

1 Introduction

Alexander Wilson could be taken as the archetypal artisan of radical working-class history. A poet-weaver who satirized conniving masters, he fled from Scotland to America in 1794, driven by fear of political persecution. Wilson's most successful work, however, was more personal; his "Watty and Meg; Or, The Wife Reformed," sold as many as a hundred thousand copies as a broadsheet. Meg nags her hen-pecked husband, Watty, to stay at home instead of drinking at the alehouse. To silence her scolding, his mates advise him, he should threaten to leave her and go join the army. Terrified of being left alone and unsupported, Meg submits; harmony reigns as they dive under the blankets for another "Hinny-moon."¹

How could Wilson both advise men to demand submission from their wives and encourage them to defy aristocratic power? This book will attempt to answer such questions by linking the personal with the political in working-class history, depicting the making of the working class as a "struggle for the breeches." The private sphere of marriage was often satirically depicted in popular literature as a bitter contest: the "struggle for the breeches" in which wives tried to rob husbands of their manly control. In politics, too, plebeian men such as Wilson felt they were denied the full manhood of citizenship.

This is, of course, not the first attempt to link the personal with the political in working-class history. In the 1950s, Neil Smelser depicted working-class radicals as irrationally reacting to the loss of their patriarchal authority during the industrial revolution.² In response, in his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* E. P. Thompson portrayed working-class activists as rational heroes who forged a working-class consciousness by 1832—but to make his point he neglected the connections between family and political life.³

As a result, as Joan Scott points out, Thompson marginalized women in his narrative and presented a masculine version of working-class history.⁴ Indeed, Thompson explained his project as “a biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its early manhood.”⁵ By contrast, Barbara Taylor, brilliantly initiating feminist attempts to rewrite the making of the working class, described the innovations of Owenite socialist-feminists from the 1820s to the 1840s.⁶ Yet the Owenites were only a small minority of proletarians; the mainstream of the working-class movement adopted quite conservative ideals of masculinity and femininity, eventually excluding women from politics. This book will begin to explain why.

My project will pay homage to the work of E. P. Thompson and Barbara Taylor by re-visioning Thompson’s narrative to include gender and by putting Taylor’s Owenites in the larger context of plebeian and working-class culture. It will not replace Thompson’s history of manhood with a history of working-class women. Instead, inspired by the work of such feminist historians as Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, Joan Scott, and Sally Alexander, it will infuse gender—the social construction of manhood and womanhood—into the analysis of class.⁷ The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed significant changes in views of masculinity and femininity, the sexual division of labor, and sexual mores, and these changes were intimately intertwined with the evolution of class politics.

This period saw a shift from a notion of gender as hierarchy to a notion of gender as separate, complementary spheres. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, men and women were not seen as opposites; rather, people saw gender, like the social structure as a whole, in terms of a hierarchy.⁸ For instance, they often envisioned women as flawed versions of men. Men ruled over women, who were seen as men’s inferiors, just as gentry ruled over common people, householders over servants, and masters over apprentices and journeymen. The manhood of the master was not the same in degree or kind as the masculinity of his servant. By the early nineteenth century, however, a new ideology of gender as separate spheres had arisen, in which individual men joined together as equals to form the public sphere of politics, while keeping their wives in the private sphere of the home.⁹ Putting separate spheres into practice, however, was a class privilege denied to working men and women. Working men were denied political power, and working women could not take shelter in the home, but had to earn wages. This book will demonstrate that the making of the working class was in part a struggle by radicals to universalize this class-bound notion of gender.

To integrate gender into class, it will be necessary to transform the traditional categories of working-class history. I will discuss class formation on four levels: work, community, culture, and class consciousness.¹⁰ For

Thompson and many orthodox Marxists, class first begins with the “common experience” of some men “largely determined by productive relations.”¹¹ In other words, working men gained a sense of their own exploitation at work, feeling robbed of their skill and the profits of their labor. But gender also shaped the division of labor during the industrial revolution, as employers sought to replace skilled men with cheaper female and child labor.¹² In response, working men identified skill with manhood and sought to keep women out of the workplace—at the cost of dividing the labor force. Second, in order to organize to fight against exploitation and injustice, workers had to draw upon the strength of community bonds.¹³ But gender shapes the boundaries of communities as well. Did plebeians define their communities according to the male worlds of workshop and pub, or did they include women in the wider circles of neighborhoods and markets?

Third, Thompson’s genius lay in exploring working people’s “traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institution[s]”—their “plebeian culture.”¹⁴ The term *plebeian* is useful for its deliberately vague inclusion of working people in general, defined not by a relation to a mode of production but as the “lower orders,” ranging from rough soldiers, laborers, and prostitutes to needlewomen, servants, artisans, and factory workers, and merging into the lower levels of what would become the middle class, that is, small masters, shopkeepers, tradesmen, and publicans. However, as Thompson himself noted, plebeians did not form a *class*, in the sociological sense of a stratum of people who shared a common experience of productive relations and social values.¹⁵ Indeed, gender conflict and clashes over moral values often fissured plebeian culture.¹⁶ The religious respectables scorned the rough libertines; textile workers needed women’s help while artisans shunned female labor.¹⁷

Fourth, it is important to explore how these diverse and divided people attained class consciousness: how, in Thompson’s words, did they “feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs?”¹⁸ For orthodox Marxists, class consciousness simply reflected the structure of economic relations and came into being when workers became aware of the “objective” analysis of their situation.¹⁹ But Gareth Stedman Jones and other historians have correctly noted that the radicalism of working people in the 1830s and 1840s did not simply reflect a socialist analysis of economic exploitation. Instead, Stedman Jones examines the language of working-class radicals—and finds that they borrowed the political language of older republican movements rather than looking forward to socialist economics.²⁰

However, while rejecting a rigid notion of class as determined by pro-

ductive relations, we can still ask how radicals of the 1830s and 1840s attempted to create and define working-class consciousness in their own terms.²¹ It is important to consider both the words and the organizational practice of working-class movements. During this period, the nature of working-class consciousness was open-ended—sometimes focusing on the political rights of skilled men, sometimes mobilizing women and the unskilled as part of larger communities. By organizing people in new ways, radicals tried to create a unified class consciousness out of divided communities. And to organize working people, radicals also had to create a rhetoric that resonated with people's diverse experiences and that promised solutions to the traumas of the industrial revolution. Radicals did not foresee socialism but, rather, recast old political solutions to solve contemporary economic ills.

Integrating language and organizational practice is also necessary if we are to understand the role of gender in the working-class movement. Joan Scott argues, for instance, that Stedman Jones ignores the way in which republican citizenship further excluded women from politics by defining them as wives and mothers.²² Yet it would be a mistake to accept totally Scott's move away from experience to political language.²³ After participating in political movements, some women were able to move temporarily away from domesticity, redefining their political identities and reclaiming rational citizenship for themselves. The tension between women's militant activism and the rhetoric of radical domesticity was an important dynamic of the working-class movement. By combining the study of working people's experience with the analysis of radical rhetoric, this book goes beyond the sterile debate about whether it is economics or language that determines class consciousness.

Infusing gender into class also requires rewriting the traditional narratives of the making of the British working class. Historians often tell the story of the emblematic workers of the industrial revolution, the skilled artisans and the lower-status textile factory workers who replaced them. Marx and Engels depicted textile workers as the classic proletariat, wrenched from their family workshops to the mass experience of the factories, who therefore should have been the vanguard of working-class consciousness. However, Marxist historians have never been able to cope with the fact that many of these proletarians were women and children. In contrast, E. P. Thompson celebrates the artisanal heritage of radicalism, depicting artisans as heroic figures who drew upon a rich cultural tradition to create political and economic resistance. As Craig Calhoun points out, Thompson deliberately neglects textile factory workers, disdainfully portraying their struggles as pale imitations of artisan organizations.²⁴ Yet the

story becomes quite different when examined through the lens of gender: artisans appear less heroic, and textile workers more creative.

Gender shaped the industrial revolution.²⁵ As Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson point out, "New work disciplines, new forms of subcontracting and putting-out networks, new factory organization, and even new technologies were tried out initially on women and children."²⁶ Skilled men thus faced competition from these cheaper sources of labor. The most familiar case, of course, is that of the cotton factories, where women and children tended machines whose productivity far outstripped that of a male handloom weaver. But urban employers also sought to undercut the clout of shoemakers and tailors by subdividing the labor process and taking advantage of women skilled at sewing and desperate for work.

This book contrasts the gender relations of artisans and textile workers in the metropolitan areas of London, Lancashire, and Glasgow.²⁷ I demonstrate that textile workers and artisans found different ways of creating and mobilizing communities, one based on fraternal bonding, the other on co-operative yet still patriarchal relations between men and women.²⁸ London was a center of artisan culture and radical political activity, facing metropolitan industrialization in the form of sweating rather than mechanization. But artisan culture reached beyond the metropolis to Lancashire and Glasgow as well. Artisans could no longer follow the traditional sequence, from apprentice, to journeyman, and then to the status of master and married man. Unable to afford their own workshops, they focused on creating trade solidarity through a bachelor journeyman culture of drinking rituals and combinations. Unwilling to tolerate lifelong celibacy, an artisan would often marry or cohabit, relying on the woman's earnings to help support the family. However, the artisans' bachelor orientation could easily be warped into misogyny and violence against women, directed both against rival female workers and against wives who complained of time and money spent with workmates in the pub. Artisans followed an exclusivist trade-union strategy directed against not only women but other male workers as well, further contributing to divisions among working people.

Lancashire and Glasgow were both dominated by the cotton textile trade, the vanguard of the industrial revolution. By examining Scottish circumstances in depth as well as those in the more familiar locale of Lancashire, this book extends the story of the making of the working class beyond the English to the British context. Yet textile trade-union struggles failed in Scotland but succeeded in Lancashire, resulting in significantly different gender divisions of labor and politics. Scots workers, however, shared many of the problems and responses of their English counterparts, and they were able to articulate them through a rich yet relatively un-

studied popular culture.²⁹ The draconian Scottish legal system fiercely prosecuted Glasgow trade unionists, in the process confiscating their voluminous records and interviewing workers in depth, thereby crippling the labor movement but providing the historian with unusually extensive documentation.

The origins and changes in the gender division of labor in the cotton textile industry constitute one of the key problems in the historiography of the industrial revolution.³⁰ Although historians often consider handloom weavers and other skilled cloth handworkers as artisans, I have found that, in terms of gender relations, they had more in common with textile factory workers than with traditional artisans in apprenticed trades. The textile trades grew so rapidly that employers began to hire weavers without apprenticeship. Unlike apprenticed artisans, handloom weavers and other male textile workers accepted women's work as essential to the proto-industrial family economy; indeed, they were often able to marry early partially because they could count on the woman's earnings. The importance of cooperation between men and women may explain why male textile workers were somewhat less likely than others to commit violence against women. However, as new technology enabled manufacturers to try to replace skilled male factory workers with women and children, the gender division of labor had to be renegotiated constantly. To combat this threat, male workers often tried to emulate traditional artisans by excluding women from their jobs; yet, unlike artisans, they accepted female assistance as auxiliaries. After all, effective strikes required the support of women, through community, workplace, and kinship networks. However, textile communities were still divided among themselves, trying to keep wages up by driving away workers outside their own networks.

While the eighteenth century is often regarded as a golden age of family harmony that was destroyed by industrialization, I demonstrate that, instead, a "sexual crisis" characterized plebeian culture of the time.³¹ Labor mobility and the social changes of industrialization drove up illegitimacy rates between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century, and wife desertion and bigamy seemed all too frequent.³² Some plebeians saw common-law marriage and births out of wedlock as acceptable adjustments to new social realities or, alternatively, part of the enjoyment of a libertine or "rough" lifestyle. A man might be judged as respectable even though he was drunk heavily and frequented prostitutes, so long as he was an independent, skilled, and intelligent worker.³³ But this libertine ethos clashed with domestic responsibilities, and wife-beating often resulted. Humiliation and anguish faced young couples when the man was out of work and unable to wed and his pregnant sweetheart was left alone and penniless.

In the rich popular culture of urban areas plebeians found social discourses through which to articulate their dilemmas.³⁴ *Social discourses* embody often unconscious values but also express a culture's social practices.³⁵ Artisans and textile workers had different sets of assumptions and ideals concerning work, community, and family. But they shared the popular culture of ballads, caricatures, newspapers, and melodrama. Even if they could not read, they heard snatches of verse bawled on the street, watched plays at street fairs or in penny theaters, ogled the latest caricatures in print-shop windows, and listened to fellow workers read the newspaper aloud.³⁶ However, the popular literature these people consumed did not derive from an autonomous working-class presence or originate in traditional folk culture; instead, popular commercial publishers plagiarized from both high literature and low, occasionally hiring itinerant ballad singers to write topical songs.³⁷ They hoped to increase sales by appealing to plebeian experiences of love, marriage, family, and social life, not through realistic depictions but in highly stylized genres of satire, comedy, or melodrama.

Religion, too, provided alternative ways of articulating the traumas of the sexual crisis. My view of religion here will differ from that of Thompson, who depicted Methodism as a masochistic distraction from the real issues of politics; instead, I will argue that sectarian religion spoke to personal dilemmas which early radicalism often ignored.³⁸

Until the 1820s, the boundaries between plebeians and the middle class were often quite blurred, for plebeians often shared values and lifestyles with the slightly higher-status middling tradesmen, small shopkeepers, and master artisans. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, successful tradesmen and merchants distanced themselves from their neighbors who were sinking deeper into proletarianization and poverty.

The middle class was the first to develop a coherent class identity. Over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, separating masculine work from the feminine home became a marker of middle-class status.³⁹ More than a matter of lifestyle, separate spheres had profound political implications as an ideology. Middle-class reformers defined themselves as more virtuous than either the dissolute aristocracy or the rough plebeians; the private virtue of their wives proved bourgeois men's public probity. Drawing upon the traditions of civic humanism, middle-class reformers defined the citizen as a propertied male householder, thereby excluding most working men, who had no property and often could not afford to maintain a household. This concept of the middle class was decisively enshrined in the 1832 Reform Act, which enfranchised middle-class men and excluded the working class.⁴⁰

As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe suggest, political language creates class by drawing hierarchical lines of difference between groups of people.⁴¹ Gendered notions of virtue, expressed in the discourses of civic humanism, separate spheres, Malthusianism, and political economy, justified the exclusion of working people from the privileges of participation in the state. In response, working-class radicals were faced with the problem of creating a positive political class consciousness among demoralized and divided working people. They developed a rhetoric of class consciousness before the working class had been formed in sociological terms, that is, before they had become a cohesive group of people sharing common experiences and values. Radicals had to mobilize fragmented groups of working people into a united "imagined community" of class, creating new forms of political organization as they went along.⁴² But which vision of community would shape working-class consciousness? Would radicals mobilize whole communities, including women and children, or would they simply speak to the interests of skilled working men?

In order to unify working people, radicals tried to create a political rhetoric that could convince them they had interests in common and that they could mobilize to defend those interests. I use the term *rhetoric* here because it implies a dialogue, for speakers must persuade their audiences and pressure their opponents.⁴³ To accomplish the first task, orators had to express the grievances of working people, not by merely describing their hardships or providing a correct analysis of their situation, but by drawing upon metaphors and motifs from popular culture to evoke their audiences' emotion and condense varied experiences into a few potent images, such as that of the aristocratic libertine destroying a happy home.⁴⁴ They also had to provide a vision of the future that promised to transcend these hardships and transform plebeian cultures plagued by heavy drinking, sexual antagonisms, and divisions between trades. This vision had to reassure both working men anxious at the loss of patriarchal privileges *and* women weary of hard work and irresponsible husbands.

To wrest concessions from Parliament, radicals had to manipulate the contradictions between political economy and the notion of separate spheres. In shaping these strategies, radicals faced many choices. Would they accept the radical re-visioning of gender in Owenite socialist feminism, or would they reshape the middle-class ideology of separate spheres for their own ends? Would radicals demand the vote on the basis of inherent individual political rights (which could include women), or would they claim manhood suffrage by proving their patriarchal respectability? Some historians and thinkers argue that only the available contemporary discourses can construct consciousness; without them, people have no way of

thinking about the world.⁴⁵ To be sure, political economy, for instance, shaped the way many people thought in the early nineteenth century. But I am arguing that early nineteenth-century radicals could choose from a variety of ideologies and discourses. Their choices were determined, not by the dominance of discourse, but by the realities of power: their own lack of political clout, and working men's desire to retain control over women at home and at work.⁴⁶

Whereas Thompson tells the story of the formation of working-class consciousness as a heroic, even a melodramatic, tale, my narrative must be more open-ended.⁴⁷ By examining diverse plebeian dilemmas and the rhetoric that attempted to address them, we can better understand that the moderation of working-class politics was not inevitable but simply one vision of many "makings" of the working class, one possible result of the "struggle for the breeches."⁴⁸