

But if Sunday was the occasion to demonstrate self-respect and to shut out for a day the pressures of poverty, Monday meant an abrupt return to reality. For Monday meant, not only the return of work, but also the day when the rent had to be paid. According to Paterson again:

On Monday morning a group of women, with bundles tied in old newspapers, will be seen outside the pawnshop, waiting for the doors to open at 9 am; for this is a common weekly practice, and not the urgent measure of exceptional distress. It is true that on next Saturday night the suit will in all probability be redeemed, but the suit by then will have cost a guinea, instead of a pound, and every time it is pawned in future will add a shilling to the price.⁵⁴

It is clear from these and other accounts that the priorities of expenditure among the poor bore little relation to the ambitions set before them by advocates of thrift and self-help. Joining a friendly society to insure against sickness, medical expenses, unemployment or old age, apart from being enormously expensive for those whose incomes were low or irregular, was too abstract and intangible for families whose whole efforts were concentrated on getting through the week ahead without being beset by disaster. In this respect, the failure of the COS campaign had been total. Even in the East End, where the Society enjoyed the co-operation of local Poor Law officials, Booth remarked: 'Its methods are disliked and its theories attacked... as regards this particular district, the reformed system of poor law administration and the attempted guidance of charity are, like the efforts of the missions somewhat disappointing.'⁵⁵

Finally, it is clear that although the popular use of leisure time had changed dramatically in the course of the century, the direction of change had not been of a kind to give much encouragement to religious and moral reformers. Certainly, the cruel animal sports of the eighteenth century had declined substantially. In 1869 James Greenwood wrote: 'In the present enlightened age we do not fight cocks and "shy" at hens tied to a stake at the Shrove Tuesday fair; neither do we fight dogs, or pit those sagacious creatures to fight bulls.'⁵⁶ By

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁵ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 2, 52.

⁵⁶ James Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London* (1869), 378.

the end of the century, rat-baiting and bird singing competitions, at the height of their popularity when Mayhew conducted his investigations, had also virtually disappeared.⁵⁷ They had given way to the gentler passions for racing pigeons and caged linnets. It is also true that Saturday half holidays established in most trades in the late 1860s and early 1870s had led to an enormous increase in the number of railway excursions to the country and the seaside. But bank holidays, according to clergymen in the 1890s were a great 'curse'.⁵⁸ The old association of holidays with betting, drinking and extravagant expenditure remained strong. Derby Day was the major festive event in the calendar of the London poor. Disapproving observers like Maurice Davies and James Greenwood found the roads to Epsom crammed with vans, carts and pedestrians making their way to races where all the 'vices' of the fairground flourished with undiminished vigour.⁵⁹ 200,000 people were said to congregate on Hampstead Heath on a fine Easter or a Whitsun, while similarly vast numbers made for Crystal Palace or the Welsh Harp on August bank holidays.⁶⁰

One of the main reasons why fairs and races provoked middle-class disapproval was their association with betting and gambling. Far from decreasing in the second half of the nineteenth century, these pastimes increased enormously. The trend was already apparent at the end of the 1860s. 'There can be no doubt', wrote Greenwood in 1869, 'that the vice of gambling is on the increase amongst the English working classes... twenty years ago there were but 3 or 4 sporting newspapers published in London; now there are more than a

⁵⁷ At the time when Mayhew was writing, rat-baiting was a major popular sport. He estimated that there were 70 regular pits attached to pubs in London. See Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 2, 56. By the time Greenwood was writing, the sport appears to have become more furtive. See Greenwood, *The Wilds of London* (1874), 271-9. There is no mention of it in the Booth Survey. Dog-fighting and cock-fighting had become illicit sports confined to a minority of sporting aristocrats by the 1850s. See Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 2, 57; and 'One of the Old Brigade', in his *London in the Sixties* (1898), 91. Bird singing contests carried on longer. They are mentioned in Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 1, 322. But the peak of their popularity was undoubtedly thirty or forty years earlier.

⁵⁸ Booth, *Life and Labour*, final vol., 51.

⁵⁹ Rev. C. M. Davies, *Mystic London* (1875), 141-9; Greenwood, *Wilds*, 318-25.

⁶⁰ James Greenwood, *Low Life Deeply* (1876), 176; see also Maurice Davies' description of Fairlop Fair in east London, Davies, *Mystic London*, 123-4.

dozen.⁶¹ According to Arthur Sherwell, by the beginning of the 1890s, touting was endemic in the craft trades of the West End and sporting papers universal in tailors' workshops.⁶² The House of Lords Select Committee on Betting in 1902 concluded that, 'even where due allowance has been made, both for the increase in the population of towns and the rise in wages, betting is undoubtedly more widespread and general than it used to be'.⁶³ The Booth survey recorded the same impression. 'Betting', the police informed Booth, 'is increasing out of all proportion to other forms of vice', and 'gambling', the clergy told him, 'presses drink hard as the greatest evil of the day'.⁶⁴ The situation was aptly summed up in one account of model dwellings where the behaviour of inhabitants was supposed to be subject to greater moral scrutiny than elsewhere: in south London, the boy brought up in model dwellings: 'while yet a schoolboy... played pitch and toss with secret exuberance on the stairs of his buildings; now that he is older, a group of his mates may entice him to the flat roof of the model buildings some early Sunday morning, and there under the sky, 150 feet above the river, a game of "banker" will be screened from the notice of police and parent'.⁶⁵

The prevalence of these 'unimproving' recreations in the daytime was matched by the enormous popularity of the music-hall at night. Despite the repeated claims made for its educational value by its promoters, the music-hall like the fairs and the races, was subject to constant evangelical disapproval.⁶⁶ Music-halls began as extensions to public houses and the sale of drink remained the mainstay of their profits.⁶⁷ Added to this there were frequent allegations — often

⁶¹ Greenwood, *Steen Curtes*, 377.

⁶² Arthur Sherwell, *Life in West London* (1894), 126.

⁶³ Report of Select Committee of House of Lords on Betting, PP 1902. V, p.v.

⁶⁴ Booth, *Life and Labour*, final vol., 57, 58.

⁶⁵ Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, 170.

⁶⁶ For contemporary defences of music-hall, see the deposition handed in by Frederick Stanley, on behalf of the London Music Hall Proprietors' Association to the Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations, PP 1866, xvi, appendix 3 (SC 1866); see also John Hollingshead, *Miscellaneous, Stories and Essays*, 3 vols. (1874), III, 254; and the dramatic critic Clement Scott's tribute to Charles Morton, 'the father of the halls', on his eightieth birthday, Harold Scott, *The Early Doors* (1946), 136-7.

⁶⁷ Ewing Ritchie, *Days and Nights in London* (1880), 44-5; Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians*, 325.

well-founded — that the halls were used by prostitutes to pick up clients. Yet, despite the efforts of campaigners for temperance, moral purity or a more intelligent use of leisure time, not to mention determined attempts by theatre managers to crush a dangerous rival, the number of music-halls increased dramatically between 1850 and 1900.⁶⁸ The first music-hall was built as an extension to the Canterbury Arms, Lambeth, by the publican, Charles Morton, in 1849 and housed 100 people. Its success was immediate and by 1856 it had both been enlarged to hold 700 and then rebuilt to hold 1,500. By 1866, there were twenty-three halls in addition to innumerable pub rooms where music-hall entertainment was held.⁶⁹ In the 1870s the number of halls continued to increase at a prodigious rate even though two hundred halls were closed after strict fire precautions had been imposed in 1878.⁷⁰ In the 1880s it was estimated that there were five hundred halls in London, and at the beginning of the 1890s it was calculated that the thirty-five largest halls alone were catering for an average audience of 45,000 nightly.⁷¹

Although music-hall entertainment spread to the provinces, it began and remained a characteristically London creation. According to a Parliamentary Commission in 1892, 'the large collection of theatres and music halls gathered together, the amount of capital used in the enterprise, the great number of persons, directly and indirectly provided with employment, the multitudes of all classes of the people who attend theatres and music halls of London, find no other parallel in any other part of the country'.⁷² Apart from the central palaces, which particularly from the 1880s onwards began to attract sporting aristocrats, military officers, students, clerks and tourists, the

⁶⁸ For the early development of music-hall in London, see appendix to 1866 Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations; Scott, *Early Doors*; C. D. Stuart & A. J. Park, *The Variety Stage* (1895).

⁶⁹ Select Committee on Theatres and Places of Entertainment, PP 1892, xviii, appendix 15. (Henceforth SC 1892.)

⁷⁰ D. Farson, *Maria Lloyd and Music Hall* (1972), 19.

⁷¹ SC 1892. The estimation of 500 halls is in Colin MacInnes, *Sweet Saturday Night* (1967), 13; the most sensitive evocation of music-hall culture to have appeared so far. It is difficult to make a precise estimate since so many of the smaller music-halls were simply extensions to pubs. For an exhaustive catalogue of all premises known to have been used as music-halls see Diana Howard, *London Theatres and Music Halls 1850-1950* (1970).

⁷² SC 1892, iv.

music-hall was predominantly working-class, in the character of its audience, in the origins of its performers and in the content of its songs and sketches. According to Ewing Ritchie who visited the Canterbury Arms in the later 1850s:

evidently the majority present are respectable mechanics, or small tradesmen with their wives and daughters and sweethearts there. Now and then you see a midshipman, or a few fast clerks and warehouse men... and here as elsewhere, we see a few of the class of unfortunates whose staring eyes would fain extort an admiration which their persons do not justify. Everyone is smoking and everyone has a glass before him; but the class that come here are economical, and chiefly confine themselves to pipes and porter.⁷³

The Canterbury, however, was one of the more exclusive music-halls. At the time of Ritchie's account, it cost sixpence admission to the pit and ninepence admission to the gallery. Smaller and cheaper halls attracted a poorer audience. Their character was described by A. J. Munby in 1868:

about 10 o'clock, I observed just opposite the Shoreditch Station, a brilliantly lighted entrance to a 'Temperance Music Hall'. The admission was only *one penny*; and I went in and found myself in the pit of a small and very dingy theatre, with a narrow stage. The pit was crowded with people of the lowest class; chiefly coster girls and lads, in their working clothes. There was no drinking or smoking as in the grander music halls; both indeed were forbidden. Rough as they looked the audience was quiet and well behaved; and two policemen kept strict order.⁷⁴

The prohibition on drinking and smoking was exceptional, but there were countless small halls of this general character in working-class suburbs between the 1860s and the 1890s. In general the music-hall appealed to all sectors of the working class from the casual labourer to the highly-paid artisan. Its importance as a social and cultural institution in proletarian districts was second only to that of the pub. As one working man told the 1892 Committee: 'The music halls in the East End and South East of London are considered the great entertainment of the working man and his family.'⁷⁵ Of its enormous popularity there can be no doubt. Even in 1924,

thirty years after the music-hall's heyday, 100,000 people turned out to attend the funeral of Marie Lloyd.⁷⁶

From this preliminary discussion of working-class spending habits and leisure-time activity, it is clear that by the beginning of the twentieth century a new working-class culture had emerged in London. Many of its institutions dated back to the middle of the century, but its general shape had first become visible in the 1870s and dominant in the 1890s. By the time Booth conducted his survey of 'religious influences', its general components had already become set in a distinctive mould. This culture was clearly distinguished from the culture of the middle class and had remained largely impervious to middle-class attempts to dictate its character or direction. Its dominant cultural institutions were not the school, the evening class, the library, the friendly society, the church or the chapel, but the pub, the sporting paper, the race-course and the music-hall. Booth's 'religious influences' series was compiled from information provided by clergymen, school board and Poor Law officials, vestrymen, policemen and charity organizers. It could be read as one interim-able confession of impotence and defeat. But, significantly, Booth did not draw a pessimistic conclusion from his enquiries. There is an inescapable tone of assurance, even of complacency, running through his final volumes – in marked contrast to the anxiety which coloured his first investigations. This difference in tone could not and was not attributed by him to any substantial decrease in poverty and overcrowding. What principally impressed him was the growing stability and orderliness of London working-class society. Writing of the poorest streets of Whitechapel he remarked, 'as poor as ever, but old rookeries destroyed, black patches cleared away, thieves and prostitutes gone, a marvellous change for the better'.⁷⁷ 'The police', he observed, 'have far less trouble in maintaining order.'⁷⁸ Describing the elementary schools in the East End, he conceded that the hopes of educationalists had not been fulfilled and that 'the accomplishments of the 4th standard may be all forgotten, so that reading becomes

⁷³ Ewing Ritchie, *The Night Side of London* (1858), 70.

⁷⁴ Derek Hudson, *Munby, Man of Two Worlds* (1972), 255.

⁷⁵ SC 1892, q. 5171.

⁷⁶ MacInnes, *Sweet Saturday Night*, 24.

⁷⁷ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 2, 61.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

difficult and writing a lost art'. 'But', he went on, 'something still remains. Habits of cleanliness and order have been formed; a higher standard of dress and decency have been attained, and this reacts upon the homes.'⁷⁹ Or again in Southwark, he reported that, compared with the situation in 1880, boys were 'much more docile; insubordination, then endemic now almost unknown ... all this, the result of discipline and control at school, reacts beneficially on the home'.⁸⁰ Describing the local music-halls, he admitted their vulgarity and unimproving tone, but observed, 'the audiences are prevalently youthful. They seek amusement and are easily pleased. No encouragement to vice can be attributed to these local music halls.'⁸¹ The general working-class objection to church-going, as Booth described it, stemmed from the class associations of religion. But secularism had sharply declined since the 1880s and the prevailing attitude had changed from hostility to good-natured indifference. In Woolwich it was apparently still 'bad form ... even to nod to a parson in the street'.⁸² But this was exceptional. In London as a whole the working class were 'more friendly, more tolerant perhaps of religious pretensions'. The final impression conveyed by the Booth survey was of a working-class culture which was both impermeable to outsiders, and yet predominantly conservative in character: a culture in which the central focus was not 'trade unions and friendly societies, cooperative effort, temperance propaganda and politics (including socialism)', but 'pleasure, amusement, hospitality and sport'.⁸³

This impression conveyed by Booth is confirmed by other sources. The secularist, republican and internationalist culture which had been such a characteristic feature of the artisan tradition in the first three-quarters of the century had all but died out by 1900. The Metropolitan Radical Federation, an independent political force well to the left of official liberalism in the 1880s, had degenerated into a canvassing network for Liberal MPs in the early 1890s and had steadily lost members.

The *Star* which had been launched in a wave of radical enthusiasm in 1888, and had reached an unprecedented daily circulation of 279,000 in 1889, had lost both circulation and political influence by 1895. The attempt by *Reynold's News* to revive a radical campaign between 1900 and 1902 proved a total failure.⁸⁴ The secularist movement which had possessed thirty branches in London in the mid-1880s had almost disappeared by the late 1890s. Working-class internationalism, still a significant force in the 1860s and early 1870s, had similarly declined by 1900.⁸⁵ Even in the 1880s, radical artisans had frequently and exhaustively debated the Eastern Question, Irish coercion and British rule in India. But in 1900, far from standing out against the Mafeking celebrations, the radical working men's clubs joined in the general euphoria. 'The relief of Mafeking has caused great enthusiasm in the club during the last few days', wrote a correspondent from the Paddington Radical Club, 'when I ventured to point out to one member that the cost of the present war would have put old age pensions on a sound basis, the answer I received was "to Hades with Old Age Pensions"'.⁸⁶

These workmen's clubs had been the focal point of artisans' radicalism in the 1870s and 1880s. But a declining interest in politics was noted by radical clubmen from the early 1890s. Its place was usurped by an increasing demand for entertainment. Entertainment, in the form of amateur dramatics, dances and sing-songs had always formed an intrinsic part of the weekly routine of these clubs – even in the mid-1880s when lectures, political debates and demonstrations had occupied the predominant place in club activity. But in the 1890s, as the pioneering research of John Taylor reveals, the political and educational side of club life faded. Entertainment became the dominant attraction and the balance of power within the clubs shifted from the political council to the entertainments committee. According to the Club Journal, it was already

⁸⁴ P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour, the Struggle for London 1885-1914* (1967), 179.

⁸⁵ For discussions of London working-class international interests in the 1860s and early 1870s, see Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists* (1965); H. Collins and C. Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement* (1965); Stan Shipley, 'Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London', *History Workshop Pamphlets*, 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸⁰ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 4, 202.

⁸¹ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 4, 'Social Influences', 53.

⁸² Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 5, 121.

⁸³ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 7, 425.

known in 1891 that political 'lecturers have a poor chance of getting an audience, no matter how clever or gifted they may be, while the comic singer and the sketch artiste, however lacking in real ability, can always draw a hall full'.⁸⁷ Furthermore, it was always entertainment of the lightest kind. Formerly Shakespeare plays and ballad singing had been popular items of a social evening. Now music-hall entertainment was all that was demanded. According to a report of a social in one south London club: 'A gentleman so far forgot himself as to sing two Ballads at the South Bermondsey Club the other evening, and was hissed by the younger people present, who left the hall in disgust. This is the result of giving the younger people "Hi-ti" and "Get Yer 'Air Cut", and pandering to a vitiated taste.'⁸⁸

It is sometimes implied that the decline of radicalism was simply the result of its displacement by socialism. But this cannot be the whole explanation. For socialism, when distinguished from a vague predisposition towards collectivism or the defence of trade union rights, remained a peripheral force in London between the 1890s and 1914. Neither the SDF nor its successor, the BSP (British Socialist Party), ever possessed more than 3,000 members in a population of 6½ million (1900) – which compares unfavourably with the 30,000 members reputed to have belonged to the London Republican Clubs in 1871.⁸⁹ The strength it did possess was mainly concentrated in the new outlying working-class areas like West Hammersmith and Poplar. Areas where trade union or labour candidates could win elections – Deptford, Battersea and Woolwich – were similarly situated on the outskirts.⁹⁰ The inner working-class area, the old home of radical working-class activity, remained largely unresponsive to socialist influence.

⁸⁷ Cited in Taylor, 'From Self-Help to Glamour', 56; for a discussion of this theme see 57–70.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸⁹ For membership of London socialist groups, see P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, 307; for the numbers engaged in republicanism, see R. Harrison, *Beyers the Socialists*, 233. But this estimate was probably an exaggeration.

⁹⁰ For accounts of working-class politics in West Ham, see Leon Fink, 'Socialism in One Borough: West Ham Politics and Political Culture 1898–1900' (1972 unpublished); for Hammersmith, see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955); for Woolwich, see P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, 250–63; for Battersea, see Price, *Imperial War*, 158–70.

It is also sometimes implied that the socialist movement carried over the most positive aspects of the old artisan tradition. It is true that the first socialist groups began as a direct extension of artisan radicalism. But by the Edwardian period, the decay of these distinctively metropolitan traditions was as evident within the socialist movement as outside it. In 1887, the year of Victoria's Golden Jubilee, radical and socialist clubs had protested vigorously against public money being spent to celebrate '50 years of royal funkism'.⁹¹ But in 1902, at the time of Edward VII's coronation, the SDF sent a loyal address, specifically denying any intention to replace the monarchy by a republic.⁹² Secularist attitudes also appear to have declined within the socialist groups. By the Edwardian period, two SDF branches were meeting in churches, another branch had established a labour church and the prevalent tone of the branches had become suffused with a vague but intense religiosity more akin to the middle-class ethical movement than to the tradition of Paine, Carlile and Bradlaugh.⁹³ Finally, the anti-jingoist, anti-imperialist character of artisan radicalism was also to a considerable extent modified within the SDF. This has generally been attributed to the peculiarities of Hyndman and his associates. But the fact that Hyndman could generally determine SDF policy on international issues without effective challenge is an indication that the bulk of the London membership either accepted his positions or considered such issues to be of subordinate importance. When at last in 1910 Hyndmanite views on imperialism were decisively challenged, the revolt in London was led by Russian and Jewish political refugees.

The decay of indigenous metropolitan political traditions and the marginal appeal of socialism in the late Victorian and Edwardian period were accompanied by the stagnation of London trade unionism.⁹⁴ In the years between 1800 and 1820, London had been the greatest stronghold of trade unionism in the country. Even in the 1850s and 1860s, the new

⁹¹ Taylor, 'From Self-Help to Glamour', 49.

⁹² Cited in Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement*, 19.

⁹³ See P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, 209–10.

⁹⁴ For the numerical strength of London trade unionism, see Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 2, vol. 5, 136–82; S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (1920 edn), 423–7; P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, 39–67.

model, the Nine Hours' movement and the trades council were largely London creations. But in the third quarter of the century, London trade unionism declined rapidly both in strength and imagination, and by the 1880s only possessed two unions (the engineers and the compositors) with more than 6,000 members. The great upsurge of new unionism of 1889-91 temporarily reversed this situation. The membership of the new unskilled unions soared and the membership of all unions substantially increased. The London Trades' Council was revitalized after years of inactivity and for a moment it looked as if London could once again become a bastion of trade union strength. But the recovery was not sustained. The return of depression in 1892, the employers' counter-offensive particularly against unskilled trade unionism, disagreement between unions and a series of badly-planned strikes once again crippled London trade unions. The London Trades' Council relapsed once more into passivity and did not even make any arrangements to assist the 1897 engineering strike. The unskilled unions were severely hit. The Dockers' Union, for instance, which had possessed 20,000 members in 1890, had been reduced to 1,000 in 1900; it only survived the bleak years up to 1910 through the strength of its provincial branches. The Gasworkers' Union held on to its London membership more successfully and in 1900 still possessed 15,000 members; but, by 1909, it too had been reduced to 4,000 members. Compared with other industrial regions, London had once more become strikingly weak. In 1897 trade unionists composed 3.5 per cent of the population of London compared with 8 per cent in Lancashire and 11 per cent in the north-east. Furthermore, despite the upheavals of new unionism, the bulk of London unions remained parochial and exclusive. Of the 250 London unions listed in 1897, 75 were purely metropolitan, and only 35 had memberships of more than 1,000. In the cabinet-making trade alone, there were twenty-three competing unions. As Ernest Aves concluded at that time: 'metropolitan conditions militate against trade unionism, just as they do against other democratic institutions that depend largely for their vitality on the maintenance of intimate personal relationship between their members'.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Cited in Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 2, vol. 5, 175.

In a period in which working-class politics was in retreat and trade unionism remained stagnant, it is not surprising to find that large numbers of the working class and the poor, when they expressed any political preferences, were motivated by sectional rather than class interests. Thus watch-makers and sugar refiners supported the Conservatives because they thought tariff reform would arrest the decline of their trades. Lightermen supported them because they promised to defend their traditional corporate privileges; munitions workers and engineers in the Arsenal, because they believed that an aggressive foreign policy would mean fuller employment and higher wages; brewery workers, because a Liberal government would mean the threat of temperance legislation; costers and cabmen, because they disliked the restrictions imposed on them by the Progressive majority on the London County Council (LCC); dockers and unskilled workers in the East End, because they thought that restrictions on foreign immigration would ease pressure on housing and employment.

Psephologists also tell us that workers in small and medium-sized enterprises were more likely to support the Conservatives.⁹⁶ In the inner London region, the vast majority of enterprises were small; firms employing more than 500 men were exceptional. Thus in the craft workshops of the West End, which involved personal dealings with the rich, conservatism could be the result of 'Admiration for the high-ups, but a contempt for the half-way-ups'.⁹⁷ Amongst the unskilled and semi-skilled, where the labour market was almost always over-filled, the retention of regular employment in small firms often depended on retaining the patronage of the employer or the foreman. To step out of line was to invite dismissal. Independent working-class politics was unlikely to result. In the new outlying areas, where the larger factories and gas works were mostly situated and enterprises tended to be more impersonal, the chances of recruiting trade unionists or socialists were better. But everywhere in the London region, except in years of good trade, sheer poverty and constant anxiety about employment were the overriding

⁹⁶ See Pelling, *Social Geography*, 422. Workers in very small enterprises (1-20) inclined towards radicalism.

⁹⁷ See Willis, *Jubilee Road*, 105-6.

concerns of the unskilled and the semi-skilled.⁹⁸ Except for home rule or Catholic education in the case of the Irish, larger political issues were abstract and remote. The result in the riverside districts of South London was described by Paterson:

Politics stir them very little, even at the time of election. Very many have no vote, because they are always moving; the majority of the more settled do not attend the party meetings, but profess great indifference. They have but the vaguest notion of the issues before the country, or the meaning of party catchwords. Old scandals sink deep and live for ever; anything that affects the reputation of the candidate is likely to prove a more potent influence than the gravest flaw in his cause.⁹⁹

But it would be wrong to assume that this sort of political apathy among the unskilled and the poor was simply in the nature of things, or to imagine their outlook can adequately be deduced from voting figures in elections. The evidence suggests that when economic circumstances promised any chance of success, as happened in 1854, 1872, 1889 or 1911, they did strike and join unions. There is also evidence that considerable numbers of the poor had identified with the Chartist cause in the belief that Chartism would relieve their poverty and end their oppression. At the very least they imagined it would mean the end of the daily oppression of the police and the Poor Law. Since most of them could not write, and few were interested in recording their opinions, it is not easy to reconstruct their attitudes. But their general feelings about Chartism were probably accurately expressed by one street ballad of the 1840s:

And when that the Charter, Old England has got,
We'll have stunning good beer at three half pence a pot:
A loaf for a penny, a pig for a crown
And gunpowder tea at 5 farthings a pound:
Instead of red herrings, we'll live on fat geese,¹⁰⁰
And lots of young women at two pence a piece.¹⁰⁰

It is true that Mayhew considered the unskilled as 'unpolitical as footmen', but it should be remembered that

Mayhew began his investigations when Chartism had already been defeated.¹⁰¹ It is not so certain that he would have come to the same conclusion had he conducted his investigations in 1842 or in the period leading up to 1848.

So far I have argued that from the 1850s a working-class culture gradually established itself which proved virtually impervious to evangelical or utilitarian attempts to determine its character or direction. But it has also been shown that in the latter part of the century, this impermeability no longer reflected any widespread class combativity. For the most prominent developments in working-class life in late Victorian and Edwardian London were the decay of artisan radicalism, the marginal impact of socialism, the largely passive acceptance of imperialism and the throne, and the growing usurpation of political and educational interests by a way of life centred round the pub, the race-course and the music-hall. In sum, its impermeability to the classes above it was no longer threatening or subversive, but conservative and defensive. Two questions remain to be asked: firstly, what factors had combined to produce a culture of this kind? And, secondly, what were the central assumptions and attitudes embedded within this culture?

Undoubtedly, the primary cause was the undermining of the distinctiveness and cohesion of the old artisan culture in London. In the period between 1790 and 1850 it was this artisan class which had provided political leadership to the unskilled and the poor. But in the second half of the century, it became increasingly defensive and concerned to protect itself from below as much as from above. In 1889, far from welcoming the opportunity to organize the unskilled, its most prominent spokesmen and its Trades' Council offered no constructive assistance and reacted more often with alarm than with enthusiasm to the upsurge of new unionism.

In the course of the nineteenth century, this artisan culture based upon traditional London trades was undermined by a variety of disintegrating tendencies. A few trades managed to maintain their traditions intact. The strongly unionized wet-

⁹⁸ Reasons for the saturation of the London labour market are discussed in Steedman Jones, *Outcast London*, Part 1.

⁹⁹ Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, 215.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Ashton, *Modern Street Ballads*, 396.

¹⁰¹ Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 3, 233; some evidence of the participation of the unskilled in Chartist agitation is provided in Iorwerth Prothero, 'Chartism in London', *Past and Present*, 44 (August, 1969), 90.

coopers and silk-hatters, for instance, maintained control over apprenticeship and the work process and continued to express a strong sense of craft solidarity reinforced by traditional rituals of communal drinking and conviviality.¹⁰² But these trades were small and exceptional. The larger trades either declined in the face of provincial competition or else were broken up through the subdivision of the work process into separate semi-skilled tasks. Silk-weaving, ship-building, watch-making and leather manufacture were examples of the first tendency; the clothing, footwear and furniture trades examples of the second. It was artisans in the latter trades who had formed the backbone of London Chartism.¹⁰³ But even at that time, Mayhew had estimated that only one-tenth of these trades were made up of 'honourable men' (that is, members of trade societies, properly apprenticed, working for accepted rates and controlling the speed, quality and location of work). In the second half of the century, these honourable men were increasingly threatened on the one hand by home work and its tendency towards 'sweating', and on the other by the gradual invasion of the bespoke sector by high-class ready-made goods produced in provincial factories. Visiting the West End clothing and shoe-making workshops in the 1880s, Beatrice Potter and David Schloss still found that the men were republicans or socialists and that traditional customs and rituals of conviviality continued in full force.¹⁰⁴ But these craftsmen now constituted a minute proportion of the trade. They were not threatened by East End slop-workers, because they served a luxury market, but they could not maintain their traditional position in the face of competition from the ready-made sector. In the 1890s, their position rapidly declined. A strike of shoe-making unions in 1890 successfully outlawed home work, but this only accelerated the removal of the trade to Northampton. The work of bespoke tailors and cabinet-makers also became markedly irregular. Skilled artisans could still earn good wages in the ready-made sectors of these

trades. But the conditions which had sustained a strong political culture no longer existed. The skilled workshop in which the trade society controlled the work process, and in which artisans had taken turns in reading aloud from Paine or Owen, had been replaced either by home work or else by the warehouse where the skilled operative was surrounded by semi-skilled 'greeners' and unskilled slop-hands.

The traditional culture of all London artisans had been work-centred. In the first half of the nineteenth century, most London trades worked a twelve-hour day, six days a week, with a daily break of two hours for meals.¹⁰⁵ Workers generally lived in the immediate vicinity of their work. Political discussion, drinking and conviviality took place either at the workplace itself or at a local pub, which generally served as a house of call and a centre of union organization. Trade feasts, carnivals and outings were normal. Intermarriage, a hereditary tendency in apprenticeship and a distinctive language and dress all reinforced trade solidarity; even broad political movements like Chartism were to some extent organized on a trade basis.¹⁰⁶ If this was the 'republic of artisans', it was a very masculine republic. Homes were cramped and uncomfortable; where they were not the place of work, they were little more than places to sleep and eat in. Even if some artisans discussed politics with their wives, women were excluded *de facto* from the focal institutions of this culture.

In the second half of the century, this work-centred culture began to yield to a culture oriented towards the family and the home. By the mid-1870s, weekly hours of work had been substantially reduced in most skilled trades. A 54–56½-hour week, or a nine-hour day and a Saturday half holiday became general. The growth of sporting interests, seaside excursions, working men's clubs and music-halls from about this time is therefore not accidental. In London, however, this increase in leisure time should be seen in connection with another tendency – the growing geographical separation between home and workplace. As early as 1836, the Owenites had

¹⁰² On these trades see Willis, *Jubilee Road*, 88–100 (on the hatters); Bob Gilding, 'The Journeyman Coopers of East London, Workers' Control in an Old London Trade', *History Workshop Pamphlets*, 4.

¹⁰³ See Prohero, 'Chartism in London', 103–5.

¹⁰⁴ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 1, vol. 4, 141.

¹⁰⁵ On working hours see M. A. Bienefeld, *Working Hours in British Industry*, An *Economic History* (1972).

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion of this artisan culture, see Prohero, 'Chartism in London'.

complained that organization was difficult 'owing to the distance of the members from each other in this large metropolis'.¹⁰⁷ But the difficulties they faced were insignificant compared with those which lay ahead. From the 1870s, the migration of the skilled working class to the suburbs became a mass phenomenon. While the residential population of the City declined from 75,000 in 1871 to 38,000 in 1891, its daytime population increased from 170,000 in 1866 to 301,000 in 1891.¹⁰⁸ The old skilled artisan centre of Holborn and Finsbury was reduced from 93,423 to 66,781 in the same period. By the time of the Booth survey, the majority of workers commanding skilled wage rates commuted to work on a tram, a workman's train or on foot.¹⁰⁹

This combination of increased leisure time and suburban migration would alone have eroded the strength of the work-centred culture. But it was combined with a number of other factors which further reinforced this process. The fall of prices in the Great Depression period produced a rise in real wages spread over the whole employed population. This increased spending power again strengthened the importance of home and family. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, all wives were expected to work in some capacity.¹¹⁰ By the 1860s, however, Booth found that the wives of workers in skilled trades did not normally work.¹¹¹ Increased earnings were not generally spent in trade drinking customs, but were handed over to the wife who became the decision-maker in all aspects of household expenditure. In many households the husband was only entrusted with pocket money to be spent on fares, beer, tobacco and a trade union or club subscription.¹¹² The effect of this division of labour could be seen in the growing institutionalization of the Sunday suit and the

elaborately furnished front parlour.¹¹³ By the Edwardian period, according to Fred Willis who was apprenticed as a silk-hatter, 'the boy wanted to get into a position that would enable him to keep a wife and family, as it was considered a thoroughly unsatisfactory state of affairs if the wife had to work to help maintain the home. The home was regarded as the sanctuary of married life, and practically all the leisure of the working classes was spent there.'¹¹⁴

This stricter division of roles between man and wife was to an increasing extent generalized throughout the working class by the 1870 Education Act. Once children, particularly girls, were forced into school, it became more difficult for the wife to go out to work and leave household cleaning and the care of the infants to the older children.¹¹⁵ Among all sectors of the working class, the association of mother with home became increasingly axiomatic. Even the poorest women in the riverside districts, once encumbered with children, generally took in home work, garment making, matchbox making, envelope making, etc. Furthermore, as the home increasingly became the wife's sole domain, her control over it appears to have become increasingly absolute. In Southwark and Bermondsey in the 1900s, for instance, it was stated:

The care of the children is delegated to the mother. It is she who chooses the school, and interviews the teacher, the inspector or the magistrate.

The care and management of the house is so much in the mother's hands that it is really more her home than his. The man rarely brings in a friend to sit by the fire and chat. Such social delights are tasted elsewhere. The neighbours who do come in are, as a rule, the wife's friends. It is she who entertains and makes the laws of hospitality. In her hands will rest the management of the furniture, the decision of what shall be pawned or redeemed. If a move is to be made, she will choose the new home and superintend the removal on a small cart or coster barrow. The husband only demands that, as far as possible, his conservatism in small things shall be respected. He would object with some force to the removal of some old photograph that for 15 years has been perched on a chest of drawers. A new wall paper would dismay him, and if he could not find his spare pipe in its

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁰⁸ Anon., *Ten Years' Growth of the City of London* (1891), 14.

¹⁰⁹ See Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 2 (Industry series), *passim*, for commuting habits of skilled workers in various trades, and see Series 2, vol. 5, Ch. III, for summary. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, working-class use of commuter transport increased sharply, but even in the 1890s a high proportion of workers travelled long distances to work on foot. See T. C. Barker and Michael Robbins, *A History of London Transport* (1963), vol. 1, xxvi-xxx.

¹¹⁰ George, *London Life*, 168.

¹¹¹ Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 1, vol. 1, 50-1.

¹¹² Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, 32; Loane, *Englishman's Castle*, 183.

¹¹³ See Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 5, 330; Loane, *The Next Street but One* (1907), 20.

¹¹⁴ Fred Willis, *Peace and Dripping Toast* (1950), 54.

¹¹⁵ The care of the house and of babies fell particularly on girl children. See James Greenwood, *Low Life Depths* (1876), 140.

usual place there would be grave dissatisfaction. If a stranger calls he will leave it to his wife to represent the family interests. Though still maintaining his headship of the family, and asserting it on occasions with ruthless force the wife on ordinary days reigns as ruler of the home.¹¹⁶

Since wives had generally had little contact with the traditional centres of political discussion, the workshop, the house of call, the coffee shop, and since in the second half of the century wives increasingly retreated from productive employment itself except in the form of home work, home and family life tended to become a depoliticized haven. With the shortening of the working week and the separation of living quarters from work-place, home and the family occupied a larger place in the working man's life. Yet, despite its growing ideological significance the home remained a crowded and unrelaxing environment. After the evening meal, therefore, men and to some extent women continued to pass a high proportion of their evenings in the pub. If the man commuted to work, however, the regular pub visited would no longer be the trade pub near the workplace, but the 'local'. At the 'local' he would mingle with men of different trades and occupations. Conversation was less likely to concern trade matters, more likely to reflect common interests, politics to a certain extent, but more often, sport and entertainment. In the past, Ewing Ritchie complained in 1880:

the bar parlour or whatever it might be called, of the public house, was the place in which men gathered to talk politics, and to study how they could better themselves. When Bamford, the Lancashire Radical, came to town in 1817, the working men were principally to be found discussing politics in all the London public houses... such things are out of fashion nowadays... In London there are but few discussion forums now, and the leading one is so fearfully ventilated and so heavily charged with the fumes of stale tobacco and beer, that it is only a few who care to attend.¹¹⁷

Of course, the picture was not quite as bleak as Ritchie painted it. The radical working men's clubs of the 1870s and 1880s constituted perhaps the most impressive attempt to adapt the old artisan culture to these new conditions. But in the clubs too, as has already been noted, politics were finally displaced by entertainment.

¹¹⁶ Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, 210-12; see also, Loane, *Englishman's Castle*, 178-206.

¹¹⁷ Julian Franklyn, *The Cockney* (1953), 179-87.

¹¹⁸ Ritchie, *Days and Nights*, 41-2.

Ritchie hoped that this situation would be remedied by the London School Board. But in fact the elementary education provided by the 1870 Act appears to have acted as yet another solvent of artisan traditions of self-education. The London *Mechanic's Magazine* had stated in 1816: 'men had better be without education than be educated by their rulers. For then education is but the mere breaking in of the steer to the yoke; the mere discipline of a hunting dog, which, by dint of severity, is made to forgo the strongest impulse of nature, and instead of devouring his prey, to hasten with it to the feet of his master.'¹¹⁸ Board School education between 1870 and 1914 appears to have confirmed this judgement. Apart from the instillation of the three Rs, constant attendance (rewarded by medals) and habits of cleanliness and order (enforced by unremitting drill) appear to have been the qualities generally aimed at in the average lesson:

The teacher will in all probability be standing at the blackboard, the boys ranged in exact rows, each head covering the one in front, hands clasped behind the neck in unanimous response to the command 'neck-rest' given at the beginning of the lesson. The class is being taught as one whole, the teacher thinking necessarily of no particular boy. Individual tuition is all but impossible when the average class is but a few short of sixty.¹¹⁹

In addition to this basic recipe, teachers vainly attempted to interest their cohorts in the Christian religion and the middle- and upper-class view of Britain's history and its place in the world. According to one ex-pupil:

'History', as taught by the board school, left us with a vague impression that up to the time of Queen Elizabeth this country had been occupied exclusively by kings and queens, good, bad and indifferent and from Queen Elizabeth onwards were the Dark Ages, since we never heard of anything happening in that period. The American War of Independence, indeed the existence of the United States of America, was hushed up... Geography was confined to the British Empire and countries were assessed not by their peoples but by the magnitude and wealth of their products. The only reference to people that I remember was 'the Indian can live on a handful of rice a day', which made us feel a particularly opulent race when we were enjoying our Sunday dinners.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Brian Simon, *Studies in the History of Education 1780-1870* (1960), 230.

¹¹⁹ Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, 76.

¹²⁰ Willis, *Jubilee Road*, 76-7.