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Literacy and the Struggle for the Working Class Press in England, 1816–1836 (1987)

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Biography of the Text

When I began reading in the area of the politics of literacy it wasn't long before I ran into Wayne O'Neil's 1970 *Harvard Educational Review* paper, "Properly Literate." O'Neil distinguished between "being able to read" and "being literate." He argued that being able to read means "that you can follow words across a page, getting generally what's superficially there." By contrast, "being literate means you can bring your knowledge and your experience to bear on what passes before you." O'Neil suggested that we think of the latter as "proper literacy" and the former as "improper literacy." This resonated with Freire's idea of literacy involving reading the word *and* the world—of keeping words and world together in ways that enhance our capacity to *name* the world. It also resonated with C. Wright Mills' (1959) concept of "sociological imagination"—a way of thinking and using information that helps people understand relationships between what is going on in the world and what is happening in their own lives and beings and/or the lives and beings of others they may know, care about, or otherwise be interested in. I was interested in the possibility of tweaking O'Neil's distinction in accordance with ideals of political, economic and social justice. I was also interested in claims that history offers many examples of marginalized groups developing non-formal literacy and popular education initiatives that approximate to the kind of proper literacy I believed was central to an educational ideal. Being contracted to write a book presented an excellent opportunity and incentive to pursue this interest.

In this chapter I present the second of three case studies comprising my account of literacy and working class politics in England during the period from 1790 to 1850 in Chapter 3 of *Literacy, Schooling and Revolution*.

Introduction

Throughout this period the English working people bore a triple yoke of oppression. They were oppressed politically (in the *formal* sense, within the sphere of formal politics), economically, and culturally. Organic working class struggle against oppression emerged on all three fronts between 1790 and the 1830s—the decades which, according to E.P. Thompson, witnessed “the making of the English working class” (Thompson, 1963: 213).

There were two major dimensions to this “making”: the growth of working-class consciousness, whereby the diverse groups of working people began in numbers to perceive an identity of interest among themselves, as distinct from and opposed to the interests of other classes; and the emergence of distinct forms of political and industrial organization corresponding to and reflecting this perceived identity of worker interests.

By 1832 there were strongly based and self-conscious working class institutions—trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements, political organizations, periodicals—working class intellectual traditions, working-class community patterns, and a working class structure of feeling. (Thompson, 1963: 213).

Thompson stresses the importance of recognizing the active role of working class people in making themselves as a class. The working class was not *forged*, in the manner of a casting, in the crucible of the Industrial Revolution—with external forces operating on inert human raw material, pressing it into shape, and turning it out ‘ready made’ at the other end. Rather, the making process was one in which working people acted and created, as well as being acted upon and responding to externally imposed economic, political, and cultural forces. “The working class made itself as much as it was made” (Thompson, 1963: 213). Moreover, the pursuit, attainment, and practice of proper forms of literacy was a vital galvanizing element within the active role played by working folk in making themselves as a class.

Literacy and Struggle for the Working Class Press

While precise figures are not available, the working class was increasingly a reading public from the late eighteenth century (Webb, 1955: 167, note 34). Furthermore, during the 1790s the Corresponding Societies had demonstrated that, through association, individuals did not personally require reading skills in order

to gain access to ideas and critiques through which to achieve enhanced understanding of their circumstances and pursue greater control over their lives (Webb 1955). The end of the war with France in 1815 ushered in a period during which the battle for access, via print, to the minds of working people assumed major proportions and significance, in the context of struggle for a popular press.

Wickwar (1928) identifies 1816 as a landmark in the struggle for freedom of the press. The peace with France had brought continued economic distress rather than improvement to the lower orders and fanned disillusionment within the middle class. Politically aware critics identified a government that had palpably failed to promote the welfare of its subjects. They saw electoral corruption in “borough mongering, pensions, sinecures and patronage” (1928: 19). They saw general political and economic corruption, privilege, and vested interest in

a corn law passed to keep the price of wheat up to eighty shillings a quarter, on the assumption that rents would thus be kept high and that the high rents were necessary to keep up the landed interest on which the government of church and state was assumed to depend. (Wickwar, 1928: 49)

Political malcontents again turned their attention to reform. Change to the constitution was the precondition of improved social and economic conditions, they argued. Unless the people shared the power of government, they could scarcely hope to share its benefits (Wickwar, 1928: 49).

Under conditions of intense and prolonged economic hardship, discontent had become widespread among the working class, and 1811 brought violence with the outbreak of the Luddite Revolts. Initially much of the violence was directed against machinery and industrial property, in the belief that machines and profiteering were the source of economic distress. There were, in addition, sporadic food riots and outbreaks of mob violence triggered by unemployment, high prices, and wage reductions. Commentators generally describe the widespread and regular outbreaks of violence and disorder between 1811 and 1816 as spontaneous and unorganized—in the sense that they were not individually parts of a unified, informed, orchestrated program of political agitation. Moves were taken to alter this in 1816 when, under two main influences, political reform re-emerged as a unifying theme and educational activity aimed at promoting widespread commitment to the reform cause was once more in evidence.

The first influence was the revival of reform societies in the wake of a reform tour by Major Cartwright. In the tradition of corresponding societies the Hampden, Union, and Spencean Clubs promoted discussion and political activity within regular class meetings (cf. Wearmouth, 1948: Ch. 1 and 2. See also Simon, 1960: 186–189, and Thompson, 1963). This initiative was soon accompanied by the development of radical Sunday schools—secular and political in nature and

focus. The second influence was the emergence of a politically critical popular press directed specifically at working people with the intention of educating them as to the real cause of their distress: namely, political and constitutional evils. It is with the emergence of the popular press that I am mainly concerned here.

Three points can be made by way of background to trends which evolved in popular publishing from 1816.

(i) Since 1712 publications had been subject to tax. In that year parliament taxed printed papers, pamphlets and advertisements and required a stamp to be placed on anything it deemed to be a newspaper. During George II's reign the stamp on newspapers was set at a penny per sheet, and penalties for transgressions of the Stamp Tax were extended from publishers to include vendors as well. In 1815 the Stamp Tax was set at fourpence per newspaper. Clearly, the cost of the tax had to be included in the sale price of newspapers, unless publishers and vendors chose to risk publishing and selling unstamped papers. The Stamp Tax thereby placed legitimate newspapers beyond the pockets of working class individuals.

(ii) Strict legislation to control the content of publication was in place. This began in 1637, when all books and papers were required by law to be licensed and registered before publication. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries tough laws governing sedition and libel were added. As Wickwar summarizes:

The publication of anything with a malicious intention of causing a breach of the peace was a misdemeanour at Common Law. Anything that it was thus illegal to circulate was called a criminal libel, and the same term was commonly applied to the act of circulating it. Criminal libels were distinguished as defamatory, obscene, blasphemous or seditious libels, according to as they treated of personal, sexual, religious, or political matters. (Wickwar, 1928: 19. See also pp. 18–20 for legal descriptions of malicious intent, breach of the peace, etc.)

Of particular relevance here is seditious libel. This law legislated against public expressions of discontent with the established government. A publication was a seditious libel if it (a) tended to bring into contempt or hatred either the monarchy (including heirs and successors), the government and constitution, parliament, or the administration of justice; or (b) tended to incite subjects of the realm to attempt to change any matter of church or state by other than lawful means. Given that there was no provision for popular participation in government, there *were* no lawful (or, by definition, peaceful) means by which the people could change either government or constitution. Hence the law covering seditious libel presented a powerful and wide-ranging control on the political content of the press. Since Britain's rulers in the early nineteenth century "were generally satisfied with the working of the constitution and the Christianity of the day," and "saw no reason why the whole nation should not be united in . . . respect for Christianity and in contentment with the constitution they had inherited" (Wickwar, 1928: 19),

there was both an incentive and a tendency for the laws covering libel and sedition to be employed—particularly when public unrest reached crisis point, as it did frequently between 1790 and 1816 (and after) (Wickwar, 1928: 19).

(iii) By 1815 an impressive range of types of publication existed for middle and upper class readers. Besides books, these included newspapers—containing national, local, and foreign news, and comprehensive reports of legal and parliamentary proceedings—monthly and quarterly reviews and magazines, and an increasingly popular (typically) weekly form known as political registers. Together with certain books and pamphlets, these registers mainly fell outside “the respectable part of the press” (Wickwar, 1928: 51). While some had a literary and dramatic focus, most were political in content and anti-establishment in bias. They were usually published by a single individual and reflected that person’s viewpoint. Whereas newspapers sought to describe or record events, registers aimed explicitly to shape them. And whereas monthly reviews and magazines reviewed general policies, the registers reviewed and evaluated current events. They evolved as potent instruments of political and, often, religious critique. And they were subject to the Stamp Tax.

Perhaps the most celebrated of the register genre was *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, founded by William Cobbett in 1802. Cobbett reflects *par excellence* the spirit and intent of the register writers as described by Wickwar. These individuals expressed in their publications what they “took to be the interests of the otherwise unrepresented people” —and particularly the working class. For Cobbett, the ills of the working class flowed from political corruption; their interests called for parliamentary reform. But if Cobbett argued and agitated on behalf of the interests of others, he required in turn their support. “He had to try to make his opinion their opinion, so that they might together accomplish what he could never do alone” (Wickwar, 1928: 52). The way in which Cobbett sought to make his opinion working class opinion led to a further chapter in the chronicle of literacy as a force and an outcome of struggle between competing interest groups.

Because of the heavy stamp duty Cobbett’s *Register* sold at 1s 0½d—with only “a very small portion . . . left to the author” (Cobbett, cited in Wickwar, 1928: 53–54). Despite the high price it was read by workmen who grouped together to buy copies and read them in public-houses. When Cobbett heard of publicans objecting to “meetings for reading the *Register* being held at their houses for fear they should lose their licences,” he decided to make available a cheaper edition (*ibid.*). He was (legally) able to do this by means of a loophole in the Stamp Tax law. Printing on open sheets (i.e., sheets printed without the intention of folding them) required no stamp. And so “the whole of one of my *Registers* might be printed in rather close print upon the two sides of one sheet of foolscap paper” (*ibid.*).

Cobbett's unstamped version of the *Register* sold for twopence—the original “Twopenny Trash.” It sold 44,000 copies inside a month, and more than 200,000 in all. A score of political periodicals followed Cobbett's lead: notably, Wooller's *Black Dwarf*, Sherwin's *Political Register* (later transformed by Richard Carlile into the *Republican*), and the penny *Gorgon*, edited by John Wade. Political corruption and the pressing need for reform was the central theme of the twopenny trash. This theme was expressed in articles analyzing and commenting upon current circumstances and events, exposing the motives and interests of opponents of reform, advocating and documenting the advantages of lawful association, and generally expounding elements of radical political theory. The politicizing influence of this literature upon the working class was enormous. It performed a role akin to that of the literacy engendered earlier by Corresponding Societies, providing a focus for class meetings within the Hampden Clubs and other reform societies. The role of Cobbett's work in particular was widely acclaimed. According to Samuel Bamford, Cobbett's writings were

read on every cottage hearth in the manufacturing districts of South Lancashire . . . Leicester, Derby, and Nottingham . . . Their influence was speedily visible; he directed his readers to the true cause of their sufferings—misgovernment; and to its proper corrective—parliamentary reform. Riots soon became scarce, and from that time they have never obtained their ancient vogue with the labourers of this country . . . Instead of riots and destruction of property, Hampden Clubs were now established in many of our large towns . . . The labourers read [Cobbett's works] and thenceforth became deliberate and systematic in their proceedings. (Bamford, 1984: 13–14)

Thompson cites a reformer who attributed the emergence of political knowledge and fixed political principles among Manchester's poor to “Mr. Cobbett's masterly essays, upon the financial situation of the country, and the effects of taxation, in reducing the comforts of the labourer” (Thompson, 1963: 679).

Cobbett's original twopenny *Weekly Political Pamphlet*, “Address to the journeymen and labourers,” is an exemplar of the genre. Cobbett argues that despite being smaller in population and poorer in soil and climate than many other countries, England was (in 1816) the most wealthy and powerful nation in the world. This wealth and power, he says, spring from the laboring classes. Moreover, the same laboring classes as produce the nation's wealth also secure its safety. While military and naval commanders receive the titles and the financial rewards, it is the people who actually win the victories. What do working people receive in return for producing wealth and ensuring security? They are denigrated by their “betters”—referred to as the Mob, the Rabble, the Swinish Multitude—and reduced to abject misery.

Cobbett asks after the cause of this misery and how it might be remedied. The main cause, he says, is excessive taxation. But do “the friends of corruption” recommend reduced taxes for the poor? Not a bit. Instead they complain about being levied for the Poor Rate. They would seek even to deny poor relief to the laboring classes—despite the fact that poor relief is the only tangible return workers might see for the taxes they pay. Even less do these friends of corruption propose political reform that would admit the real creators of wealth and security to the body politic. The same political corruption that reduces the poor to misery ensures that sinecure placemen and pensioners receive from twenty to forty thousand pounds a year—in return for producing and securing nothing! Having attacked Malthus’ “remedy” for the situation, Cobbett proceeds to his own. The only remedy is to give every person who pays direct taxes the right to vote for MPs at annual elections. A reformed parliament would redress economic injustices and ensure the most democratic electoral procedures. He ends by exhorting working people to pursue political reform with zeal and resolution—by peaceful and lawful means. And

if the *Skulkers* will not join you, if the “decent fireside” gentry still keep aloof, proceed by yourselves. Any man can draw up a petition, and any man can *carry* it up to London, with instructions to deliver it into trusty hands, whenever the House shall meet. (Cobbett, cited in Cole and Cole, 1944: 216)

The revival of reform societies, initiated by Major Cartwright, had its heyday between 1816 and 1823. The twopenny trash was an important part of the literature read and discussed by working-class folk in the various Hampden Clubs, political Protestant Unions, secular Sunday schools, and other reform associations. The literacy practised within the class meetings of these societies reflects pedagogical approaches and a range of educational concerns, which are interesting and important in their own right (see, for example, Simon, 1960: 186–93; Thompson, 1963: 712–36; and Wearmouth, 1948: 31–49).¹ Unfortunately, they are beyond our scope here. For my concern in this section is not with the overall context and practice of a particular literacy. Rather, I wish to focus more narrowly on the emergence of an important *medium and expression* of working class literacy: namely, the working class press. In this I will emphasize the dynamic between efforts and initiatives taken to establish a distinctively working class press and the many obstacles presented to these efforts.

The twopenny trash was the first step toward a genuinely working class press. By “a working class press,” I mean (i) a press which offered working people access to information and comment on their daily reality at a price (more or less) within their economic grasp; and (ii) a press which reflected working class interests and

was committed to promoting those interests. This, of necessity, was a press increasingly under the control of working people themselves.²

We may think of (i) and (ii), crudely, as cost and content dimensions. Pursuit of a working class press involved *struggle* against oppositional forces on both of these dimensions. The Stamp Tax militated against a working class press on the cost dimension. Laws covering sedition and libel imposed powerful obstacles on the content dimension. So too did initiatives undertaken by representatives of middle- and upper-class interests to make cheap literature available to working-class readers with the intention of diverting them from authentically working-class critiques of social, economic, and political conditions, and accommodating them to the status quo—thereby promoting the interests of the privileged at the expense of working class interests. To carry this part of the argument forward it is necessary to outline some key aspects of the struggle that ensued following Cobbett's intervention in 1816. Once again, my description here is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, and will be limited to selected aspects of struggle between 1816 and 1836.

The struggle for a working class press echoes the earlier struggle for *proper* worker literacy within the Corresponding Societies, in that it too was confronted by both coercive and ideological/hegemonic forms of opposition. Examples of coercion include the 1819 legislation covering Stamp Duty and Sedition, and measures employed against Hetherington and others in the 1830s. Hegemonic opposition is represented in attempts by various publishers, organizations, and even the government itself, to “write Cobbett down” and establish a cheap anti-reform literature. It is also to be found in the activities of such organizations as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.

Coercion

In the midst of heightened and critically informed activity for political reform, the government passed the notorious Six Acts of 1819. Two of these were explicitly directed against the low cost reform press. The “Act for the more effectual prevention and punishment of Blasphemous and Seditious Libels” reminded the public of what constituted criminal libel (as outlined above), and established mechanisms for administering the law more effectively than before and for frightening would-be offenders. Greater powers of search and arrest were given to magistrates and constables, and penalties for a second offence under the Act included banishment from the Empire or, alternatively, transportation for up to fourteen years. The “Act to subject certain Publications to the Duties upon Newspapers, and to make other Regulations for restraining the Abuses arising from the Publication of Blasphemous and Seditious Libels” (or Publication Act, for short!), closed Cob-

bett's loophole by bringing the twopenny trash within the definition of a newspaper, thereby subjecting all such publications to the Stamp Tax of fourpence per copy. The complex definition of a newspaper written into this Act—that is, the lengths the Act went to in order to prevent the proliferation and accessibility of the reform press to working people—is recorded by Wickwar (1928: 137).

The two Acts, then, undermined a free press in two ways: by economic constraint and by controlling content. The battle for the free press during the 1820s was mainly a battle against the restriction on content. It was not, to this extent, a battle for a working class press *per se*. Rather, people like Richard Carlile, his shopmen, and his army of vendors, fought for the right to express political beliefs and criticism freely. While the battle was fought on this front the twopenny trash collapsed. Wooller, Cobbett, and others conformed to the Stamp Tax requirement, and their circulation fell away under the resulting price increase—with Wooller folding in 1824. A system of reading rooms, coffee shops, and other networks, at which people could peruse papers they could not afford to purchase, continued throughout the decade. In general, however, “the working-class press struggled under the crushing weight of the stamp duties” until 1830 (Thompson, 1963: 799). In the meantime the most authentic expressions of working class interests available in print had been effectively moved beyond the economic means of individual working class readers.

For a decade the Publication Act of 1819 checked development of a cheap popular press. The legislation of that year brought in its wake prosecutions for seditious publishing rather than for defiance of the Stamp Tax. But in 1830 the struggle moved to the other front, with the battle of the “great unstamped.” By 1830 the battle for free expression had been largely won. The courage and defiance of Carlile's army of persecuted and punished had defeated—morally and practically—those who would suppress political critique in the name of preventing sedition. The barrier that remained against a politically informed and critical working-class press was the Stamp Tax—which remained at the prohibitive level of fourpence set in 1815.

After several years of relative quiet, clamoring for political reform broke out anew in 1829, when “the widespread depression afflicting various sections of the community found voice and passion” (Wearmouth, 1948: 50). A host of political unions quickly emerged, based upon the principle of middle and working class collaboration in the pursuit of reform. Some working class leaders, however, anticipating the subsequent betrayal of working class efforts for reform in the 1832 Reform Act, formed associations explicitly concerned with promoting working-class interests. The most important of these was the National Union of Working Classes and others—formed in early 1831 when London workers broke away from the middle class dominated Metropolitan Political Union. Its leaders includ-

ed a printer named Henry Hetherington, and it was he who became the central figure in the struggle against the Stamp Tax on behalf of a working class press.

Through October and November 1830 Hetherington published a series (twenty-five in all) of penny daily papers, entitled *Penny Papers for the People*. These were written in letter form, addressed to their intended audience, in an attempt to evade the Publication Act (and, thus, the Stamp Tax) whilst at the same time providing “cheap political information for the people” (Barker, 1938: 5). The first *Penny Paper* was addressed to the people of England, and subsequent issues were addressed to such as the Duke of Wellington, the King, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. In December 1830 Hetherington shifted to a weekly format with *A Penny Paper for the People* by the *Poor Man’s Guardian*, containing “a comprehensive digest of all the political occurrences of the week” (Barker, 1938: 5–6; see also Lovett, 1920: 60). This new format brought Hetherington to court, and to conviction, for defiance of the Stamp Tax. He was sentenced to six months imprisonment, appealed, but had the appeal disallowed. Hetherington’s response to his conviction and sentence was to produce (on 9 July 1831) the first issue of *The Poor Man’s Guardian*. Instead of the official stamp it bore the emblem of a hand-press. Its motto was “Knowledge is Power,” and it was headed “Published contrary to ‘law’ to try the power of ‘Might’ against ‘Right.’”

Hetherington was uncompromising; his aim in defiance of the law was absolutely explicit. His opening address stated the intention to protect and uphold the freedom of the press, “the press, too, of the ignorant and the poor” (Barker, 1982: 8). He served notice that *The Poor Man’s Guardian* will contain “news, intelligence, and occurrences,” and “remarks and observations thereon” and “upon matters of church and state tending to excite hatred and contempt of the government and constitution of the tyranny of this country, as by law constituted” (Barker, 1983: 9). One by one he cited the clauses of law his paper was to defy (see also Collett, 1933: Ch. 2). Gone was any attempt to evade the law by loopholes—as in the earlier format of a letter addressed to an ‘intended’ audience. Hetherington was confronting the Publication Act head on in the cause of a working class press.

Other unstamped newspapers appeared, including Carlile’s *Gauntlet*, Hobson’s *Voice of the West Riding*, Doherty’s *Poor Man’s Advocate*, O’Brien’s *Destructive*, and a paper called the *Working Man’s Friend* which, together with Hetherington’s *Poor Man’s Guardian* became the voice of the National Union of Working Classes. The working class press was born: a press by working class people, for working class people, expressing and promoting working class interests, and at a price working people could reasonably afford.

Some appreciation of the quality of ideas and thought accessible to working class readers via their own press can be gleaned from a typical example taken from the *Poor Man’s Guardian*, 17 November, 1832. The background to this particular article concerned the formation of a separate Union of the Working Classes in the

Midlands. Faced with this development a council member of the Birmingham Political Union claimed that no sufficient reasons had been given that would justify the formation of a distinctively working class union. The *Poor Man's Guardian* published a reply to this charge (the original Address is reproduced in Hampton, 1984: 458–459). In it five grounds were advanced for establishing the new organization.

(i) Leaders of other political unions simply could not represent working class interests because their own interests conflict with those of workers. For example, men of property who live off rents would have an interest in preserving the Corn Laws. Yet abolition of the Corn Laws was absolutely basic to working class interests.

(ii) The most active members of existing political unions were interested in securing representation of *property* rather than of human beings. As with ruling classes from time immemorial, they seek power to make laws which will promote their own ends. It is precisely the creation of such interest-serving laws which has yielded “extreme wealth on the one hand, and the destitution and starvation of the artisans of our own town on the other” (Hampton, 1984: 458).

(iii) Working class distress has resulted from displacement of manual labor by machines and other inventions, which have forced workers to compete with each other for employment. This has resulted in low wages. Since masters and capitalists have an obvious interest in further mechanization if it brings still cheaper labor, they could hardly be expected to exercise power—inside or outside of parliament—with due consideration of working class interests.

(iv) Those “above” working class station seek to avoid involvement in productive labor. Consequently, they have an interest in securing privileged positions in the army, navy, church, or excise, for themselves, their families and connections. This makes them part of the very problem producing the heavy taxes, which cripple working people. To this extent they cannot represent working class interests, which directly conflict with their own.

(v) The working classes are sufficiently intelligent to discuss issues concerning their best interests, their rights and liberties, and to acquire enhanced knowledge of these matters, *among themselves*—without being dictated to or controlled by persons with opposing interests.

In purely economic terms, then, the working class had access through the work of Hetherington, Hobson, Doherty, and others to properly literate publications at a price they could afford. At a different level, however, the price of such publications was extremely high. As is self-evident from the article I have just described, it was very much in the interests of the ruling classes to have strong coercion brought against the development of a cheap press that politicized working people. Were such ideas to become prevalent among the masses, the social, economic and political order would surely be overthrown. And so the law moved

against the working class press. Hetherington served multiple six month terms of imprisonment, and between these spent considerable time (publishing) on the run from the law. Watson served six months. A veritable army of vendors responded to Hetherington's advertisement calling for "some hundreds of poor men out of employ who have nothing to risk, some of those unfortunate wretches to whom distress has made prison a desirable home," to sell the *Poor Man's Guardian* in the face of the law. They sold; they were prosecuted in large numbers—up to 750 prosecutions according to one reliable estimate; they were jailed. Shortly after the *Poor Man's Guardian* finally ceased publication, at the end of 1835 with its 238th number, the Stamp Tax was reduced to a penny, "and the way had been opened for the Chartist press" (Thompson, 1963: 800).

The role of legal coercion against the working class in their struggle for a press that authentically expressed and aimed to promote their class interests is accentuated by the fact that publications reflecting ruling class interests, *and which ought to have been stamped but were not*, remained free from prosecution. This patently class-interested operation of the law, which opposed worker initiatives in search of a proper literacy and sided *with* church and state sponsored activities to perpetuate improper literacy among working people, is best articulated by Simon.

Sellers of the *Poor Man's Guardian* were unmercifully persecuted up and down the country; James Watson was jailed with Hetherington, Cleave and his wife seized, Heyward of Manchester, Guest of Birmingham, Hobson and Mrs Mann of Leeds, and about 500 others suffered imprisonment, as sellers of the un-stamped press. Yet at the same time prominent members of the government unctuously promoted the activities of the [Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge] whose *Penny Magazine*, which had been launched in 1832 as part of the policy of providing innocent amusement for the workers, but which should equally have been stamped, circulated unchallenged. (Simon, 1960: 227)

This biased application of the law did not escape working class notice. And in the best tradition of informed struggle the National Union of Working Classes and the worker press together treated it as an issue through which to further politicize working people. As an example of this we may consider a letter from the Leicester Branch of the National Union of Working Classes to the *Poor Man's Guardian*. The branch formally expressed its "detestation and abhorrence" at the "base spite and vindictive malice" by which Hetherington had been singled out for persecution

whilst Brougham, and a whole host of *lying* editors, proprietors, and publishers of the *Penny Magazines*, *Omnibus*, and others too numerous to mention, all equally offending against the *damnable and detestable taxes on knowledge*, are suffered to go on with impunity, and even rewarded with honour, expressly because they either basely abuse and deceive the people, or attempt to divert their

attention from their true state, and the cause of their distress, instead of showing these. (cited in Simon, 1960: 228)

The letter ends by expressing the Branch's resolve to continue their efforts until tyranny is overthrown and Equal Rights and Equal Law established.

Besides denouncing selective coercion against working class publishers, this correspondence draws our attention to the role of popular publication as an ideological tool for preserving ruling class interests by fostering improper literacy among worker readers. To follow this theme further I turn now to the hegemonic dimension of the struggle surrounding the emergence of a working class press.

Hegemony

The state was actually involved in activity against the twopenny crash and those associated with it prior to the Acts of 1819. In part this was coercive activity. A Shropshire magistrate, for example, “caused two men to be apprehended under the Vagrant Act for distributing *Cobbett's Political Register*, and had them well flogged at the whipping post” (Aspinall, 1949: 47). Elsewhere hawkers were detained, prosecuted and, in some cases, fined with the option of imprisonment for non-payment. In addition, however, the state was implicated from 1816 in an extensive ideological campaign against Cobbett and others who published reform literature at working class prices. The primary object of this campaign was hegemonic: to maintain support—especially among the working class—for the existing political order by creating a cheap anti-reform press centering around a concerted anti-Cobbett campaign. The focus on Cobbett stemmed from the fact that he was universally acknowledged as the most effective and, therefore, most dangerous communicator of radical ideas to working class readers. Following a four-column assault on Cobbett published in *The Times*, and subsequently republished for sale at “a penny singly, or 6s. per 100” (ibid.), a correspondent of the *Morning Post* recommended that bastions of the status quo adopt the same approach to influencing political consciousness) as that taken by their opponents. After all,

if Cobbett's poisons are circulated in short pamphlets, at the expense of Jacobins, why not make their antidotes be circulated, in the same manner, at the expense of loyal men who can afford to give them away? (ibid.)

This correspondent recalled that during the 1790s “many excellent pamphlets were circulated by government and by individuals, *which gave a just tow to the public mind*,” and was at a loss as to why the same measures were not being adopted in 1816 (Aspinall, 1949: 155, italics mine).

In fact they were. Aspinall claims that the government was involved to the limits of its financial resources in assisting the publication and distribution of pamphlets “calculated to counteract the mischief done by ‘incendiary’ publications.” Indeed, government thought so well of an anti-Cobbett pamphlet published in 1819 (called *The Beauties of Cobbett*), that it printed thousands of copies and assisted in its circulation. Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, received much correspondence seeking subsidies for such anti-reform publications and personally issued the challenge (in 1818) that Cobbett “must be written down.”

Anti-reform publication generally, and anti-Cobbett initiatives in particular, extended far beyond government activity. Webb notes that, in addition to the government, numerous publishers and organizations were involved. Cobbett’s work and character were attacked in a host of low cost pamphlets, including *Anti-Cobbett*, *The Political Death of Mr William Cobbett*, *Politics for the People by William Cobbett*, and the *Letter to William Cobbett* published by the Birmingham Association for the Refutation and Suppression of Blasphemy and Seditious. Wooller’s *Black Dwarf* was countered with Merle’s *White Dwarf*. And W.H. Shadgett published a *Weekly Review of Cobbett, Wooller, Sherwin, and other Democratical and Infidel Writers*, “designed as an antidote to their dangerous and subversive doctrines” and to disseminate “just and sound principles, on all popular subjects.” The wider body of anti-reform literature included a refurbished *Village Politics* and more than a dozen new tracts from Hannah More. Activity was feverish in the towns as well as the provinces.

London publishers, like Hatchard and Seely, turned out numbers of cheap anti-reform pamphlets. George Cayley, a physician, published two addresses to pitmen and keelmen at Durham . . . Edward Walker in Newcastle published *A Word from the Other Side*, *The Friendly Fairy* . . . and reprinted Paley’s *Reasons for Contentment* . . . The *Leeds Intelligencer* in 1819 published a penny *Reformers’ Guide* and also issued a loyal paper called *The Domestic Miscellany*, and *Poor Man’s Friend* . . . [In Manchester] a periodical called *The Patriot* appeared after Peterloo . . . The Pitt Club in 1817 distributed two [dialogues] by Canon C.D. Wray . . . and in the same year Francis Philips wrote *A Dialogue between Thomas, the Weaver, and His Old Master*. (Webb, 1955: 52)

This literature aimed to counter directly the reformist flavor of material, which had become increasingly accessible to working people after 1816. It confronted the ideology of radicalism and reform with an ideology grounded in the beliefs and values of the established order: that is, in the worldview of those whose interests were best served by existing political, social, and economic arrangements. It is true that the Publication Act of 1819 had been largely successful in restricting working-class access to radical ideas in print. As we have seen, however, seditious libels continued apace, and despite their reduced circulation among working-

class readers it was clear that they would continue to exert upon working-class consciousness an influence hostile to ruling interests. After all, ideas in currency could be communicated orally, from those with direct access to published opinion to those without—providing a basis for discussion and further development of these ideas among those penalized by taxes on newspapers. Since the cause of reform embraced (to 1832) both middle class and working class activists—and radical societies with mixed class membership continued into the 1820s, and were revived again after 1829—dissemination of radical critiques among the working class would (and did) continue. Hence the considerable activity on the part of supporters of the status quo to develop and communicate as widely as possible a direct counter to reformist ideas: one reflecting their own interests and ideological position.

The policy of publishing a direct counter to reformist ideas was an *overtly* political strategy—an exercise in consolidating active support for maintaining the status quo by shaping and controlling political consciousness. This, however, was only one line of ideological attack available to the ruling classes. A second approach involved a more *covert* strategy, but one which would equally preserve the status quo. This was to make “safe” literature available at low cost to working class readers. “Safe” literature was of two main types: religious tracts, and material intended to inform, interest, and amuse, but which was powerless to stimulate political critique. Religious tracts would secure loyalty to Christian doctrine and, to that extent, help maintain the hegemony of church and state. Informative literature would operate (in political terms) on the logic of diversion—it would deflect the reading habits of workers out of the political field altogether; whether the politics of reform or anti-reform. It would effectively depoliticize working-class readers by channeling their reading energies into politically impotent content, with the effect of maintaining the status quo by failing to stimulate opposition to it.

Among the leading groups to employ the strategy of providing cheap but safe literature for worker readers were the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK).

The SPCK was formally established in March 1699. In part it was a response to its founders’ perception of the deplorable moral and religious situation in England. More broadly, however, it was concerned to promote Christian knowledge at home as well as in His Majesty’s Dominions. A subscription society, its major activities at home during the eighteenth century included promoting charity schools with a catechetical flavor, formulating policy (communicated by the bishops) for charity schools under the trusteeship of Anglican churchmen, publishing religious literature for sale at subsidized prices and for use within charity schools, establishing libraries for poor clergy and religious services for prisons, and producing bibles, prayer books, liturgies, etc., in Irish, Welsh and Gaelic. Records from 1815 establish that at this time the Society recognized three main tasks:

missions abroad; distribution of the Scriptures, the prayer book, and religious tracts; and the education of the poor “in the principles of our faith.” Its publishing activities were conducted under eighteen separate headings, with major priorities including printing and distributing bibles, prayer books, commentaries and explanations (pitched at different levels for different readerships), sermons and tracts on catechetical themes, books for public and private devotion, guides to confession and absolution, and works concerning duties, vices, and the evils of popery (See Clarke, 1959: 148–152, and Allen and McClure, 1898: Ch. 5., especially pp. 188–189).

In the midst of the political turmoil of 1819, however, a new dimension was added to the work of the SPCK, and its activity took on a special urgency. Viewing with much concern and dismay “the efforts which the enemies of Christianity were making in disseminating the poisons of infidelity,” and believing it proper to employ all its available means to counteract the evils being done by radical publications, the Society appointed a special committee charged with countering the infidel influence. This committee had instructions “to publish in a more popular form, and at a diminished price, suitable tracts then on the Society’s Catalogue,” and also to publish “such other works as might be deemed necessary” (Allen and McClure, 1989: 189). Large print runs were made of several existing works, and more than thirty new tracts were produced. According to SPCK records more than a million copies of books and tracts “against infidelity and blasphemy” were printed and distributed in less than a year—with expenses being met from the £7000 raised by appeal to supporters.

Webb suggests that this attempt (during 1819–1820) to counter the influence of the emerging radical press on working class readers brought some disappointments to the SPCK. Reports from Manchester, Bolton, and London’s East End expressed great difficulties in getting the poor to take the tracts, even where the original policy of selling them cheaply was waived in favor of distributing them gratis in order to reach an audience. While sales were good in better-off areas, such as London’s West End, the Society’s real concern was to have an effect in the poorer neighborhoods. Whatever its true degree of success may have been, the SPCK expressed satisfaction “that the measures . . . pursued were productive of much good.” So much so that the work of the anti-infidel committee was reactivated in 1830–1831 when, once more, “the infidel press teemed with the bitterest invectives against religion and the ministers of Christ,” and publications “of the most pernicious kind, full of blasphemy . . . were circulated with unceasing activity” (Allen and McClure, 1989: 190).

This was the era of Hetherington and defiance of the Stamp. The SPCK again raised funds for publication. Many of the earlier tracts were reprinted and distributed, and no less than twenty-nine new titles were produced. Together these comprised *A Library of Christian Knowledge*. In 1832 the Society’s rejuvenated

publishing program took a further step with the formation of a Committee of General Literature and Education. This was a response not only to the “evil opinions being inculcated” in some parts of the popular “penny literature,” but also to the fact that in other parts (where opinions were not in themselves “evil”) the knowledge being diffused among the masses was “studiously separated from religion” (Webb, 1955: 73). Under the auspices of the new committee the SPCK entered popular publishing on several new fronts, including historical and biographical series, a scientific series with a “decided bias” towards revelation, and a penny weekly called the *Saturday Magazine*. Together with the work of the Religious Tract Society, the activities of the SPCK represent the most impressive attempts to foster safe literature on the model of religious content. On a political level their work was complemented by the efforts of publishers specializing in essentially secular knowledge. Foremost among these was the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.

The major figure behind the formation of the SDUK (in 1826) was Henry Brougham, a leading Whig and, subsequently, Lord Chancellor. Brougham’s *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People* had been published in 1825. In this he noted two main impediments to a sound working class education. First, working people could not afford the books and instructors available to more affluent citizens. Second, even had they been able to afford the expense, workers lacked the necessary leisure time to plow through the kind of learning material as did exist within such areas of knowledge as science, literature and the arts. To overcome these impediments facing the provision of a sound education for the working class, Brougham advocated making available cheap publications adapted to the special learning circumstances of workers—this material to be available in the fields deemed useful knowledge. Even earlier, in 1821, Charles Knight had expressed his hope that “ignorant disseminators of sedition and discontent”—i.e., people such as Cobbett—would be “beaten out of the [publishing] field” by opponents with “better principles,” who would thereafter “direct the secret of popular writing to a useful and righteous purpose” (cited in Simon, 1960: 159). The sentiments of Brougham and Knight (who became the main publisher for the SDUK) were reflected in the official aim of the Society: namely, “the imparting of *useful* information to all classes of the community, particularly to such as are unable to avail themselves of experienced teachers, or may prefer learning by themselves” (cited Webb, 1955: 67).

The ideological purpose of such activity was expressed very clearly by Knight himself, some years after the SDUK was founded. He insisted that

the object of the general diffusion of knowledge is not to make men dissatisfied with their lot—to make the peasant yearn to be an artisan, or the artisan dream of the honours and riches of a profession—but to give the means of content

to those who, for the most part, must necessarily remain in that station which requires great self-denial and great endurance; but which is capable of becoming not only a condition of comfort, but of enjoyment, through the exercise of those very virtues, in connection with a desire for that improvement of the understanding which to a large extent is independent of rank and riches. (Cited in Hollis, 1973: 334)

The early publications of the SDUK kept clear of explicit political themes, including political economy. The *Library of Useful Knowledge* specialized in biography and natural science. It was supplemented by the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge* which, as its title suggests, offered amusement on less esoteric matters. The two *Libraries* appeared in monthly issues and “were filled with miscellaneous scientific and cultural information, ranging from lepidophera to ‘Autumnal Customs in Kardofan’ ” (Simon, 1960: 160). In 1832 the *Libraries* were joined by the *Penny Magazine*, edited by Charles Knight. Knight aimed to produce “a safe Miscellany, in which all classes might find much information and some amusement.” Webb suggests that the proportions were rather more the reverse. The *Penny Magazine* was largely a compilation “of quaint facts and descriptions of various animals, buildings, and natural phenomena” with much of its initial popularity doubtless due to its woodcut illustrations. Even so, it was by no means entirely bereft of political implication. Consider, for example, the ideological message conveyed in “The Weaver’s Song,” published in an early number of the *Magazine*.

Weave, brothers, weave!—Swiftly throw
 The shuttle athwart the loom,
 And show us how brightly your flowers grow,
 That have beauty but no perfume!
 Come, show us the rose, with a hundred dyes,
 The lily, that hath no spot,
 The violet, deep as your true love’s eyes,
 And the little forget-me-not!
 Sing,—sing brothers! weave and sing!
 ‘Tis good both to sing and to weave:
 ‘Tis better to work than live idle:
 ‘Tis better to sing than grieve.
 Weave, brothers, weave!—Toil is ours;
 But toil is the lot of men:
 One gathers the fruit, one gathers the flowers,
 One soweth the seed again!
 There is not a creature, from England’s King,
 To the peasant that delves the soil,

That knows half the pleasures the seasons bring,
 If he hath not his share of toil!
 So,—sing, brothers! etc. (Cornwall, cited in Hollis, 1973: 53)³

Despite such excursions into thinly veiled political comment on the virtues of accepting one's station with grace and serenity, comforted by the 'insight' that toil is the lot of (all) men, the content of the *Libraries*, the *Penny Magazine*, and the *Penny Cyclopaedia* was diversionary rather than explicitly political in nature; an exercise in covert rather than overt strategy. This material was attacked from all sides: by Tories, middle class radicals, and the working class press itself; and from 1830 the SDUK published in addition to its program of safe literature a number of works steeped in the political economy of the bourgeoisie (See, for example, Simon, 1960: 160–161, and Hollis, 1973: 334–335, for reference to Tory and middle class attacks).

While there is not the space to develop the theme in depth here, it is worth noting that the attempt by the SDUK to diffuse political economy as useful knowledge among working class readers involved a shift to an overtly hegemonic strategy. Such publications sought to shape the consciousness of working class folk in accordance with an ideology grounded in middle class interests and that directly contradicted the interests of workers themselves. Quite simply, there is no other way in which to understand Charles Knight's *Results of Machinery*, Brougham's arguments on wages, consumption levels and employment, presented in the *Companion to the Newspaper*, or the SDUK's *Short Address to Workmen on Combinations to Raise Wages*—all of which insisted that attempts by workers to force higher wages through combined activity were futile. According to these arguments, the inexorable operation of supply and demand meant that wages must inevitably be set by market forces. The economy simply could not sustain wages above the level fixed by the labor market. The real choices facing laborers were, according to SDUK theory, strictly limited. They must either accept the fortunes (and misfortunes) of the labor market and learn to live within them, or escape by becoming themselves capitalists. Those laborers who did not choose to become capitalists could, at best, hope to make the most of their earnings (whilst employed, that is) by practising thrift and sound economic management. And so, says the *Short Address to Workmen*,

When labour offered for sale is plentiful its price [i.e., wages] will be low, when it is scarce it will be high. This is a law of nature against which it is vain to contend"; only "forbearance, management, and economy" could alleviate the inevitable lot of human life, as revealed in the iron law of wages. Active protest was out of place. "Your complaints [labourers were informed] are sometimes exaggerated and were they better informed than they are, you would not have chosen [protest and combination as] the remedy to remove them. (Simon, 1960: 162)

The working class press was severe in its treatment both of overt and covert approaches to ideological domination by such organizations as the SPCK and the SDUK. In penetrating and revealing these strategies, working class writers exposed attempts on behalf of opposing class interests to foist an improper literacy onto workers. In the same process by developing their critiques they helped positively to enhance proper literacy among their readers. Against the political economy of the SDUK, such working class writers as William Longson, Bronterre O'Brien, William Carpenter, and numerous economic commentators for the *Poor Man's Guardian*, produced compelling yet entirely accessible rebuttals (see Hollis, 1973: 64–69). Some of the most scathing comment, however, was reserved for the exponents of diversion—for those who would neutralize workers' critical potential by channeling their reading energies into safe literature and, thereby, turn hard-won skills against the interests of those who had managed to acquire them.

The SPCK was denounced for aiming “to prop up the ‘present cannibal order of things’ by reconciling the poor to poverty.” O'Brien referred to those who circulated the Society's tracts as “canting vagabonds” with “hypocritical pretensions to religion,” lamenting that the hold they had over weak minds made it even “more difficult to break through their slimy meshes” than to overcome the persuasive powers of the stamped press (cited in Hollis, 1973: 144). In a more moderate vein, Cobbett exposed the SPCK as hoping to prevent the people from reading and thinking politics.

The working class press similarly denounced “useful knowledge” as patronizing, hypocritical, and hostile to the people's interests. The kind of knowledge truly required by the people—that is, the content of a proper literacy—had nothing to do with the number of humps on the back of a dromedary, the number of transmigrations in the life of a caterpillar from chrysalis to butterfly, or with how a kangaroo jumps. It had, instead, to do with their rights as citizens; with why the class that actually produced wealth was the most degraded, while that which produced nothing was elevated; with why working people were denied a vote and any say whatsoever in legislation, while the “idle and mischievous” exercised complete power in political and legal matters; with why those whose acts revealed that they were really without religious conviction had control of the nation's religion (Hollis, 1970: 20–21).

Critiques published in the working class press of the literacy fostered by the SCPK and the SDUK came from rank and file readers as well as from the editors and other established writers. Hollis cites a laborer's assessment (published in the *Poor Man's Guardian*) of the ‘useful knowledge’ purveyed by the *Penny Magazine*.

Useful knowledge, indeed, would that be to those who live idly on our skill and industry, which would cajole us into an apathetic resignation to their iron sway, or induce us to waste the energy and skill of man for them all day, and seek re-

laxation of an evening in the puerile stories or recreations of childhood . . . This first number of their *Penny Magazine*, insinuates that poor men are not qualified to understand the measures of government. ‘Every man is deeply interested in all the questions of government. Every man, however, may not be qualified to understand them’. My fellow-countrymen, I beseech you now do be modest, do be very diffident,—Pray do distrust the evidence of your reasons—submit implicitly to the *dicta* of your betters! (Cited in Hollis, 1970: 143–144)

This writer shows a profound understanding of the distinction between proper and improper literacy; of reading and writing that promises enhanced control over and genuine understanding of one’s daily life, and that which effectively negates them in the interests of others. The self-conscious aim of those who produced the working class press was to advance proper literacy among their readers. Nowhere is this expressed more clearly and directly than by O’Brien.

Some simpletons talk of knowledge as rendering the working classes more obedient, more dutiful—better servants, better subjects, and so on, which means making them more subservient slaves, and more conducive to the wealth and gratification of idlers of all description. But such knowledge is trash; the only knowledge which is of any service to the working people is that which makes them more dissatisfied, and makes them worse slaves. This is the knowledge we shall give them . . . (cited in Hollis, 1970: 20)

The battle for the working class press between 1816 and 1836 provides an excellent illustration of distinct and competing literacies emerging as social constructions within the context of struggle between competing interest groups. The polarized conceptions of Charles Knight and Bronterre O’Brien capture this in microcosm. From a working-class standpoint, the form of literacy promoted on behalf of ruling class interests for worker consumption must be adjudged *improper*—and, in fact, was assessed as such by the working class press. Against this hegemonic literacy the working class press battled to create and transmit a proper literacy: a truly counter-hegemonic form which would focus workers’ attention upon those structured inequalities of power and control within economic, political, and social life, that were the *real* causes of their condition.

Endnotes

1. An especially interesting development was apparent in the growth of secular Sunday schools, where a major concern was to free working people from the ideological influence of the church. This influence was seen by many working class leaders as “the chief means whereby the people were held back from action.” The reform groups established in Royton maintained that there was no hope of a more liberal form of government while priests were able to awe the people with fears of being damned to eternity. Anti-religious literature and discussion was a feature of reform activity in Lancashire. This concern with undermining the unwanted ideological influence of religion extended to promoting a proper literacy among working-class children as well

as adults. Lancashire reformers “endeavoured to replace the religious indoctrination of children with a rational education in the Sunday schools they promoted, as part of the union movement for parliamentary reform from 1817 onwards” (Simon, 1960: 187). The underlying assumption was that instruction in an ambiguous, doubtful, and contradictory religion cramped children’s understandings, and baffled their judgments. It made for uncritical, irrational, and distorted thought. When people were trained to think rationally, and to distinguish critically between right and wrong, it would be impossible for any king or government to tyrannize over them and deny them their rights (Simon, 1960: 187-188).

2. It is, for example, debatable how far Cobbett’s concern for political reform was grounded in authentic commitment to working-class interests. In the *Address to Journeymen and Labourers*, for instance, we find him recommending the principle that the right to vote be extended only to those who pay direct—as opposed to indirect—taxes. This would have denied the vote to vast numbers of working people. In acknowledging this, the best Cobbett offers is the assumption that a reformed government could very easily hit upon an optimally just arrangement (compare Cole and Cole 1944: 214–215). The relationship between journalism and authentic commitment to working class interests is much less ambiguous in Hetherington and *The Poor Man’s Guardian* and later, in the Chartist press.
3. By Barry Cornwall, *Penny Magazine*, 7 July 1932, cited in Hollis (1973: 53). See the reply, “The weaver’s song not by Barry Cornwall,” *Poor Man’s Guardian*. 3 November 1832, cited in Hollis (1973: 54).

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