

THE SOCIAL NOVEL IN ENGLAND 1830-1850

Louis Cazamian
Translated, with a Foreword,
by Martin Fido

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Dickens Disraeli Mrs Gaskell Kingsley

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Translator's foreword

Cazamian's *Le Roman social en Angleterre*, still after almost seventy years unrivalled in its field, has a double advantage of distance. It was written in France. And it is now as distant from us in time as the books it deals with were from Cazamian himself. We do not expect a foreigner from the turn of the century to have a declared interest in one side or the other of nineteenth-century English social life, and this is extremely useful when the subject dealt with is as sensitive as the rise of the labour movement, and the division between early radicals and idealists. Cazamian's occasional notes of personal bias – his belief that Disraeli was a cold and unpleasant person, for example, or his view that Victorian society would have been utterly detestable were it not for the presence in it of idealistic interventionists – can neither offend nor distract the reader today.

Its very foreignness provides the book's great strength. English critics tend to work empirically. We analyse a novel, and assume that what we discover within it tells us almost all we need to know about the writer's outlook. Arnold Kettle, Raymond Williams, and John Lucas are only three critics who have described and assessed individual social novels far more cogently than Cazamian ever did. But as a rule we are far less confident in grasping broad movements and sweeping intellectual trends. An English critic is likely to leave his reader enthusiastically determined to read a particular novel again and get the best out of it, but he is unlikely to go very far in relating it to a clear understanding of the thought of the society that produced it. Here Cazamian comes into his own. Although he devotes a good deal of space to analysing individual novels, his real subject is the intellectual movement linking one book to another. He forces us to perceive and understand a nationwide reaction against Benthamite utilitarianism, and to see how each novelist under consideration was influenced by it and influenced it.

Of course, this approach is sufficiently un-English to present us with some difficulties. The 'English nineteenth-century idealistic and interventionist reaction' is not a part of our mental furniture, and we may be daunted by such a broad vision of a group of writers. We are, as a matter

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of fact, much better at seeing trees than woods. But the woods can help us to understand how the trees grow, and once Cazamian has made clear the importance of idealism, reactionary conservatism, and interventionism in his key term, our understanding of Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs Gaskell and Kingsley is enhanced.

Cazamian paints his picture in bold strokes, and this creates stylistic problems. 'Idealism', for example, is a word he uses more colloquially than philosophically, and he allows 'reaction' to mean resistance to new impositions or a wish to impose bygone conditions as suits his purpose. 'Democratic' means egalitarian more often than not in his vocabulary, and 'socialist' is a term of infinite flexibility. He compensates for this confident imprecision by the use of repetition and dramatic phraseology, which have made his style notorious. As it seemed more important that his essential meaning should be conveyed readably than that a perfect impression of the original book should be re-created, I have fairly ruthlessly cut repetitions, rearranged sentences within paragraphs, and abandoned his phraseology whenever this seemed necessary.

Time has had a harsher effect on Cazamian's critical judgements. It does not much matter that he assumed there was no topical satire in *The Beggar's Opera* or *Jonathan Wilde*; nor does his overrating of Kingsley matter greatly; indeed, it might stimulate us to ask whether we do not slightly underrate a writer who is always vigorous and energetic. His view of Dickens's good characters as markedly superior creations to his comic villains is startling, but does not seriously affect his main thesis. But his Chestertonian belief that late Dickens is of little value is crucial. The 'Carol philosophy' as Dickens called it, which takes up Cazamian's fourth chapter, is essential to an understanding of his social and moral view of life, no matter how unfashionable his Christmas jollity may be today. But equally, we cannot disregard the sombre, pessimistic view of society presented in the late novels without misrepresenting Dickens. And this Cazamian does.

This oversight blinds him to one of the most curious features of the broad pattern of the social novel: the way in which Dickens worked against the trend, meeting his contemporaries on the same ground around 1850, and then stepping chiastically onto territory they had abandoned, while they moved into his earlier terrain. As Cazamian shows, early nineteenth-century social fiction attacked the whole structure of society, and condemned its injustice, even though it might do this with all the flippancy and superficiality of Bulwer's *Paul Clifford*, or the spurious claims to moral comment of 'Silver Fork' writers. But in his early days Dickens did not see the whole social organism as unhealthy: contrary to

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Orwell's statement, he did indeed think that the spots (workhouses, Yorkshire schools) could be cured by cutting them off. And, as Cazamian shows again, he enjoyed some remarkable practical successes. By 1850 industrialism was beginning to appear as a 'spot' to be cut off, and in *Hard Times* Dickens showed his growing awareness that it would not respond to such simple treatment. It was 'all a muddle', and he was at one with his fellow novelists in fearing the revolutionary cure as much as, or more than, the evils that had invoked it. Yet when trade improved in the 1850s he did not join those writers of the younger generation whom he had influenced, and who faced society confidently while they attacked local abuses. Reade might protest about a prison here, an asylum there; Collins might query the legitimacy laws and the social treatment of prostitutes; Dickens had reverted to the nation's earlier view of society as terrifyingly corrupt, mismanaged, and neglectful of its duties. Individuals might more or less redeem themselves through love, but even they could hardly hope to escape all tarnish of the prisons and dust-heaps that symbolised the social organism. Of course he was profounder, more powerful, and less of a practical reformer than the early nineteenth-century forerunners of the Victorian social novelists. But it remains true that the novel began the century by dealing with a diseased society, and trailed off into attacking specific sectional disorders by the 1860s, while Dickens moved in the opposite direction.

This critical limitation of Cazamian's book does, to some extent, set it back in the period when it was written. It has therefore seemed reasonable to leave his documentation and bibliography more or less as they originally stood, as evidence of the material available to him, rather than to suggest more up-to-date sources. Error does not deserve the same respect, and I have silently corrected numerous mistranscriptions and misdirections in the footnotes. This does not mean that every reference has been checked; only those where obvious error or direct quotation necessitated examination may have been corrected. I have occasionally changed dates and places of publication so that correct references might be given to the editions available to me from which I transcribed. Similarly, ease of access encouraged me to give references to Bulwer Lytton's *Life* by his grandson rather than that by his son wherever the wording was unchanged. On the two occasions where passages quoted by Cazamian have proved impossible to trace, I have provided the English version given in his edition of 1903, together with his reference, and the added note that the passage will not in fact be found in the work he names. The evidence of Joseph Hebergam (not, as in all previous editions, Habergam) on p. 67 has been taken direct from the Sadler Report, as it does not

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occur on the pages of Cooke-Taylor cited by Cazamian, nor have I been able to trace it anywhere else in his writings. I have, to date, been unable to obtain a copy of *Judge Lynch of America: his Two Letters to Charles Dickens*, and so I have substituted a translation in reported speech for Cazamian's translation in direct speech from this work. I have silently absorbed into the text footnotes containing afterthoughts which fit into the flow of the argument, and omitted those which expound commonplace details of English life for the benefit of French readers. Some additional information (usually places or dates of publication) has been given in the bibliography, but no entries have been added or subtracted, and there has been no serious attempt to bring the apparatus into line with modern standards of detail and consistency. The division into two volumes bore no relation to any division in the text and has traditionally been swept aside by English bookbinding, and so I have ignored it and presented eight consecutive chapters without a break after [chapter 4](#).

Cazamian's rather tentative Introduction shows how much of a pioneering work *Le Roman social en Angleterre* was in 1903, and as such it would have been well worth reprinting. In fact it remains a work of great importance, the standard study of its subject, and one whose view of Victorian fiction could well be allowed more influence than it has normally been granted in England.

I am indebted to Miss Alison Hodgson for her extremely thorough and helpful editorial reading of my manuscript. Routledge's editorial staff have also tried to bring greater accuracy and consistency to my work, as well as Cazamian's. But I am responsible for such error as remains. Mr and Mrs Arne Gordon and Mr and Mrs Hugh Fido kindly put me up when I had to consult libraries at a distance from Leeds, and Mrs Helga Hanks prepared the index. My wife, mother, and daughters helped me correct proofs.

Leeds

Martin Fido

Introduction

The subject

This study attempts to examine the psychological working of a section of social history. Its subject is an intellectual movement. It sets out to understand cause and effect in a group of literary works. Its starting point and justification is the relation between literary and social evolution, and in turn it may shed some light on that relationship. The history of England in the nineteenth century is taken as the working basis for the study, which then has to conform to the framework and chronological limits of this period.

Victoria's reign began in 1837, but in all respects that of William IV (1830-7) is inseparable from it. After 1830 the progress of liberal ideas and the aftermath of the July Revolution made the Reform Act of 1832 inevitable: the years 1830 and 1832 mark the birth of a new England.

The long and prosperous development which followed may be divided into three sections. Quite apart from historical research, popular opinion has recognised this division: we usually speak of the early-, middle-, and late-Victorian periods. And these concepts represent a more precise actuality than their superficial sense suggests. To define this actuality we must find points of reference fixing the boundaries of the periods.

Political history readily supplies the first. 1848 saw a decisive crisis in England, as on the continent. 10 April and the end of Chartism closed one era and opened another. National life was changed, and men were aware of this. By contrast, the extension of the franchise in 1867, even if it really did inaugurate English democracy, was very far from shaking society to its foundations, and did not trouble the surface of the reign. On the contrary, it increased and strengthened that social optimism which characterised the mid-Victorian period. It is later that the appearance of a new spirit must be noted; round about 1880 the signs of economic depression and the reawakening of socialism disclose the advent of the third period.¹

We are only concerned in this study with the first.

It is not possible to attribute anything but a symbolic value to these dates. The more or less rapid transitions that they represent envelop and

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overlap them. The first phase of the Victorian era certainly did not end abruptly in 1848. The economic or moral factors which produce a new age do not take effect immediately. The rebirth of national prosperity, the principal of these elements, made its effects felt by degrees from about 1846 onwards. If Chartism was finished as far back as the middle of 1848, the minds of the ruling classes were not at rest until 1850 or 1851. The Exhibition of 1851, which disclosed to England the spectacle of her wealth, was an important agent of social appeasement. And at length the Crimean War in 1854 and 1855 opened a phase of public life dominated by foreign affairs. So it was between 1846 and 1855 that the early-Victorian period ended. If a symbolic point must be selected, 1850, the mid-point of the century, might mark the boundary between the two periods.

1830 to 1850, the period under consideration, was distinguished from the years that followed by strikingly contrasted domestic affairs. It was the revolutionary phase of the young English democracy, and the heroic age of socialism. The political problem partly resolved in 1832 reappeared in the activities of the classes still disenfranchised, and the social questions which appeared alongside it contracted a partial and poorly-defined alliance with it. It was a time of riots, bloody strikes, and violent clashes between capital and labour. Poverty and industrial troubles reached an unbearable pitch, and revolution seemed imminent. Society, still tinged with many traces of ancient barbarism, had to make an immense effort to raise its conduct to the level of its thought. Politically, England was indecisive and unsure of herself for a time. The series of reforms which exhausted the victorious bourgeoisie's positive programme left the country confused, while the sharp shocks indicating the presence of a new malaise caused alarm. The political parties were transformed, allying and dividing in unrecognisable combinations. Meanwhile, under the pressure of social need, there appeared the ideas and sentiments which were to renew English life. This was the germinal and creative phase wherein those ideas and movements developed which were to flower in succeeding periods. Until the end of the century, England lived off the intellectual substance of this troubled time.

By contrast, the period which followed was tranquil and confident. It fell into simple, harmonious patterns, and saw the splendour of the Victorian era develop magnificently. Material prosperity, intellectual optimism, enthusiastic or resigned anticipation of inevitable democracy – in a word, peaceful progress – was the character of England between 1850 and about 1880.²

We all know how trouble and discord reappeared at the close of the great reign. Renewed social crisis was the significant feature of that

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period. Between 1880 and 1900 problems that were believed to have been solved arose again.

We are examining one aspect of the intellectual movement which accompanied and expressed the social agitation between 1830 and 1850: namely, the formation of a new emotional and intellectual response to the subject of social relations on the part of English society in general, and the middle class in particular. This new outlook, curious in itself, owes its historical interest to its consequences. It influenced the theory and practice of relations between men. Its long-term effects are not yet exhausted; but we shall make only passing allusion to this as we study the results which immediately obtained. The documents selected for consideration will enable us to understand the rise of a compassionate interventionist spirit between 1830 and 1850, when humane or religious feelings, allied with self-interest, gave rise to the concept of society's corporate responsibility to all its members. The philanthropic reform of English social life: the restraint of violence inflamed by abject poverty, and the preservation of a threatened public order: these, together with the overturn of those theories by which social quietism had been justified, were the work of the movement of opinion in which Dickens and Kingsley participated. And whatever their part in it may have been, their writings make them of outstanding importance.

From this point of view it is possible to categorise the confused aspirations underlying the disarranged ideas and interests of the time. The movement which we are examining belongs, together with the social struggle and the moral crisis, to the second term of an antithesis. The first term brought into conflict the partisans and adversaries of individualism. The *laissez-faire* principles of classical economists and the liberal bourgeoisie were opposed by a demand for both state and individual intervention, stemming from the needs of the proletariat and the malice of the landed gentry. It seemed that the two opposite poles around which temperament and interest might group men were on the one hand untrammelled liberty, and on the other regulated social relationships. In the intellectual sphere, rationalist doctrines and logical preferences were ranged against idealistic theories and emotional sympathies. And the second opposition was directly related to the first. The dominant feature of the thought of the time was the affinity of clear and systematic ideas with individualism, and of vague, emotional ones with social responsibility. Interventionism, one of whose sources we are studying, was intimately associated with the renewal of English idealism.

From 1830 to 1850 there was a general awakening of practical and moral activity for which the only proper epithet is 'idealistic'. The

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Oxford Movement revitalised Anglicanism. In aesthetics, the feeling and desire for beauty were reanimated. In Carlyle's hands philosophy became intuitive and mystical; social charity and philanthropy took on the force of a national impulse. Certain common psychological characteristics can be found in all these movements: they tend to make sensation and emotion dominate the logical and abstract operations of the mind. We may justifiably consider them under one head and attribute to them a profound interior unity. And as their moral effects and social consequences are inseparable we may see them all as one movement, which might be described as 'the idealist and interventionist reaction'.

To identify this movement we shall have to examine the ideas and activities opposed to it: that is, the rationalist movement and individualism. But the heart of our investigation will, necessarily, be elsewhere, in that complex mixture of economic and psychological facts, class interests, and ethical preferences from which were assembled the practical solutions that England brought to the social problems of the time. We are studying the social aspect of the idealist and interventionist reaction.

The very nature of this movement gives a primary importance to literary documents. They are numerous. Carlyle's social writings are the most profound expression of the interior reaction which produced English interventionism. Although there were few socialists or economists capable of contradicting the classical liberal analysis of society, and the influence of such as there were was small, nonetheless they did exist, and should not be overlooked. Popular poems and Chartist literature form another class of documents, as do the writings which affirm the aristocratic ideal of feudal socialism. Finally, the novels of Dickens, Disraeli, and Kingsley are richly significant, and it is these which we have chosen to study.

One distinct type of novel emerged around 1830, and survived until the end of the century. It maintained a close relationship with political agitation, and its development mirrored the phases, and to some extent took on the pattern, of the Victorian era. The social 'novel with a purpose' appeared with the early-Victorian period in 1830, and until about 1850 exhibited characteristics analogous with it. Impassioned, challenging novels took as their subject the grave problems which concerned the whole of society, discussed them in their entirety, and proposed precise formulas or vague aspirations for the total reform of human relations. The novel took on the emotional tone and generous idealism of the age in which dying Romanticism found a new lease of life in political and social aspirations.

By contrast, the *roman-à-thèse* in the mid-Victorian period became

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prudent and scientific. The great questions were removed from literature, as they were from political life. Novelists attacked specific abuses, or displayed in their treatment of fiction the historical and critical spirit through which evolutionism impregnated English thought.³

At last, about 1880, the social novel took on a new vigour with the return of economic depression and political pessimism. Gissing, William Morris, and Mrs Humphry Ward put forward theories tending towards the transformation of society.

If it is difficult to determine the precise opening and closing dates of the Victorian epoch, it is still more difficult to assign limits to the corresponding phases of the social novel. Certainly *Paul Clifford*, the first true *roman-à-thèse*, was published in 1830, the year of the July Revolution. But this was mere coincidence, as is shown by the fact that *Paul Clifford* does not touch on political questions. The liberal philanthropy which fills the book could have found expression some years sooner or later. Likewise, if intellectual pacification was far from instant in society in 1848, it took still longer to come in the novel. This is a normal phenomenon: literature more often than not comes in the wake of events. Two novels, Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), prolonged for several years the artistic response to social agitation which had been stilled.⁴

It remains to justify our chosen topic and outline our method of approach.

Justification

In the first place, environmental conditions coupled with the nature of the form ensured that the *roman-à-thèse* was the outstandingly influential didactic literary genre of the period. Its appearance coincided with two important phenomena: the accession of the middle class to power, and the submission of Parliament to public opinion. The popularity of novels during the period is well documented.⁵ One commercial innovation, publication in monthly parts, brought the novel within reach of all purses, so that a great diversity of intellects, superficial as well as thoughtful, confronted the novel. And the general climate of sensibility was influenced by this form which could instruct and divert, persuade and affect, at the same time.

Literary realism was the best weapon social idealists could have wielded against the attitude of mind they opposed. Utilitarianism and political economy were alike abstract. The idealist reaction was able to castigate individualism for its failure to appreciate the real and concrete; for its

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substitution of the single faculty of reason for all others; and for its replacement of complex human nature with one single type, economic man. The social novel implanted realism in English thinking. It exposed facts, and selected the most important of these for discussion. Its valuable philosophy of life was experimental and demonstrative: it showed the direct way from experience to principle. And under the writer's guidance the reader took an instructive walk through society which was not offered him by any economist.⁶

Individualism was as cold-blooded as it was abstract. A desiccating wind of self-centred analysis and argument seemed to have blown over England: the chief characteristics of bourgeois society seemed to be selfish business calculation and cool theoretical lucidity. By contrast, the idealist reaction appealed to the emotions. It entered all areas of life and letters: artistic feeling, religious enthusiasm, and social conscience. It was diffuse and powerful and it stimulated new ideas and practical activities. A whole new theory and practice of altruism sprang from it as men's emotions gave them an intuitive grasp of organic human relationships. The novel, being above all an emotional stimulant, with pathos frequently, if not invariably, at its centre, was easily involved in this movement. When Dickens and Kingsley revealed the extent of the social distress around them, and inspired compassion for the sufferers, they were providing their readers with actual experience, and informing their social consciousness with the feeling it had hitherto lacked.

On the other hand, certain novels (happily for us) exhibit the other prominent social doctrine informing English life between 1830 and 1850. Bulwer and Miss Martineau were inspired by utilitarianism and classical economics. We have only to pass chronologically from them to Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs Gaskell, and Kingsley – all leading interventionists – to observe human sensitivity opposing social rationalism. In addition, the literary merit of the works is in proportion to the special interest they have for us. The utilitarian novels are feeble, the interventionist novels, rich. And either by coincidence, or because of the whole climate of feeling, both the novel with a purpose and the historical idealist movement reach the same point in the end: both culminate naturally in Christian socialism.

The novelists themselves were usefully representative citizens. They were of average intelligence, lacking the exceptional ratiocinative powers of philosophers or sages. They were of middling birth and social standing: even Bulwer, whose family was noble, and Disraeli, whose habits were aristocratic, made strenuous efforts to bring themselves within the horizons of the bourgeois public. As for Miss Martineau, Dickens, Mrs

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Gaskell, and Kingsley, they all belonged to different levels of the middle class. Disraeli was the only original thinker among them: the other novelists assimilated ideas, but tended not to devise new ones. The unusual imaginative powers which made them novelists did less to set them apart from the general public than philosophic intellects would have done.

The personalities of the novels' heroes are as representative as their authors. To be acceptable to public taste, they could not stray very far from life, or from that idealised half-life which comprised their existence. Their feelings and reflections as they encountered new areas of society were to be instructive to readers who might undergo similar experiences. And as most of the novels deal with conversions, describing the path from apathy to altruism, they offer a stereotyped and simplified version of the growth of feeling in average minds for us to inspect.

It would be quite impossible to use the socialist writings of Owen, Hodgskin, and Thompson as the focal point of this investigation: these writers never appreciably influenced the bourgeoisie. Similarly, popular poems and Chartist tracts, interesting as they are in the history of the working-class movement, are of secondary importance for the understanding of 'social conscience'. And even Carlyle, the most profound thinker of the idealist reaction, lacked immediate influence and popular esteem commensurate with his genius. The bizarre qualities of his mind and the obscurity of his style cut him off from the wide public, and it was left to his disciples to make his ideas generally known. Then, in the second phase of the Victorian era, his stimulating force, compounded with that of Ruskin, became effective. But between 1830 and 1850 only a few men understood him and tried to make him understood. And the popularisers of his thought prove to be none other than the social novelists: Dickens, Disraeli, and Kingsley.

Thus the novel exerted a particularly extensive influence, and provides unusually suggestive information about the social aspect of the idealist reaction. The other documents cannot, however, be disregarded. They will be cited as much as is necessary for a proper understanding of the general movement wherein the novel and its influence are to be placed.

Method

One preliminary problem is the guiding principle by which we should select works for discussion. For in one sense, every novel dealing with human customs is a 'social novel'. But the term is used here in a more restricted sense: by social novel we mean 'novel with a social thesis': a

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novel which aims at directly influencing human relations, either in general, or with reference to one particular set of circumstances. Of course, private manners and public affairs are too closely connected for the former to be altered independently of the latter. Every moral critique has its social repercussions. Nevertheless, those works which only examine the private failings of individuals in society have been ignored, together with any which do not directly assert their reformatory intention. Our main purpose is to study the development of interventionism, and by definition interventionism involves a positive attempt by the individual or the community to improve social relations. If a novel is truly a part of the interventionist movement, then its author must expressly have demanded positive action, either from the State, or organised institutions, or private persons.

The problems of industrialism dominated the thought of the time, and posed in an acute form the choice between active charity and passive non-interference. Well-meaning literature inevitably had something to say about this. Central to our study, then, is the pro-interventionist novel in general, and any novel which suggested remedies for the ills of industrial anarchy in particular.

Setting boundaries in time, as has been observed, is more awkward. Between 1850 and 1860 some didactic novels are early-Victorian in spirit, and some mid-Victorian. In distinguishing these from each other we have accepted the internal evidence. Charles Reade, for example, began to write during this decade, but his works are obviously mid-Victorian in spirit.⁷ On the other hand, *Hard Times* and *North and South* treat of industrial problems in what is palpably an early-Victorian tone. Dickens, indeed, was able to go on writing until 1870 without ever ceasing to be an early-Victorian commentator. Artistically, he never was a contemporary of George Eliot. The social elements in his novels after 1854 are exceptional, unimportant, and naturally blended with the other elements enriching the work of his maturity.⁸

This procedure leaves us with two unequal groups of novelists. Bulwer, with *Paul Clifford* (1830), and Miss Martineau, with her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-4), represent the 'utilitarian novel'. *Pickwick Papers* (1837) and *Oliver Twist* (1838) mark Dickens's entrance on the scene; henceforth he was to use his imaginative fertility in the cause of compassionate interventionism. Disraeli, in *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847), served the same cause, though not without private ambition. With *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) Mrs Gaskell achieved the success that had eluded Mrs Trollope in *Michael Armstrong* (1840) and Charlotte Elizabeth (Mrs Tonna) in *Helen Fleetwood*

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(1841). Kingsley's Christian socialist novels *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850) finally brought the social welfare movement to its natural conclusion.⁹

These novels are to be examined analytically, although this runs the risk of reducing them to a set of formulations, and missing their literary essence. In their case, the essence is the convincing demonstration of social conditions they offer; therefore the range of the analysis has been stretched as far as possible. The novelist's intentions are not exhibited in his explicit declarations alone; we must consider the thousands of details which reveal the writer's opinion of his characters and show the purport of the plot; the hints which expose the nature of the settings, and show how appropriate artistic modes have been found for the treatment of the different areas of society presented. Taken all together, these disclose social attitudes on the part of the author which are fully as important as his systematised theories. It is hoped that these have been brought out.

In a study of the reciprocal action and reaction of novels and life, two questions recur: what elements in the book gave it its influence? And what historical factors permitted the public to feel this influence? We have to know which books in a given period actively affected their audience, and we have to understand how that audience was peculiarly well adapted to be affected, so that, in one sense, it ultimately became the result of the novels. A novel has a dual historical interest. It has the *a priori* value of a historical fact: it contains a certain amount of documentary evidence related to its didactic purpose; and it has exerted some definite influence on the public. This study sets out to find the information on social problems and proposals for their solution with which social novels persuaded their readers. It is also hoped to measure, as accurately as possible, the extent of social novels' influence.

Novels also have a representative value. They reflect their authors, the public which accepted them, and literary taste. If we keep a novel in the foreground, and examine it in the context of that psychological responsiveness of which it is at once cause and effect, our understanding of the novel may lead us to a better understanding of the psychology, and thus to a grasp of the whole general mental climate. But for this final development it is not enough to examine novels alone; they must be compared with evidence from other sources. Four particular procedures are here employed to make use of these.

The psychological make-up of the novelist who, as has been said, was a normal member of society, offers us a key to the state of public feeling. Dickens and Kingsley may have had superior emotional and

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imaginative faculties, but they were not alone in sensing social misery. Others were led by their feelings to the same kind of conclusions.

Secondly, we may infer something about society's moral outlook when we examine fictional characters in the light of the fact that they were drawn from reality, and were accepted as realistic by the public. Any sympathetic or antipathetic touches in their portrayal may show us something of the author's whole outlook, though, of course, we must be careful not to overlook the private and personal relation of character to author.

A third object for study is the public who gave the book its success, appreciated it, resembled it, and even imitated it. And the novels themselves are as valuable as any external evidence in our assessment of these people.

Finally, without losing sight of the novels, it is possible to set them aside for a quick glance at writings which are 'social' in the same sense, and whose consequences were parallel and similar. All these procedures are followed without systematic logic or rigorous order: rigour in such matters is liable to be a matter of form only.

The definition of 'social novel' given above, and the mode of study outlined, carry certain negative implications. These works might be examined in other ways: for example, novels might be regarded as historical documents, and scrutinised for the material for a reconstruction of social life. Such research would aim at description rather than explanation. The novel of manners does, indeed, give us evidence on aspects of society concerning which other documents all too often leave us in ignorance. It shows us the dynamics of social exchange instead of a tableau; life and action are breathed into modes of conduct which we would otherwise only know as laws, regulations, and surface appearances. It would be possible to try and re-create a picture of early-Victorian life with the aid of Dickens, Mrs Gaskell, and Kingsley.¹⁰ But this is not our intention. We hope, first and foremost, to explain a movement in public opinion, in so far as the novel allows us to grasp the causes and feelings involved. On the other hand, the social novel is a distinct subdivision of a literary genre, whose development, content, and form might be studied like any other branch of literature. Aesthetic criticism would find rich food for thought here in the great problem of the compatibility of didactic and artistic intentions. Such a purely literary study is dismissed also. But this is not to say that these two possible approaches are entirely neglected: as far as possible, they are brought together in our work.

As we compare the settings of the novels with their sources, their value as contemporary descriptions will be continually made evident.

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Realism was a vital factor in their success, and cannot be ignored, so that the historical surface of social life will be displayed as part of our analysis: it is of particular importance as a source of plot-material. Aesthetic criticism will assume the position it holds, as of right, in any study of literature's influence. The 'condition of England' novel points to changes in the mood of the public, and from this point of view it is interesting to note the origins of social novels before 1830 and the reasons for Kingsley's emotionalism giving way to George Eliot's positivism. It hardly seems worth considering the question whether the social novel is a true art form: it existed in fact, and this seems a sufficient answer, although we shall point out places where this or that novel is weakened by excessive preaching.

One last problem of exposition remains: for reasons of space it is impossible to give a full descriptive account of every book examined. Yet mere plot synopses are thin, flat, and banal. Therefore detailed accounts of full plots have been left aside, and the works are examined through relevant extracts. But this procedure obviates one essential feature of importance to social history as well as literature: there can be no discussion of the general development of a work as a whole, with the organisation of scenes and characters for dramatic effect considered as the plot unfolds. We have tried to overcome this difficulty by thinking of each separate element under discussion as being in the context of a plot, and examining each section as part of a larger whole, so that the reader should carry away a reasonable impression of the total work at the end, although the action is not followed through from start to finish. It has not been possible to do this in the case of Dickens. His output is too copious and too densely packed with social observation to allow separate consideration for each novel. Perforce, his didactic moments have been extracted without being replaced in their narrative framework.¹¹ It is assumed that most of his novels are familiar: fortunately they are the best known of all the books under consideration.

Finally, it seemed sensible to adopt a systematic plan of presentation. Thus the analysis of each group of novels is preceded by an account of the views which they hold in common and by which they are to be understood. It is impossible to understand Miss Martineau without some knowledge of the individualist movement, or *Sybil* without an acquaintance with the growth of social romanticism. Certain details from the novels themselves, however, are used together with the general historical evidence in the descriptions of these attitudes. To this extent, the conclusion precedes the exposition.¹² It is some compensation that the link between the social novel and public opinion is thereby made clearer.¹³

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From its inception, this work is involved with a philosophical debate extending beyond its chosen scope. The literary character of the novel lends it a moral influence; the point in time with which we are concerned is marked by the confrontation of two opposing forces: the economic phenomenon of the industrial revolution, and the psychological phenomenon of the idealist reaction. On the one hand the period seems dominated by the infrastructure of demand and supply, with historical determinism truly representing the nature of events. On the other hand, this is directly challenged by the superstructure of art and philosophy, wherein it seems that the power of man's mind is a reality, and the history of ideas shows what is actually happening. We have been compelled to bow to one or other of these readings of history, and on the whole have inclined towards idealism. Our study, therefore, attributes real influence to moral energy, and sees the idealist reaction as an important part of the historical environment. We discern an internal coherence and an independent psychological progression in the evolution of ideas which interact with economic progress in ways which are difficult to define. We shall indicate the particular data which lead us to this position when they arise.

We likewise believe that opposing opinions derive from psychological differences. When men of the same class hold different views of society this must be accounted for by differences of temperament. We find, in fact, the elementary opposition of intellect and sensibility underlying the divergence of idealists and men of action. Thus we note on the one hand social science, the remarkable outcome of an almost perverse alliance between manufacturing interests and mathematical abstractions. It offered an exceptionally clear and lucid exposition of society, and of the necessary principles and consequences of individualism. But its field of vision was narrow, and excluded the truths of sensitivity, organic social relations, human sympathy, charity, and moral or religious responsibilities. On the other hand we find social consciousness, the flowering of some of the central seeds of English philosophy whose potential had already been glimpsed in the great religious and cultural movements of the early nineteenth century. Here the perception of reality was clouded by compassion, yet for all its vagueness it was more complete, and marked by a sympathy for suffering which found an echo in the observer, and led to individual or collective relief work.

These two points of view which we have presented as opposites are not mere personifications of abstract tendencies. They represent the two

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poles around which individuals ranged themselves unmistakably, in accordance with the diversity of their temperaments. They have certain common features, and certain tangled local disputes. Yet when these are discounted, England between 1830 and 1850 reduces simply to this classic opposition, which has certain national qualities, and constitutes a decisive moment in the psychological history of the nation.

Throughout the period, the preoccupation with individual autonomy and the demand for private freedom was characteristic of the social analytical personality as well as the political representatives of bourgeois economic interests. And the socially aware personality shared with the political representatives of labour and the landed interest a preoccupation with charitable intervention, and a demand either for some sort of state socialism, or a more or less philanthropic paternalism.

Of course, reality is complex, and comprises various gradations between one pole and the other. The Chartists, whose programme was one of democratic social reorganisation, were in the main emotional and passionate enthusiasts. And Kingsley and his Christian socialist friends gave fervid support to certain similar democratic policies of social engineering. But such exceptions are more apparent than real: the individualism of radical philosophy had little in common with Chartist egalitarianism, and Kingsley returned to his temperamental stance as aristocrat and conservative.

The central opposition remains unchallenged. Different men urged two separate aspects of progress, each offering an incomplete programme. Utilitarian individualism was better reasoned; compassionate interventionism was truer to human nature. The latter was, perhaps, more needed at the time, yet its policies were inadequate and checked unfeeling indifference at the expense of individual enterprise.

All this does not mean that we believe social conscience to have been perfectly disinterested. In many of its most illustrious exemplars it was associated with utilitarian 'enlightened self-interest'. Indeed, its partial success could be explained in terms of a national instinct for self-preservation. Thus we must pose a very delicate question concerning the English idealists: how far did they recognise the compatibility between their selfish interests and their social opinions? We hope to suggest an answer to this question, and to note the difference between the utilitarianism of Bentham and that of Carlyle.

We adopt these hypotheses as basic assumptions in our study, justifying such use of them by their value in explaining events. They seem to accord with most of the evidence, and permit the clearest possible understanding of it.

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The industrial revolution, a great economic movement, increased the power of the individual and extended his potential for consumption of goods and services. Utilitarian philosophy, an important intellectual movement, argued that such power and consumption was based on moral law. Around 1830 these movements combined to give massive support to self-interest in public affairs.

The industrial revolution and 1832

Individualism was the product of events. Between 1800 and 1830 the mighty industry engendered during the previous quarter of a century in England reached full growth.¹ Division of labour and the reorganisation of the work-force into units of mass production created factories; the application of technology to industry and the harnessing of steam and water power produced modern manufacturing.² At the same time, increased production evolved a new people who made their living from it.³ The spinning and weaving of cotton and wool, metal-working, and its related industries, all grew with the same vigour. Coal and iron mines were desperately strained to meet their needs. In the North and Midlands there came into being a nation quite different from the traditional England:⁴ there were weavers in Manchester, ironworkers in Birmingham, miners in Lancashire, and potters in Staffordshire. The great build-up of trade which had preceded the growth of industry was turned to its service: English products inundated Europe in spite of a continental attempt to impose an embargo. The docks of the great industrial ports, Liverpool, London, Glasgow, and Hull, teemed with windjammers at first, and steamers subsequently.⁵ Only a fraction of the railway system was built by 1830, but Brindley's canals and McAdam's roads had opened up the country for commerce.⁶ Finance and speculation thrived alongside industry, and the great joint-stock companies floated adventures reminiscent of the South Sea Bubble: the crash of 1825-6 was but the first of the series of financial crises by which over-production periodically set

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industry back. The economic system of nineteenth-century England was fully formed by 1830.

As trade and production expanded, the nation grew richer. Between 1815 and 1830 the population rose by 25 per cent, but the incomes of the middle and upper classes rose by 50 per cent. While national prosperity concealed the wretched conditions of the poor, the numerically powerful ascendant bourgeoisie mounted a bold and vigorous assault on the citadels of power. Northern manufacturers, unchallenged by foreign competition, pressed on with day and night production, and accumulated massive fortunes. London and Liverpool merchants exported English iron and cottons all over the world, and their fleets fed the nation, which had already lost its agricultural self-sufficiency. The reduction of taxes and the removal of spice duties after the Napoleonic War increased the amount of money in circulation,⁷ and more financiers came into being. They, like the merchants and manufacturers, became a power in the land. The farmers had grown enormously prosperous as a result of the Corn Laws and the continental embargo, but they must be seen as separate from and opposed to the agricultural labouring community, whose wages had fallen. The descendants of the 'yeomen' had been driven from their villages by the enclosure of common land, and went to the towns to swell industry's labour surplus.⁸ More and more the youth of the land left agriculture, and the new industries were the beneficiaries. By 1831 agriculture employed only 28 per cent of the total population; in 1811 it had still employed 35 per cent.⁹ The powerful men of the day came from factories and workshops where their fathers had been small employers, still capable of working with their hands when necessary. Over a few years their fortunes swelled until the cotton kings had grown into a race of grandees, outside the ranks of the traditional aristocracy. New men came from the Thames and the Mersey, where the wharves were laden with wealth; from the City and the Stock Exchange, where speculation set millions whirling on a fantastic merry-go-round. Their opinions and tastes were identical: they were all stamped by the economic conditions which had created them. They came together and united to form a single, homogeneous, powerful and energetic class: the great middle class of 1832 which rode rough-shod over all time-honoured forces of resistance, and wrenched political enfranchisement from the landed oligarchy.

A deep antagonism, indeed, divided this new and thriving class from the old order. The vehement aggression of these sons who rejected their heritage wounded the peaceful, patriarchal spirit of agricultural England, slumbering in self-satisfied torpor. In the old society everyone knew his

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place. The great families governed the country; the squires and justices of the peace administered their own localities. The state of affairs handed down from the past seemed unshakeable to eighteenth-century England.¹⁰ The Poor Laws dealt with the relatively simple problem of agricultural poverty, without bitterness or strife. Personal ties, as of vassal and overlord, were maintained in the gentler relationship of squirearchical paternalism and tenant deference. But the demands of the new bourgeoisie and the pressure of the industrial revolution introduced ideals of liberty and enfranchisement to this society where, hitherto, material and moral ties had chained the individual to his ancestors' station in his own locality. For production to rise and prices to fall, it was vital that men should become interchangeable economic units who could be dispersed and reassembled into new temporary groupings by the pressure of wages and profits. Men would have to cut themselves off from their native society and become free and independent, relying on the strength of their intelligence or wealth, if they had any, and their muscular strength if they had not. Thus they would enter the merciless battle of each against all for life. The new bourgeoisie had a love of struggle bred in its bones; it saw the effort which attended its own achievements as an inevitable feature of health and progress. Contest was the framework of its thought as well as its economic actions, and the world seemed an arena in which weak and strong joined battle under the free light of commercial competition. The fallen were trodden underfoot: so much the worse for them. 'Each for himself and the law of England for all' was the motto of industrialism. These men were filled with pride when they contemplated the great wealth they had amassed from the products of their own energy. And they were enraged by the ridiculous impediments which still hindered individual freedom. Reminders of feudalism, relics of old institutions, Acts of Settlement, Statutes of Apprentices, and protectionist Corn Laws were all so many obstacles to be knocked down in the march of progress. Or the march to wealth.¹¹

In the writings of Baines and Ure, two spokesmen for this spirited generation, one can see the contempt with which they regarded the landed aristocracy:¹²

Grandeas, as the spoiled children of the state, may be indulged in their learned play things, as in the ribbon and the star, to mark their exclusive caste, and they may be allowed freely to waste their early years in the pastime of scanning Greek and Roman metres, provided they do not fancy themselves thereby, albeit ignorant of the principles of Science, Art, and Trade, qualified to scan the measures and to regulate the affairs of empires at their will.

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Ure preferred 'the bloodless but still formidable strife of trade'¹³ to the feudal exploits which bolstered the pride of the aristocracy: 'To impair the resources of a rival at home by underselling his wares abroad, is the new belligerent system, in pursuance of which every nerve and sinew of the people are put upon the strain.'¹⁴

And he proclaimed the divine origin of middle-class achievements in a tone of religious conviction:¹⁵

The great truth, that Providence has assigned to man the glorious function of vastly improving the productions of nature by judicious culture, and of working them up into objects of comfort and elegance with the least possible expenditure of human labour [is] an undeniable position which forms the basis of our Factory System.

The new men were conscious of their material prosperity and assured of the moral value of their gospel of competition. Through them, individualism emerged from the undergrowth of economics to become a force in society.

Utilitarianism

Individualism found expression in a corpus of philosophical thought. With one accord, the theoreticians of the period mounted a powerful assault on the moral and emotional foundations of the old England, and sought to replace it with a society meeting the wishes of the bourgeoisie. (We restrict ourselves here to a brief sketch of this united effort.)¹⁶ Bentham and his disciples had faced the conservative reaction at the start of the nineteenth century without wavering in their enthusiasm for reform. As liberal ideas again came to the fore, around 1815, the Benthamites took over this revival, and a coalition was formed comprising all the forces seeking the overthrow of oligarchy. Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, and the *Edinburgh Review* Whigs; Cobbett and the radical democrats; the working-class leaders, who were already disturbing the peaceful surface of society – all accepted the intellectual leadership of the doctrinaire liberals, so that Place and his friends served to introduce utilitarian theory into political agitation. Meanwhile, individualist economics had solidified into a body of doctrine, based on Adam Smith, extended by Malthus, and codified by the clear mind of Ricardo. Between 1820 and 1830 philosophical radicalism became the social and political gospel of English democrats.¹⁷ Bentham and the economists presented a ready-made Bill of Rights to the new bourgeoisie, as it felt for its place in society and demanded industrial freedom and a share in government.¹⁸

Utilitarianism was rationalism with a mathematical bias. The ideal

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of scientific exactitude permeated its massive attempt to synthesise and explain ethics, psychology, politics, and economics. In an effort to reduce the moral order to a set of laws, it applied concepts which had proved essential to recent research in the natural sciences: the mechanistic approach was accepted as the way which had cast the clearest and most definitive light on the material universe. Bentham's phraseology typifies the methods used in all areas of this philosophy: terms like the 'ontological calculus' or the 'arithmetic of pleasures' are a key to the Benthamite frame of mind. The moral, psychological, and political principles of utilitarianism postulated a division of reality into widespread unitary factors, such as individuals, their basic needs, or single concepts. These could combine arithmetically with like units to produce the more complex areas of experience – society, duty, or opinions. This approach was two-edged: it could be used in defence of the past and tradition, or it could justify egalitarianism and lay claim to the future. A common-sense preference for the natural, deriving from Hume, conflicted with Bentham's instinctive rationalism. On the whole the latter prevailed, and philosophic radicalism put forward the doctrine of political equality.¹⁹ This rested on the simple mathematical principle that the aim of government should be the greatest good of the greatest number. Democracy was the best way of pursuing this goal. For all men tend to serve their own selfish interests: a king will do this as an individual; an aristocracy will act as a concerted body. These, in a favourite utilitarian phrase, are 'sinister interests' running counter to the good of the nation. Private interests can only be neutralised, or brought into some kind of generally beneficial accord, if all citizens are participating in government. Democracy goes as far as is possible towards the reconciliation of private and national interests by giving power to majorities.²⁰ Thus the internal groupings of citizens within the community will be related to the ends they pursue. This, in essence, was the doctrine of philosophic radicalism. Its formulaic precision explains the self-confidence of its proponents, and their rather supercilious attitude towards alternative arguments based on sentiment, habit, or prejudice.

After 1820 political economy was equally rigid in its approach to society. Ricardo had applied his intelligence to the analysis and simplification of experience: economic man, a mere atom endowed with the simple, single-minded energy of self-interest, came into play with his fellows, and thereby produced the harmonious totality of society.²¹ This closed system of tiny antagonistic forces was contained within the limited environs of cultivable land, where it produced order out of chaos. The phenomenon of rent was an inevitable consequence; likewise all classes,

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landowners, businessmen, and workers, would sort themselves out so that they received economically proper returns on their property or labour. The greater the freedom given to the separate units in society, the more easily they would find ways of working together, and the nearer society would approach to an ideal state. Ideal, here, could not mean perfect, for harmony was unfortunately bound to be disturbed by the limited quantity of resources. Providence had not set the human atomic system in a vacuum, but had confined it to the cultivable parts of the world. Ultimately, then, as population was increasing in proportion with industrial production, it was mathematically bound to exceed the available resources. Thereupon wages would fall relatively; profits would drop absolutely; and rent-rolls would grow endlessly larger. But this vision of future calamity was not a matter to disturb the serenity of theoreticians foreseeing it. The world still appeared far from unpleasant, and any improvement to be made lay in the direction of greater freedom for individuals. Indeed, the danger of world over-population might best be met by ensuring that nothing by way of ignorance, sentiment, prejudice, or legal restraint hindered the free play of self-interest. Procreation might have to be restrained, but in all other ways freedom should be encouraged, that competitive self-interest might devise combinations of greater use and ingenuity. This remarkable simplification of the new industrial society was Ricardo's system. It rested on totally abstract principles, which reduced the rich complexity of human nature to the one quality of self-interest.²² This was the second element in the body of doctrine which, unusually for England, gave rise to a rationalist ideological crisis in 1830.

Rationalism was central to individualism, but the aims of its supporters were by no means theoretical. A sincere concern for the public good gave them a reforming spirit, and they favoured reform by the practical application of ideas. These dry and abstract utilitarians were far from being the soulless monsters that popular prejudice made of them. Adam Smith and Bentham exhibited a simple and humane public spirit: this became more pessimistic and doom-laden in Malthus and Ricardo, and burned as a pure flame of logic in James Mill. But it was present in all of them, running as a vein of sentiment throughout their lives and writings. Their work did more than separate the old and the new Englands: they played a large part in the process of social amelioration which continued throughout the nineteenth century. They put down abuses by exposing them in their analysis of society: they had their own philanthropy, and were able to collaborate with other philanthropists.²³

It is interesting to see how much their choice of social concerns was

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influenced by the essential nature of their philosophy. Their wish for social justice often found expression as part of a wish to tidy society up. The need for logic and clarity gave reason enough for launching an attack on the centuries-old mass of inchoate and contradictory law on the statute-books. The whole rationale of their proposals for law reform sprang from their wish to see things properly presented in a logically comprehensible order. Their aim was to codify English law, although their schematisation would at the same time have made it more humane: disproportionately heavy sentences and unnecessary use of the death penalty were among the illogicalities they would have swept away. Of course, the law had already been modified in practice: a long tradition of judicial clemency went a long way towards improving on statutory barbarism. But how absurdly irrational was this very division between prescription and practice!²⁴ The prison system was another scandalous affront to humanity: Howard obeyed his philanthropic sentiment in working for its improvement. Bentham, too, turned his mind to the problem of penitentiaries, but only to conceive of the 'Panopticon', the geometrically designed prison which applied the laws governing the expenditure of energy to reduce the labour of surveillance to a minimum. Finally, it was abstract and mathematical benevolence that gave the utilitarians their faith in education and led to their campaigns for a free press, the popularisation of scientific knowledge, and the enlightenment of the populace. The best possible way to persuade the people to recognise and pursue their own class-interest would be to spread education throughout society. Then all the units of humanity would start equal in the most important respect in the competition of life. For, setting aside property as an uncertain asset, only one thing created inequalities between citizens, namely their greater or lesser ability to define their own interests. The suppression of educational inequality as far as possible was, then, an act of justice rendered necessary by the advance of industrial democracy.

These were the main lines of the doctrine which held such powerful sway over England. It was almost totally rationalist: an extension of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth, and a curious invasion of abstract ideology into the home of empirical thinking. The radical philosophers and economists were a minute, little-known faction, antipathetic to the general public where they were known. Yet as long as their voice was heard their influence was enormous. For they were in harmony with social and economic developments and, consciously or accidentally, forged alliances which put them at the centre of the great revolutionary force producing individualism. We have to see how far they were typical of

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this movement, and how far they were extraordinary; and we must try and discover the factors which on the one hand made them leaders of a great movement in English intellectual life, and on the other hand led them to arouse a passionate national reaction against themselves.

The Reform Act

Meanwhile the new bourgeoisie enjoyed its triumph. The Reform Act of 1832 was its decisive victory, and it was preceded by a series of partial successes that paved the way for it, and laid the foundations of the society which saw the rediscovery of the social novel.

Ricardo outlined his political economy in 1817.²⁵ Mrs Marcet produced a popular account of the theory in her *Conversations* (1818), and the Political Economy Club became the main platform for Ricardian propaganda. A petition in favour of Free Trade was presented by London tradesmen as early as 1820. When Huskisson entered the cabinet he initiated a series of commercial reforms which he intended to crown with the repeal of the Corn Laws. Radical agitation focused on administrative corruption and sinecures; 'Black Books' in 1820 and 1823 listed the recipients of government pensions. Joseph Hume conducted a parliamentary crusade for 'Retrenchment and Reform', which became the watchwords of the radical liberals. Some preliminary legislative and administrative reform cleared away the worst abuses in the 1820s. Mackintosh continued Romilly's noble exposure of the criminal code, and in 1823 Peel moderated the terrible severity of the penal laws. In 1828 Brougham spoke for six hours, giving an outline of the 'true crimes of the law'.²⁶ The most important reforms of the period were Catholic emancipation in 1828, and the abolition of the laws against workers' combinations in 1824. The latter was not quite so clear a victory of liberal reason over bourgeois class interest as it seemed. The radicals claimed to be following their principle of non-interference in allowing workers' societies freedom within certain limits. But in fact they sensed a spirit of collectivism in the nascent trade unions which threatened individualism, and they hoped that freedom to strike would bring about the final downfall of the unions.²⁷ In Catholic emancipation the utilitarians scored a partial victory over the Established Church. It is remarkable how utterly removed from the spirit of religion their ideas were. James Mill put forward a scheme of ecclesiastical reform in 1835 which amounted to the secularisation of the Church. The clergy would be employed to give 'lectures on morality, botany, political economy, and so on'.²⁸ With allies like this the Catholics and Nonconformists might have won more than

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civil rights for themselves: separation of Church and State was the dearest wish of Bentham and James Mill. But the Whigs, whose lukewarm piety found Catholic emancipation perfectly acceptable, clung to the Established Church for its social usefulness. They brought off a triumph of compromise in preserving establishment, and thereby demonstrated the difference between instinctive Whig utilitarianism and systematic philosophical utilitarianism.

After a furious struggle, a coalition of liberals and radicals of all shades carried the Reform Act. The Lords' resistance was overcome, after frequent upsets, in June 1832. It was high time. This period of constitutional political activity had taken on a revolutionary character, with public impatience and frustration building to pent up fury, and actual outbreaks of violence in places.²⁹ The prospect of social change had aroused the proletariat from its lethargy, and it is impossible to imagine what socialist dreams they expected reform to realise.³⁰ In the end, the Reform Act was far from totally democratic. The franchise was extended to freeholders to the value of £10; the constituencies were revised and the 'rotten boroughs' replaced by new towns; and that minute fraction of the community which enjoyed hereditary electoral rights lost this privilege. Essentially, this was all the measure achieved, and yet its effect on public morale was incalculable. It was the end of the old order and the opening of a new. The leaders of the bourgeoisie officially took their place among the governing classes, where their wealth and initiative promised them supremacy. Then did English democracy really begin in 1832? John Stuart Mill thought so: 'To most purposes, in the constitution of modern society, the government of a numerous middle class is democracy. Nay, it not merely is democracy, but the only democracy of which there is yet any example.'³¹

The new England was ripe for individualism. For the moment political thought was under the direction of theoreticians, and it seemed that the philosophic radicals were going to run the country. Yet in fact the power of doctrinaire partisans was to decline steadily after 1832. In 1841 the Tories were returned to power by a popular reaction of conservative prudence. Thereafter utilitarianism as an active revolutionary force was overwhelmed, although its influence continued to be felt in such measures as the codification of the criminal law (1833) and the attenuation of its more extreme penalties (1837). But the reformed Parliament hardly attended to anything but the immediate interests of the bourgeoisie. Thus it wished to destroy the social ties between men and classes which had characterised the old England; it was determined to do away with the paternalistic, personal approach to government, and chose to withdraw

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the Poor Law's official recognition of society's responsibility to its members. The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 was the principal step towards the destruction of the old social forms: it replaced the unpaid administration of squires and magistrates with professional bureaucrats serving elected councils.³² After a public inquiry, the Poor Law was revised in 1834. For a long time liberal economists had denounced the harmful effects of the right to public assistance, established under Elizabeth and confirmed by successive statutes.³³ The maintenance of paupers by parish rates was as offensive to the principles of theoretical economists as it was expensive to the pockets of bourgeois ratepayers. A premium paid to the unemployed was an encouragement to the endless multiplication of socially useless individuals and a long-standing grievance to the Malthusians. They argued from statistics that increasing unemployment and rising poor rates made reform necessary. But reform, when it came, was carried out in a spirit of ruthless schematisation. Public assistance was centralised: the central committee was empowered to join parishes together in 'unions' and to compel them to pool their resources and build workhouses. These were to be run on a strictly disciplined regimen. Under no circumstances were able-bodied men to be given relief outside the workhouses. Bastards were to be a charge on their mothers. The new system sharply replaced the old with the cruelty of a radical measure. The separation of the sexes and deliberate harshness of workhouse life were intended to discourage malingerers, but they also oppressed the truly needy. Opposition to this reform was significant: no single issue offered a clearer polarisation of utilitarians and men of feeling.

Similarly revealing was the great Free Trade campaign which engaged all radicals and economists from 1838 to 1846. Here a sincere and disinterested concern for the public good went hand in glove with class-interest. Cobden and Bright, the leaders of the campaign, were industrialists first and philanthropists second. The artificial maintenance of high bread prices for the benefit of the landed interest had been denounced repeatedly.³⁴ The Anti-Corn Law League then organised a brilliant propaganda campaign, with all the essentials for success. By 1842 the Government had been won over to the cause. Peel, as a Conservative minister, still hesitated, but his budget was already a partial victory for Free Trade. In 1846 a serious economic crisis and the prospect of famine finally broke down the resistance of agricultural Toryism.³⁵ An immediate improvement in the condition of the poor was felt, and the repeal of the Corn Laws was one of the primary causes of the return of national prosperity after 1850. And yet some radical democrats were suspicious of the Free Trade movement, and the Chartists, the spearhead

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of the workers' demand for political rights, were for the most part actually hostile. This was because the altruism of the Free Traders was, in their view, vitiated by class-interest. The industrialists of the League would be striking a mighty blow against the landed gentry, their class antagonists, if they carried the repeal of the Corn Laws. At the same time the cost of living would fall, which meant that conditions for trade would become easier, and wages could be lowered while profits were raised. Cobden admitted as much in 1843.³⁶ 'I am afraid,' he said at Manchester on 19 October, 'that most of us entered upon the struggle with the belief that we had some distinct class-interest in the question.' The Chartists' suspicions were right, even if class loyalty concealed the true interests of the masses from them.³⁷ Their attitude clarifies the true social conflict in this complex and uncertain period.

The political problem and the social problem

The confusion of English history between 1830 and 1850 arises from the fact that the same social forces were involved in two separate systems of confrontation. On the one hand there was the political and administrative battle of the middle class as they tried to force open the historical English social alignments, against the opposition of the conservative landowning aristocracy of the established order. The bourgeoisie wanted the assistance of the masses in this struggle, and succeeded in gaining their involvement by conjuring up the image of common middle- and working-class opposition to the holders of power, and vaguely promising a better future once the oligarchical base of government had been extended. This movement was analytical and individualist, and generally progressive. Cobbett supported it, and persuaded the first working-class movements that their place between 1815 and 1830 was with the bourgeoisie, whose cause was the cause of all the people. After 1832 the pressure built up over the years continued to provide the motive force for a number of separate social movements. Thus Chartism claimed to be continuing and completing the work of the Reform Act. And sporadic associations of the middle and working classes continued individualist social activity until the end of the century, through Free Trade agitation, successive electoral reforms, and the last stages of the struggle with the persistence of feudal attitudes. The first social confrontation, then, was between feudal traditions and the spirit of modernity, and although this was partially resolved by the Reform Act and became of less importance thereafter, it was protracted into the early twentieth century by the slow progress of democracy. As long as the demand for political equality was

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not met, a part of the populace was ready to continue the struggle. And it cannot be said that the electoral reforms of 1867 and 1884 met their demands: the English class structure is so tenacious that the radical aim of individual independence and equality could not be described as achieved until the twentieth century.

On the other hand, a second arrangement of the same social forces, with a different or even contrary orientation, came into being at the very moment of individualism's first political triumph.³⁸ The industrial revolution carried the seeds of a new antagonism which was to divide the classes along new party lines. In the light of industrialism, the middle and working classes could see themselves as quite separate, with different interests underlined by their economic conditions. The question of political power now became secondary: the battleground had changed, and different principles were invoked. As far as the victorious individualists were concerned, the needs of the proletariat and the dismay of the former ruling classes were alike obstacles to the reorganisation of society they proposed. Thus the bourgeoisie, hitherto the allies of the people, became an enemy, and their victory signalled even more cruel oppression. Now the old aristocracy seemed a possible ally against the bourgeoisie, and the weapons they had forged in the previous struggle could be taken up by the workers. This sequence of events took place in all the advanced nations of Europe, but it was far more rapid in England than anywhere else. The amazingly swift development of industrialism, coupled with stubborn resistance to social change, meant that the resolution of the political power struggle in 1832 coincided with the birth of the social class war. In France the struggle for socialism was half a century away from the struggle for democracy; in England they took place almost simultaneously.

It was difficult for men to make the mental adjustment from the first problem to the second, as they appeared to be flatly opposed. Hardly anyone saw socialism as an extension of democratic principles to the economic sphere. Among the Chartists, only the followers of Owen and Hodgskin wanted to attack the basis of property. Everybody else – the estate-holders who had survived from the old order in spite of the depredations of bourgeois radicalism; the factory hands who were denied legal protection against overwork; and the middle-class altruists whose consciences revolted at the competitive principle – upheld the ideal of intervention in opposition to the liberal economists' *laissez-faire*. The social changes they hoped for involved the maintenance of such social relations as offered safeguards to the participants, the replacement of industrial anarchy by a hierarchical structure guaranteeing more security

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to its members, and the creation of new social responsibilities by government action. State socialism and Guild socialism combined to polarise opposition to individualism. Men of all classes, allied by permanent or ephemeral sentiments, preferences, or interests, combined to produce various theories which were united in their opposition to the common enemy. When Christian socialism was added, the whole mass of anti-*laissez-faire* activity became the pivot around which the struggle for social change revolved after 1832.

Thus from 1830 to 1850 two quite separate philosophies of progress were thriving, side by side. Each had its own justification: the need for democratic individualism had not terminated in 1832. And although the other 'progressive' movement was less self-aware, it was nonetheless necessary. And this is why we find such confusion on the ideological plane throughout the period. Contemporary witnesses exhibit intellectual uncertainty, difficulty in the face of new questions which cannot be answered by old principles, and a diversity of opinion which, for example, created problems for politicians dealing with industrial legislation. Greville noted in his *Journal*:³⁹

I never remember such excitement as has been caused by Ashley's Ten Hours Bill, nor a more curious political state of things – such intermingling of parties, such a confusion of opposition. . . . Some voted, not knowing how they ought to vote, and following those they are accustomed to follow; many who voted against Government afterwards said they believed they were wrong. . . . The whole thing is difficult and unpleasant.

Nor is it surprising that even the most clear-sighted men of the time were unable to detect more than one of the forms of social conflict around them. Their viewpoint from within society concealed from them either the need for social justice, or the need for democracy. At that time, more than any other, individualism and socialism presented hostile faces to each other, and seemed implacably opposed; yet this, too, was the moment in English history when socialist sympathies were most likely to be found among reactionaries, and democratic tendencies circulated among the conservative *laissez-faire* bourgeoisie.

Most people were quite incapable of distinguishing between or reconciling the two problems, and they tended simply to adopt random principles and policies from both. The leaders of opinion who influenced the national conscience throughout the period exhibit a singular confusion of contradictory ideas. And habitual abstract thinkers were as confused as men of action. Furthermore, the classification of ideas around