

Discipline was maintained by the habitual resort to the cane. This caused particular offence to working-class parents who might hit a child when annoyed, but did not generally employ a formalized system of corporal punishment. It is now generally recognized that one important working-class objection to the early factory system was the removal of children from parental control and the exercise of discipline by an impersonal supervisor. But it is not so often realized that one of the main working-class objections to the Board School was of a similar kind. It took some time before working-class parents accepted their inability to stop this treatment. One headmaster comparing the situation in one poor board school in 1882 and 1900, noted:

*Parents in relation to teachers:* Much more friendly; hostility, insolence, violence or threats, common in 1882, now hardly ever occur.<sup>121</sup>

In general, it is not surprising that the new education system aroused no gratitude or enthusiasm among the working class and that remarks about the indifference of the English working class to education begin to become commonplace from the late 1880s onwards.<sup>122</sup> It is certainly significant that when radicals in the working men's clubs began to look for reasons why members were taking less interest in the political and educational side of club life, they assigned a place to the effects of elementary education.

The combination of declining industries, the breakdown of skilled crafts into a mass of semi-skilled processes, the prevalence of home work, the decline of a work-centred culture, the growth of commuting and the deadening effects of elementary education made a politically demobilizing impact in London. Some of these tendencies were of course present elsewhere in Britain. But they did not generally produce such demoralizing results. What intensified the purely negative aspect of these developments in London was the continuation of small-scale production combined with chronic unemployment. The problem of unemployment, as Paul de Rousiers

<sup>121</sup> Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 3, vol. 4, 202; on the hostility of working-class parents to the discipline of their children at school, see M. E. Loane, *From Their Point of View* (1908), 150.

<sup>122</sup> See Royal Commission on the Elementary Education Acts, Final Reports, PP 1888, xxxv, 131.

wrote in the 1890s, was largely a problem of London.<sup>123</sup> In the years before 1914, London was stranded between a small workshop system which refused to die and a system of factory production which had scarcely begun to develop. Its workforce was divided between a highly skilled but technically conservative elite and a vast mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers subject to varying degrees of under-employment. In the 1920s and 1930s, London was to be transformed by the development of light industry on its peripheries. But few would have prophesied this transformation before 1914. In the late Victorian and Edwardian period, rents and prices rose, wages remained stagnant and unemployment was a permanent feature of the landscape. Yet London continued to grow at a phenomenal rate. The new suburbs were flooded with rural immigrants from the depressed and conservative home counties.<sup>124</sup> With the exception of a few outlying areas like Woolwich or Stratford, London working-class districts were shifting and unstable. The eviction of the poor from the central area continued and everywhere 'shooting the moon' (moving furniture from an apartment after dark before the landlord collected the rent) was a familiar feature of London working-class life – one need only think of perhaps the best known of all music-hall songs, 'My Old Man said follow the Van'. The family as a working-class institution may have grown in importance, but in London there was nothing very settled about the home. Co-op and professional football, two of the most prominent features of the new working-class culture of the north, were still of minor importance in London. Like trade unionism and friendly societies, their strength was greatest in more stable and homogeneous industrial areas. If we wish to find a peculiarly metropolitan form of the new working-class culture, it is to the music-hall that we must look.

Once the evidence is sifted critically, the music-hall can give us a crucial insight into the attitudes of working-class London.

<sup>123</sup> P. de Rousiers, *The Labour Question in Britain* (1896), 280, 357.

<sup>124</sup> It may be significant that it is in the mid-1870s that Sam Weller-type cockney pronunciation with its substitution of *v* for *w*, is said to have died out. See Franklyn, *The Cockney*, 22.

But this can only be done if working-class music-hall is disentangled from its West End variant with which it is generally confused.

Music-hall was both a reflection and a reinforcement of the major trends in London working-class life from the 1870s to the 1900s. 'Music halls and other entertainments', wrote T. H. Escott in 1891, 'are as popular among the working men of London as they are the reverse with the better stamp of working men out of it.'<sup>125</sup> Music-hall was a participatory form of leisure activity, but not a demanding one. The audience joined in the choruses, but if they didn't like the song or the sentiments expressed, they 'gave it the bird', and it was unlikely to be heard again. Top stars could earn up to £100 a week by rushing from one hall to another in the course of each evening.<sup>126</sup> But the profession was also crowded with less successful aspirants. The vast majority of performers came from poor backgrounds and began by doing turns in pubs or trying themselves out in a newcomer's spot in one of the smaller halls. Since most singers were generally too poor to pay a song writer, they composed the lyrics themselves, usually adapting them to an already known tune. Until it was transformed by the coming of the more pretentious palaces of variety in the Edwardian period, the atmosphere of the halls was more like that of the pub than the theatre. Indeed, many of the smaller halls were simply extensions to pub premises. Performances were continuous from six to eleven p.m., but the audience could move freely to and from the bar which was responsible for half the profits of the proprietor. The great boast of music-hall and of Charles Morton, its self-appointed 'father', was that it was a 'family entertainment'. Unlike the old 'free and easies' and pub sing-songs which had been popular in the 1840s, the music-hall admitted women, and avoided overtly obscene songs. In fact, the bulk of the audiences were composed of young unmarried workers, male and female; but all witnesses agreed that there was always a fair sprinkling of families as well.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>125</sup> T. H. S. Escott, *England, Its People, Polity and Pursuits* (1891), 161.

<sup>126</sup> See Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 2, vol. 4, 137-40.

<sup>127</sup> See Scott, *Early Doors*, 139-40; Ritchie, *Days and Nights*, 47; Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 2, vol. 5, 334.

In working-class districts, where the multiplicity of occupations, the separation of home from workplace and the overcrowding and impermanence of apartments made any stable community life very difficult, the local hall with its blaze of light and sham opulence, its laughter and its chorus singing, fulfilled, if only in an anonymous way, a craving for solidarity in facing the daily problems of poverty and family life. Music-hall stood for the small pleasures of working-class life - a glass of 'glorious English beer', a hearty meal of 'boiled beef and carrots', a day by the seaside, Derby Day and the excitements and tribulations of betting, a bank holiday spent on Hampstead Heath or in Epping Forest, the pleasures of courtship and the joys of friendship.<sup>128</sup> Its attitude was 'a little bit of what you fancy does you good'. Music-hall was perhaps the most unequivocal response of the London working class to middle-class evangelism. As Marie Lloyd told her critics in 1897:

You take the pit on a Saturday night or a Bank Holiday. You don't suppose they want Sunday School stuff do you? They want lively stuff with music they can learn quickly. Why, if I was to try and sing highly moral songs they would fire ginger beer bottles and beer mugs at me. They don't pay their sixpences and shillings at a Music Hall to hear the Salvation Army.<sup>129</sup>

Or, as the *Era* put it in 1872: 'The artisan tired with his day's labour, wants something to laugh at. He neither wants to be preached to, nor is he anxious to listen to the lugubrious effusions of Dr Watts or the poets of the United Kingdom Alliance.'<sup>130</sup>

Music-hall appealed to the London working class because it was both escapist and yet strongly rooted in the realities of working-class life. This was particularly true of its treatment of the relations between the sexes. While its attitude towards courtship could be rhapsodic, there were few illusions about marriage. Writing about marriage among the London poor in the 1870s, Greenwood remarked of the couples he saw entering and leaving the church, 'they are as a rule, cool and business like, as though, having paid a deposit on the purchase of a donkey or a handsome barrow, they were just

<sup>128</sup> See MacInnes, *Sweet Saturday Night*, 106-23.

<sup>129</sup> Quoted in Farson, *Marie Lloyd*, 57.

<sup>130</sup> A. E. Wilson, *East End Entertainment* (1954), 215.

going in with their witnesses to settle the bargain'.<sup>131</sup> Paterson observed a similar attitude in 1911:

A funeral demands special clothes and carriages, very considerable expense, and to attend such an event, second cousins will take a day off work, and think it but dutifully spent. Yet a marriage is, by comparison, almost unnoticed... It occurs most frequently on a Saturday or Sunday, as it is hardly worthwhile to lose a day's work... few attend it outside a small circle of lady friends.<sup>132</sup>

Among the poor, marriage was normally the result of pregnancy, but among all sectors of the working class, marriage meant children and the constant drudgery of work on a declining standard of living until they were old enough to bring money into the home. Marriage as a 'comic disaster' is an endless refrain of music-hall songs. The titles of the best known male songs are self-explanatory: Tom Costello's 'At Trinity Church I met my doom', Charles Coburn's 'Oh what an Alteration', Gus Elen's 'It's a great big shame'. The lead in translating courtship into marriage was normally taken by the woman. For working-class women, marriage was an economic necessity and unlikely to happen after the age of twenty-five. Booth stated that among the poor, marriage bans were almost invariably put up by the woman.<sup>133</sup> The anxiety of girls to get married was the theme of many female songs like Lily Morris' 'Why am I always the bridesmaid, never the blushing bride?' or Vesta Victoria's 'Waiting at the Church'. According to Dan Leno, in his sketch of the lodger entitled 'Young Men taken in and done for':

I'll tell you how the misfortune happened. One morning Lucy Jagg's mother came upstairs to my room, knocked at the door and said, 'Mr Skilley are you up?' I said, 'No, what for?' Mrs. Jagg's said, 'Come along get up, you're going to be married.' I said, 'No, I don't know anything about it.' She said, 'Yes you do, you spoke about it last night, when you'd had a little drink.' Well, I thought, if I did say so, I suppose I did, so I came downstairs half asleep (in fact I think every man's half asleep when he's going to be married).<sup>134</sup>

But despite their determination to achieve wedlock, the

<sup>131</sup> Greenwood, *Low Life Days*, 140.

<sup>132</sup> Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, 130.

<sup>133</sup> Booth, *Life and Labour*, final vol., 45.

<sup>134</sup> McGillem's *Star Song Book* (1888), 10, 4.

attitude of women to marriage was no more romantic than that of men. The pros and cons were summed up by Marie Loftus in 'Girls, we would never stand it':

When first they come courting,  
how nice they behave,  
For a smile or a kiss,  
how humbly they crave  
But when once a girl's wed,  
she's a drudge and a slave.

Nevertheless, she concludes:

I think we would all prefer  
marriage with strife  
Than be on the shelf  
and be nobody's wife.<sup>135</sup>

The same comic realism dominated the depiction of relations between husband and wife. Husbands make themselves out to be dominated by the tyranny of their wives. They escape to the pub, go off to the races and lose money on horses or are cheated out of it by 'welshers', they get drunk and return home to face the consequences. Males are generally represented as incompetent at spending money and are endlessly getting 'done'. But if a wife is incompetent at managing the household, the results are much more serious. In the end the wife who 'jaws' is preferable to the wife who drinks. The problem of the lodger, the landlord and the pawnbroker's shop are also constantly discussed. Finally, the threat of destitution in old age, once children no longer contribute to the family income and the man is too old to work, is not evaded. The whole point of Albert Chevalier's famous song, 'My Old Dutch' is that it is sung in front of a backdrop representing the workhouse with its separate entrances for men and women.

In music-hall, work is an evil to be avoided when possible. But the only real escape suggested in the songs is the surprise inheritance or the lucky windfall. It is the same sort of fantasy escape from poverty that could be detected in the passionate interest with which poor Londoners followed the case of

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 3.

Arthur Orton, the Tichborne claimant, between the 1870s and the 1890s. Nevertheless, when such an escape is made in the songs, the result is consternation; the former friend begins to 'to put on airs', as Gus Elen sang, 'E don't know where 'e are'. Class is a life sentence, as final as any caste system. The pretensions of those who feigned escape aroused particular scorn, as did those who suggested that education would change this state of affairs. According to a *Daily Telegraph* report of Mrs Lane's Britannia Theatre in Hoxton in 1883:

Here is a large audience mainly composed of the industrious classes, determined to enjoy itself to the utmost ... Mrs Lane's friends feel the disgrace which attaches to a fulfilling of the requirements of the School Board so that when one of the characters upon the stage pertinently asks, 'if every kid's brought up to be a clerk, what about labour? Who's to do the work?' there rises a mighty outburst of applause.<sup>136</sup>

There was no political solution to the class system. It was simply a fact of life. It was certainly not considered to be

<sup>136</sup> Wilson, *East End*, 183. The rapid growth of clerical labour during this period was another demoralizing feature of London working-class life. Skilled artisans in nineteenth century London unquestionably regarded themselves as an elite, the natural spokesmen for the whole of their class. Both Mayhew and Escott regarded a distinct and sometimes exaggerated sense of his own importance to be one of the defining traits of the London artisan. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, this artisan pride was increasingly threatened by the increase of white-collar workers. This latter group was overwhelmingly recruited from the skilled working class, tended to earn comparable wages, and generally inhabited the same districts. Far from recognizing these affinities however, clerks ostentatiously rejected them. They drew *salaris*, not *wages*; their occupations were genteel; their clothes and their hands were clean; their mode of life was modelled upon that of the professional middle class. They were loyalist in politics and came to form the ballast of what Lord Salisbury referred to as 'villa Toryism'. Like 'Mr. Pooper', they were prepared to go to any lengths to stake their claim to gentility. Therefore, far from accepting the traditional artisan division between those who possessed a trade and those who did not, they erected a new caste-like distinction between those who worked with their 'hands' and those who worked with their 'brains'. The growth of this clerical stratum as a wedge between the working class and the middle class accentuated the cultural gulf between two distinct ways of life. The anxious and often absurd pretensions of clerks reinforced working-class cultural identity, if only by force of repulsion.

The friction between clerks and artisans was exacerbated by the educational programme of the London School Board which was disproportionately geared towards the production of an adequate supply of clerical labour. It thus accentuated working-class estrangement from public education. See, on this, Booth, *Life and Labour*, Series 1, vol. 3, 231-4. I am grateful to Professor Eric Hobsbawm for pointing out some of the ramifications of the growth of clerical labour in London.

just, for as Billy Bennett sang, 'it's the rich what gets the pleasure, It's the poor what gets the blame.' But socialism was just a lot of hot air. As little Tich put it, in his sketch of the gas-meter collector, 'My brother's in the gas trade too, you know. In fact he travels on gas. He's a socialist orator.' Music-hall never gave class a political definition. Trade unionism was accepted as an intrinsic part of working-class life and the music-hall songs of 1889 supported the 'Docker's tanner'.<sup>137</sup> But music-hall didn't generally sing about the relationship between workers and employers, and the capitalist is completely absent as a music-hall stereotype. The general music-hall attitude was that if a worker could get a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, that was a good thing, but if the worker could get a fair day's wage without doing a fair day's work, that was even better. The attitude towards the rich was similarly indulgent. The general depiction of the upper class was, as MacInnes has remarked, not hostile but comic.<sup>138</sup> Upper-class figures like Champagne Charlie, Burlington Bertie, the 'toff' and the galloping major were incompetent and absurd, but there was no reference to the source of their income.

Music-hall has often been associated with a mood of bombastic jingoism, associated with MacDermott's 1878 song, 'We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do' or 'Soldiers of the Queen' sung at the time of the Boer War.<sup>139</sup> The audiences of Piccadilly and Leicester Square sang these songs with undoubted gusto, and, judging by the innumerable song sheets on these themes, could never get enough of them. But the predominant mood of the working-class halls was anti-heroic. Workers were prepared to admire and sing about the bravery of the common soldier or the open-handed generosity of the sailor, but they did not forget the realities of military life. Men joined the army usually to escape unemployment, and, if they survived their years of service, it was to unemployment that they would return. According to one song

<sup>137</sup> See 'The Dock Labourers' Strike' and the 'Dock Labourer' in *New and Popular Songs* (1889).

<sup>138</sup> MacInnes, *Sweet Saturday Night*, 108.

<sup>139</sup> According to one report, Distracti used to send his secretary, Monty Corry, to the music-hall to listen in on MacDermott's song to assess the extent of support for his foreign policy. See J. B. Booth (ed.), *Seventy Years of Song* (1943), 38.

of the 1860s which recounts a conversation between Podger and his lodger, a soldier on leave:

Said he, now Podger, Why don't you enlist,  
 you'll get cheap beer  
 The glories too, of war in view  
 Come be a soldier bold  
 Said I, not me. No not me,  
 I'm not having any don't you see  
 Might lose my legs, come home on pegs.  
 Then when I'm O-L-D  
 Not wanted more.  
 Workhouse door  
 Not, not, not, not me.<sup>140</sup>

In a song which was enormously popular in the 1860s, Charles Godfrey's 'On Guard', an old Crimean veteran asks for a night's shelter in the workhouse casual ward. 'Be off you tramp', exclaims the harsh janitor. 'You are not wanted here.' 'No', thunders the tattered veteran. 'I am *not* wanted *here*, but at Balaclava, I *was* wanted *there*.' This scene which was a working-class favourite, was apparently curtailed in the West End because officers from the household brigade complained that it was bad for recruiting.<sup>141</sup>

Working-class music-hall was conservative in the sense that it accepted class divisions and the distribution of wealth as part of the natural order of things. By the 1860s, the class resentment expressed in Godfrey's sketch was as near as it came to political criticism. But the music-hall industry was not merely a passive barometer of working-class opinion. And here lies the difficulty of using it simply as an index of working-class attitudes. For in the period between 1870 and 1900 it became actively and self-consciously Tory. There were two major reasons for this development.

The first reason was the growth of a second audience for music-hall entertainment, alongside that of the working class. This new audience consisted of sporting aristocrats, from the Prince of Wales downwards, guards officers from St James', military and civil officials on leave from imperial outposts, clerks and white-collar workers, university, law and medical

students, and the growing number of tourists from the white Dominions. This audience can be dated back to the 1860s, but it first reached boom proportions in the 1880s, as witnessed by the opening of the new Pavilion in 1884, rapidly followed by the Empire, the Trocadero, the Tivoli and the Palace.<sup>142</sup> The Empire was the most famous centre of this new audience. It provided a natural focus for jingoism, upper-class rowdiness and high-class prostitution. The most popular event in its annual calendar was boat race night, a drunken saturnalia in which all breakable objects had to be removed from the reach of its tipsy 'swells'.<sup>143</sup> There was little in common between these imperial playgrounds and the working-class halls, except for the important fact that these new palaces drew upon the working-class halls for many of their performers. Furthermore, as the entertainment business became more organized and monopolistic, and combines began to take over the proletarian halls, the turns offered in Hackney or Piccadilly to some extent converged.<sup>144</sup>

In the 1860s many of the songs sung in the working-class halls were still anti-aristocratic and populist in tone. They were still at a halfway stage between the old street ballad and the mature music-hall song.<sup>145</sup> Even Frederick Stanley, defending music-hall interests before a Parliamentary enquiry in 1866, conceded as the one valid objection to the music-hall 'the immense difficulty of improving the comic element'. 'I believe,' he stated, 'it is impossible to get a comic song written worthy of the present age.'<sup>146</sup> But the atmosphere changed in the 1870s with the appearance of stars like Leybourne, Vance and MacDermott. The anti-aristocratic element in the songs disappeared, the intellectual level fell, and a jingoist tone became prominent. The effects of the new audience were clearly evident by the late 1880s when Vesta Tilley stated:

<sup>142</sup> See Stuart and Park, *The Variety Stagers*, 191 ff.

<sup>143</sup> Farson, *Marie Lloyd*, 60.

<sup>144</sup> Real convergence was more possible in variety than in music-hall. Even Marie Lloyd found herself booed in the East End music-hall when she attempted to sing some of her more risqué West End numbers. See Farson, *Marie Lloyd*, 75.

<sup>145</sup> See for instance the songs of J. A. Hardwick in *Comic and Sentimental Music Hall Song Book* (n.d. [1862]).

<sup>146</sup> SC 1866, appendix 3, 307.

<sup>140</sup> MacClemens's *Star Song Book* (1866-7), 105.

<sup>141</sup> Scott, *Early Doors*, 215.

Nowadays, nothing goes down better than a good patriotic song, for politics are played out as they are far too common. Talking of that suggests the oddity of the music-hall audience in their political bent. Every such allusion must be Conservative.<sup>147</sup>

This first reason for music-hall Toryism, the growth of an aristocratic and jingoist clientele, had little to do with any marked shift in working-class opinion. But the second reason affected slum and West End music-halls alike. This was the increasing association between Toryism and the drink trade. In the first half of the nineteenth century, as Brian Harrison has shown, the pub was not the exclusive property of any particular political interest and in fact London brewing magnates tended to be Whig or Liberal rather than Conservative. But the rise of the teetotal movement and its growing tendency to operate as a pressure group on the flank of the Liberal party began to push publicans and music-hall proprietors towards Toryism. This tendency became increasingly apparent after the 1871 Licensing Act of the Liberal government.<sup>148</sup> In the 1880s, Liberals, teetotalers and radical temperance advocates attacked both the central pleasure palaces and the working-class halls with equal vigour, for both were associated, although in unequal proportions, with drinking, gambling, prostitution, crude chauvinism, and the absence of educational content. In the early 1880s, the temperance crusader, F. N. Charrington, launched his attack on Lusby's Music-Hall on the Mile End Road and the Salvation Army made an unsuccessful attempt to close down the Eagle in the City Road.<sup>149</sup> But reformers did not confine their assaults to the working-class halls. In 1894, Mrs Ormiston Chant of the Social Purity League, challenged the licence of the Empire in the name of 'the calm steady voice of righteous public opinion, the non-conformist conscience'.<sup>150</sup> Supported by the Progressive party and the Labour bench on the LCC, Mrs Chant was successful in getting a screen erected between

the auditorium and the bars, thus fencing off the audience from the provision of drink and the solicitation of prostitutes. But the young 'swells' and 'toffs' of the period who regarded the Empire as their spiritual home, violently resisted this restriction of their prerogatives. On the Saturday following the erection of the screen, 200-300 aristocratic 'rowdies' smashed it down again with their walking-sticks and paraded in triumph around Leicester Square, waving its fragments at the passers-by. The ringleader of this group then made a speech to the assembled crowd: 'You have seen us tear down these barricades tonight; see that you pull down those who are responsible for them at the coming election.'<sup>151</sup> The speaker was the young Sandhurst cadet, Winston Churchill.

Music-hall proprietors, 'swells', cabmen and bizarrely, George Shipton, the Secretary of the London Trades' Council (he also ran a pub just off Leicester Square), enrolled in defence of the Empire's rights. A 'Sporting League' was formed. According to one of its spokesmen:

They were now approaching the County Council Elections, and it would be the duty of every true lover of sport to see that no 'wrong'uns' got on the council again... These faddists came upon them in all shapes and kinds, either as members of the Humanitarian League, or the anti-Gambling League, or Anti-Vaccination. They were all acting on the same principle, trying to interfere with the enjoyment and pleasures of the people.<sup>152</sup>

This incident was no doubt the origin of the myth, assiduously cultivated by the upper class after the war, of an affinity of outlook between the 'top and bottom drawer' against the 'kill-joys' in between.<sup>153</sup> It is true, however, that for different reasons both the proletarian halls and the West End pleasure-strip were devitalized in the succeeding twenty years. The West End became more decorous after the Wilde scandal, while the working-class halls were bought up by the Moss-Stoll syndicate whose policy was to replace the 'coarseness and vulgarity' of the halls by the gentility and decorum of the Palace of Variety. Music-hall entertainment was given its final kiss of death with the achievement of a Royal Command Performance in 1912. Music-hall artists removed from their

<sup>147</sup> *McClannon's Star Song Book* (1896-7), 8, 2.

<sup>148</sup> Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians*, 319-48.

<sup>149</sup> On Charrington, see Guy Thorne, *The Great Acceptance, the Life Story of F. N. Charrington* (1912), Ch. v; on the attempt to close down the Eagle, see H. Begbie, *Life of William Booth* (1920), vol. 2, 10-13.

<sup>150</sup> Mrs Ormiston Chant, *Why We Attacked the Empire* (1895), 5.

<sup>151</sup> Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (1930), 71.

<sup>152</sup> Chant, *Why We Attacked the Empire*, 30.

<sup>153</sup> See Shaw Desmond, *London Nights*, 84-92; Willis, *Jubilee Road*, 30-6.

acts any allusions that could be considered offensive or coarse and vainly tried to win the approval of King George V, 'a lover of true Bohemianism' according to Conan Doyle's unctuous description of the proceedings.<sup>154</sup>

If these had been the only tendencies at work in music-hall since the 1870s, it would be difficult to explain its prominent position in London working-class culture. But it was the mid-1880s which also witnessed the emergence of the greatest and best-loved music-hall performers – Dan Leno, Marie Lloyd, Gus Elen, Little Tich, Kate Karney and others. These artists, who all sprang from poor London backgrounds, articulated with much greater accuracy than their predecessors the mood and attitudes of the London masses. Although they were popular both in the West End and in the East End, they sang or spoke not about the Empire or the Conservative party, but about the occupations, food, drink, holidays, romances, marriages and misfortunes of the back streets. It is from their songs that the specificity of London working-class culture can best be assessed.

Unlike the ballad, the songs of these performers expressed neither deep tragedy nor real anger. They could express wholehearted enjoyment of simple pleasures or unbounded sentimentality in relation to objects of affection. But when confronted with the daily oppressions of the life of the poor, their reactions were fatalistic. In the middle of the century, Mayhew had written:

Where the means of sustenance and comfort are fixed, the human being becomes conscious of what he has to depend upon.

If, however his means be uncertain – abundant at one time, and deficient at another – a spirit of speculation or gambling with the future will be induced, and the individual gets to believe in 'luck' and 'fate' as the arbiters of his happiness rather than to look upon himself as 'the architect of his fortunes' – trusting to 'chance' rather than his own powers and foresight to relieve him at the hour of necessity.<sup>155</sup>

This was precisely the attitude to life projected by the London music-hall. The two greatest products of that culture, Dan Leno and Charlie Chaplin, play little men, perpetually 'put upon'; they have no great ideals or ambitions; the characters

they play are undoubtedly very poor, but not obviously or unmistakably proletarian; they are certainly products of city life, but their place within it is indeterminate; their exploits are funny, but also pathetic; they are forever being chased by men or women, physically larger than themselves, angry foremen, outraged husbands, domineering landladies or burly wives; but it is usually chance circumstances, unfortunate misunderstandings, not of their own making, which have landed them in these situations, and it is luck more than their own efforts which finally comes to the rescue.

The art of Leno and Chaplin brings us back again to the situation of the poor and the working class in late Victorian and Edwardian London; to that vast limbo of semi-employed labourers, casualized semi-skilled artisans, 'sweated' home workers, despised foreigners, tramps and beggars.

In this paper, I have attempted to put into relationship two themes which traditionally have been kept apart: on the one hand, the history of the labour movement, on the other, the investigation of working-class culture. It is only a preliminary analysis, based upon the study of one city, and any conclusions that might be drawn from it can only be provisional. Nevertheless, the mere conjunction of these two themes points towards the necessity of questioning some of the traditional assumptions of English labour history.

Music-hall highlighted the peculiarities of the working-class situation in London. But it also reflected the general development of the English working class after 1870. Fatalism, political scepticism, the evasion of tragedy or anger and a stance of comic stoicism were pre-eminent cockney attitudes because the decline of artisan traditions, the tardiness of factory development, the prevalence of casual work, and the shifting amorphous character of the new proletarian suburbs were particularly marked features of London life. But it would be a mistake to overemphasize the purely local significance of these themes. In industrial areas more homogeneous than London, trade unionism tended to occupy a much more commanding place in working-class culture. In such communities, co-ops, friendly societies, choral clubs and football teams were also more likely to flourish. But these were

<sup>154</sup> See Farson, *Marie Lloyd*, 88–97.

<sup>155</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 2, 325.

differences of degree, not of kind. There are good historical reasons why after 1870 London pioneered music-hall, while coal, cotton and ship-building areas in the north generated the most solid advances in trade unionism.<sup>156</sup>

Trapped in the twilight world of small workshop production, London was not well-placed to sustain the defensive corporate forms of solidarity upon which working-class politics was increasingly to be based. The strength of its own political tradition had not been founded on the factory. It therefore registered the new situation in predominantly cultural forms. But music-hall did spread to the provinces and trade unions were slowly able to secure important pockets of strength in certain areas of London. There was great diversity of local experience, but no unbridgeable gulf. What is finally most striking is the basic consistency of outlook reflected in the new working-class culture which spread over England after 1870.

If the 'making of the English working class' took place in the 1790-1830 period, something akin to a remaking of the working class took place in the years between 1870 and 1900. For much of the cluster of 'traditional' working-class attitudes analysed by contemporary sociologists and literary critics dates, not from the first third, but from the last third of the nineteenth century. This remaking process did not obliterate the legacy of that first formative phase of working-class history, so well described by Edward Thompson. But it did transform its meaning. In the realm of working-class ideology, a second formative layer of historical experience was superimposed upon the first, thereby colouring the first in the light of its own changed horizons of possibility. The struggles of the first half of the century were not forgotten, but they were recalled selectively and reinterpreted. The solidarity and organizational strength achieved in social struggles were channelled into trade union activity and eventually into a political party based upon that activity and its goals. The distinctiveness of a working-class way of life was enormously accentuated. Its separateness and impermeability were now reflected in a dense and inward-looking culture, whose effect

was both to emphasize the distance of the working class from the classes above it and to articulate its position within an apparently permanent social hierarchy.

The growth of trade unionism on the one hand and the new working-class culture on the other were not contradictory but interrelated phenomena. Both signified a major shift in the predominant forms of working-class activity. What above all differentiated the Chartist period from the post-1870 period was the general belief that the economic and political order brought into being by the Industrial Revolution was a temporary aberration, soon to be brought to an end. This belief sustained the activities of moderate Chartists like Lovett and Vincent no less than Harney and O'Connor. It was this half-articulated conviction that had made Chartism into a mass force.

Once the defeat of Chartism was finally accepted, this conviction disappeared. Working people ceased to believe that they could shape society in their own image. Capitalism had become an immovable horizon. Demands produced by the movements of the pre-1850 period - republicanism, secularism, popular self-education, co-operation, land reform, internationalism etc. - now shorn of the conviction which had given them point, eventually expired from sheer inanition, or else, in a diluted form, were appropriated by the left flank of Gladstonian liberalism. The main impetus of working-class activity now lay elsewhere. It was concentrated into trade unions, co-ops, friendly societies, all indicating a *de facto* recognition of the existing social order as the inevitable framework of action. The same could be said of music-hall. It was a culture of consolation.

The rise of new unionism, the foundation of the Labour Party, even the emergence of socialist groups marked not a breach but a culmination of this defensive culture. One of the most striking features of the social movements between 1790 and 1850 had been the clarity and concreteness of their conception of the state. There had been no hypostatization of the state into a neutral or impersonal agency. It had been seen as a flesh and blood machine of coercion, exploitation and corruption. The monarchy, the legislature, the Church, the bureaucracy, the army and the police had all been occupied

<sup>156</sup> See Webb and Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, 299-325.



by 'bloodsuckers', 'hypocrites', 'placemen', etc. The aim of popular politics had been to change the form of state. The triumph of the people would replace it by a popular democracy of a Leveller or Jacobin sort – an egalitarian society of independent artisans and smallholders – a society built upon petty commodity exchange on the basis of labour time expended (the Chartist land plan and the Owenite labour bazaar formed part of a single problematic). The Charter, a purely political programme, was to be its means of realization.

Late Victorian and Edwardian labour leaders had no such concrete conception of politics or the state. The emphasis had shifted from power to welfare. Socialism, as Tom Mann defined it, meant the abolition of poverty. The founding moment of the Labour Party was not revolution abroad or political upheaval at home, but a defensive solution to the employer's counter-offensive of the 1890s. The ending of Britain's industrial monopoly did re-create an independent labour politics, as Engels had prophesied, but not in the way he had intended. The LRC (Labour Representation Committee) was the generalization of the structural role of the trade union into the form of a political party. It was not accountable directly to its constituency, but indirectly via the trade unions upon which its real power was based. Its mode of organization presumed mass passivity punctuated by occasional mobilization for the ballot box. As a form of political association, it was not so much a challenge to the new working-class culture that had grown up since 1870 as an extension of it. If it sang *Jerusalem* it was not as a battle-cry but as a hymn. It accepted *de facto*, not only capitalism, but monarchy, Empire, aristocracy and established religion as well. With the foundation of the Labour Party, the now enclosed and defensive world of working-class culture had in effect achieved its apotheosis.

## 5

### WHY IS THE LABOUR PARTY IN A MESS?

The present crisis of the Labour Party has deeper roots than the Conservative victory of 1979, the rise of the Bennite left and the emergence of the SDP (Social Democratic Party). These are only the final acts in a drama of a more secular kind and, if we are to understand it, we must step back from the present apologies being offered on the right and left of the Party and attempt to situate the crisis in a longer term historical perspective.

Of course, history of a kind is not absent from the present debate. But the history on offer is generally of the 'golden age' variety and, curiously, both right and left are at one in the dating of that 'golden age' – the Labour governments of 1945–51. Political memories are short. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the predominant tone of discussion of 1945 was critical. For the right, it had identified the Party too closely with obsolete 'shibboleths' like nationalization and the 'cloth cap' image; for the left, it had represented a failure to capture the 'commanding heights' of the economy and a capitulation to market forces, the civil service and the cold war – in either scenario, it had generated 'thirteen wasted years' of Tory rule. But, in the light of the failures and frustrations of the Wilson and Callaghan years, the post-war Labour government has come to be seen in increasingly benign terms. It has come to be associated with a magical moment to which all sections of the party have yearned to return. 1945 has been summoned up as much by Social Democrats as by Tony Benn. 1951 is the time from which everything started to go 'wrong' for Jeremy Seabrook and it is the point at which Eric Hobsbawm's 'forward march of Labour halted'. The talismanic character of that epoch has been as evident in the recent television drama