reading, not only because it gives a good sense of the eclecticism of the radical tradition, but because it ably reveals the melodramatic tropes of constitutionalist narratives. It should, however, be read alongside James Epstein's recent *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford University Press, 1994), which attempts to encode these narratives in a class context. Vernon predictably cavils at this, so anxious is he to exorcise "that illusory beast 'working-class radicalism' " (p. 328) from the political history of the period. This is a book that continually attempts to write class out of the nineteenth century, on the central premise that popular constitutionalism was always capable of a multiplicity of readings, was too fluid and indeterminate to serve as a class discourse. I am not convinced by this reasoning, nor by procedures that see language as constitutive of reality without being shaped by it. Others may be.

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Paul Crook — *Darwinism, War and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the "Origin of Species" to the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. ix, 306.

The basic question posed by this rich, intriguing study is whether there emerged, in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an alternative Darwinian legacy that legitimized peace and mutual aid rather than pugnacity, war, and racist imperialism culminating in the slaughter of 1914–1918. It is Paul Crook's contention that a mythology of Darwinism as an explanation for human bellicosity has tended to