DRAFT ESSAY – NOT TO BE REFERED TO WITHOUT PERMISSION

<u>These which be participant of the common wealth": Class. Governance, and Social Identities in early modern England</u> *

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I

The discourse of class is a child of the Enlightenment. It was from the mid eighteenth century that 'class' as a term descriptive of social distinctions slid into the languages of western Europe. Initially its intellectual appeal owed much to its apparent analytical neutrality. It facilitated the Enlightenment project of exploring the nature and historical development of human society. Yet its rapid adoption as the conventional vocabulary of social classification perhaps owed more to the implications of that analysis. First, it focused attention upon the economic structures of society, tracing social subordination to the unequal distribution of property and anatomizing society in terms of broad economic interest groups. Secondly, it conveyed a sense of the mutability of the social order, of the contingency of its present forms. Third, it was potentially (and sometimes actually) critical of conceptions of society which disguised privilege and exploitation in the mantle of divine sanction and organic harmony. It carried charges of political electricity. It could be used not only to describe and to explain, but also to challenge; to stake claims.[1]

The staking of such social and political claims has always been a prominent element in the historiography of the 'birth of class'; commonly as an <u>end</u> point in processes of class formation. It is there is Marx's conception of how a "class in itself" (defined by productive relations) can become, through the development of "manifold relations" among its members, community, a sense of common identity, and eventual political organization, a 'class for itself'; a political actor. It is there in E.P. Thompson's account of how the "experience" of class (rooted in, though larger than productive relations) leads to the identification of antagonistic interests, and struggle over them, whereby "in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes". It is there also in Weber's recognition that economically defined "class situations" represent "possible and frequent bases for social action" – though he cautioned that such political action was by no means inevitable, leaving neo-Weberian sociologists and historians to wrestle with the problem of the circumstances under which the many distinguishable economic classes could be translated into larger social classes, and on occasion into political parties. Collective political action is present also as one of the four "layers" or "levels" of class formation distinguished in Katznelson and Zolberg's comparative analysis of working class formation in Europe and America. They are careful to insist that such layers or levels should not be confused with "stages", implying "developmental assumptions", and emphasize the "general rule of contingency" in the process of class formation. Yet it is strikingly evident that to many of their contributors, the key indicator of class formation appears to be political mobilization. [2]

More recently, sensitivity to that element of contingency has led to the placing of still greater emphasis upon the role of politics in class formation, less as an end point or litmus test than as a process constitutive of class identities. The essential link lies in the medium of class discourse and its political potential. Geoffrey Crossick has suggested that the emergence of a conflictual language of class was less a reflection of external reality than an intervention in it, less a language of social description than of "political assertion". To William Sewell, the vital development of the critical period c. 1790-1830 was the emergence of such a "class discourse": a "discursive transformation" directly related to the politics of the French Revolutionary era.[3] Just as the Enlightenment discourse of the market expanded in use long before the structures of economic life actually conformed to the emergent model of 'market society', so also, the discourse of class, as a mode of legitimizing political claims, may have pre-dated and influenced the process of class formation. To Patrick Joyce, capitalist development in England created only sets of <u>potential</u> interests. The outcome in terms of social and political consciousness depended upon how collective identities came to be structured. In that process, the crucial development was the employment of the language of class to provide potential constituencies of "collective political actors" with "unifying identities". Similarly, to Dror Wahrman, the vital moment in the emergence of the 'middle class' was the increased use of that term as a meaningful, albeit contested, category in the political debates precipitated by the French Revolution and the subsequent agitation for parliamentary reform.[4]

To such historians, class identities appear less "the collective cultural experience of new economic classes", than "a product of arguments about meanings, arguments which were primarily political in character".[5] They were contingent political constructions, and in consequence they displayed considerable complexity and instability. Reflecting on the "fractured and ambiguous" consciousness of England's nineteenth-century industrial workforce, Joyce observes (repeatedly) that "the consciousness of a class need not be the consciousness of class". Long after the supposed 'making' of the English working class, 'class' was only one of several available sources of social identity, and not necessarily the most powerful. In such a situation, as Geoff Eley puts it, the most crucial issue facing labour movements was that of "how to mobilize the maximum solidarity from a socially-defined constituency which has no essential unity in the sphere of consciousness". Working class unity, insofar as it ever existed, was "a contingency of political agitation". Similarly, Dror Wahrman has traced fluctuations in the political employment of the "middle class idiom" between the 1790s and the 1850s as a kind of barometer of political pressure. David Cannadine's "new master narrative of class" from the French Revolution to Thatcherism is structured around the ebb and flow of the contingent political conflicts which "consciously and contentiously" politicized alternative perceptions of the social order (the "hierarchical"; the "triadic"; and the "dichotomous, adversarial") each of which was expressed in a variant of the language of class.[6] In the most unguarded manifestations of this interpretation of class as political discourse, the 'classes' concerned appear almost to have taken on the character of 'interest groups', dissolving when their immediate objectives have been realized, rather than 'cultural collectivities' of a more rooted, binding and persistent nature.[7]

The discontents currently animating historians of class on the 'classic ground' of early industrial Britain can be summed up crudely as a shift of emphasis in causal reasoning from 'social being' to 'social consciousness', from 'experience' to 'discourse', and from political conflict as outcome, to political action as constitutive of class identities. As such, it has its problems. In the first place, its proponents tend to neglect or underplay the material dimensions of social identity, the disparities in life opportunities and the concrete social relations which must surely retain a central place in any discussion of class. As Richard Jenkins argues, discourse is a social activity. "Group identification probably cannot exist in a social vacuum". "For a group to be defined, it must be definable. There has to be something which its members share". Representations matter, but there are limits to the human capacity to define reality in the face of the material world.[8] Again, the political is no more autonomous than any other sphere of life. To utilize political contingency as a <u>deus ex machina</u> is to leave unspecified the relationship between politics and other social processes. Why do certain issues and events have the capacity to galvanize and mobilize people? Can we have catalytic moments in the absence of elements in reaction to be catalyzed? Why do certain politically charged discourses of social identity make sense?

To be fair, none of the new historians of class quoted above would deny these things. They are 'soft' post-modernists. Joyce recognizes that class is not a "purely discursive or linguistic" construction, and that the material, the symbolic, social practice and discourse are inseparable. Wahrman accepts that there are constraints on the possible ways in which social reality can be represented. But his interest lies in "the degree of freedom which in fact exists in the space between social reality and its representation" – a space permitting different representations of the social order, equally credible alternatives which may or may not become dominant under particular circumstances. Similarly, Cannadine shows how the vocabulary of class has itself been used to describe three very different conceptions of what he sees as the fundamentally enduring structures of social inequality in modern Britain, thereby facilitating barely conscious shifts from one to another. For both these historians the determinant of such choices is politics rather than social process; the political uses to which a particular rendering of the nature and implications of social inequality can be put.[9]

If some of the relationships implied remain under-specified, this could be seen as a stimulating challenge to explore them further. But perhaps what is most disturbing to historians of early industrial Britain is the way in which the 'linguistic turn' has undermined the grand narrative of class formation, not only by loosening its ties to capitalist industrialization post-1780, but also by emphasizing the partial and incomplete nature of the process itself; the complexity and mutability of class identities in nineteenth-century Britain and their contextual, contingent and conditional nature. It is not just that the goal posts have been moved; they have been dismantled. One can easily see why that upsets people. Yet from the perspective of an early modernist, it can be liberating.

Historians of early modern England with an interest in social structures and social relations long laboured under the constraints of a kind of conceptual and interpretative

prohibition. 'Class is not permitted in this period'. It was not that the period lacked economic and social inequality. It had these things in abundance. It was not that it lacked discourses of social classification. They were many and varied, drawing attention to several axes of differentiation: functional 'orders' or 'estates'; hierarchies of 'degrees' of wealth and status; 'sorts' of people arranged in dichotomous or in triadic configurations (better/richer; meaner/poorer; better/middle/poorer). In fact all the perceptions of the social order that Cannadine finds later subsumed in the language of class were present by 1650.[10] It was not that it lacked social conflict. There was plenty of that too, pitting lords against tenants, masters against journeymen, urban or rural elites against the 'commons', as conflict groups apparently embodying some kind of collective identity. Be that as it may, these things were not to be discussed in terms of the concept of class.

Why? Because to use that concept was anachronistic and inappropriate. Contemporaries rarely used the term 'class' before the eighteenth century. Moreover, as I put it myself almost twenty years ago:

> Many of the essential elements of the class alignments associated with
> the nineteenth century had not yet developed: mass industrial employment
> and factory work; greater urbanization; residential segregation; a large and
> independently-minded middle class; trade unions, voluntary associations and
> other institutions which were class based and able to give class interests
> national organization and expression and to stabilize and perpetuate class
> identities; fully developed conceptions of class structure and class conflict
> and prophesies of class destiny.[11]

In sum there was no class experience, class consciousness or class mobilization comparable to that then taken to be characteristic of the Victorian age. An early modernist might feel the craving to talk about class, but the 'Thank you for not talking about class' signs were posted everywhere to encourage self-control. Or almost everywhere: class was permitted in one 'designated area' - when talking about the gentry. As Peter Laslett pointed out in 1965, they certainly fit the theoretical bill in terms of economic and political dominance, cultural cohesion, and group identity at national level. Beyond gentlemen, however, this was still a "one class society".[12] Anyone for whom that was a problem had better go and stand outside, the nervous Weberians close to the door, the truculent Marxists gathered on the corner, openly rolling-up sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social classifications in nineteenth-century categories and passing the results around in blatant disregard of the thought police.

Nor would such deviant activity find much sympathy from historians of the age of class proper. With few exceptions they showed little interest in early modern society, save as a roughly caricatured 'before' with which to contrast a closely defined Victorian 'after'. It was assumed that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries offered no comparable experience. Class was a product of modernity, and like most students of modernity, their preoccupation with phenomena deemed to be both relatively recent and qualitatively novel led them to disregard the more distant past: an indifference nicely characterized by

Richard Jenkins as evidencing "a conceit that consigns most of human experience to a historical anteroom".[13]

Now, however, they have changed their tune. The majestic facade of nineteenth-century class society is crumbling. Class retains a material base, but is no longer firmly tied to, let alone reflective of, a particular set of economic structures. Class identities are no longer clearly defined, stable and enduring. They are highly contingent, contextual, localized, heterogeneous and ambiguous, as much a product of political alignment as of material conditions. This may seem a brave (or a terrifyingly anomic) new world to historians of the nineteenth century, but to an early modernist it all sounds surprisingly familiar. We have spent decades fretting about the unstable and contradictory nature of social relations and social identities between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. As Andy Wood has recently observed, released from the teleological assumptions of the old narrative of class formation, we are "freed to assess the historical content of those relations on their own terms. Instead of measuring early modern social formations and identities against a reified category of class deriving from nineteenth-century experience, we can develop more flexible, sensitive and historicized understandings of class identities and conflict".[14]

I agree. But I would add that we also need a developmental history of class – not one leading to a predetermined climacteric, but one recognizing that societies do change historically and that the contours of change can be mapped (however tentatively) and interpreted (however provisionally). One of the most useful ways of furthering that end for early modern England is to put the politics back: to consider these issues in the light of the rich historiography of state formation in this period, and to examine not only the relationship between social class and political participation in a developing polity, but also the ways in which the experience of such forms of 'citizenship' (or exclusion from them) could shape and reshape social identities over time.

II

We can begin by considering some of the established and relatively enduring characteristics of political society in early modern England. By the early sixteenth century England was already a precociously centralized polity; one in which the royal government could be remarkably effective in enforcing its will. At the same time, however, the professional bureaucratic element in government remained tiny. Day to day rule was largely devolved to unpaid members of pre-existing local elites; the 'natural rulers' of the localities, be they regional aristocratic magnates, gentleman landowners, civic leaders, or the 'principal inhabitants' of parishes and townships.[15]

This dispersal of governance, together with the assumption that fitness for office was to be judged in the first instance on local social standing, meant that, as David Eastwood puts it, the "symmetry between social status and political power…was striking". It also meant that there was a certain duality in the basis and legitimacy of authority. Public office was certainly distinguished from private power, but remained closely connected to it. Service to the crown confirmed social standing and indeed enhanced it, but did not in itself create it, and to this extent central government was obliged to share political space

with partially autonomous sources of legitimate authority.[16] This was most evident in the case of a great provincial magnate like the Earl of Northumberland, who in 1489 retained eighty-four lords, knights and esquires beyond his immediate household, laying out over two fifths of his rental income on fees and annuities to such personal retainers. He was the king's chief officer in the north, but he was also the focus of an intense loyalty amongst his own 'affinity', an entity ramifying outwards beyond his personal followers. "Throughout Northumberland", as Lord Hunsdon reported as late as 1569, "they know no other prince but a Percy". [17]   The same basic reality, however, could be equally, if less formally and spectacularly, evident in the authority exercised by many a county magistrate, urban alderman, or parish notable.

The fact that the capacity of the state rested upon its ability to mobilize the cooperation of local elites which enjoyed a degree of independent authority inevitably deeply influenced the texture of governance and the political relationship between local officers and higher authority. The system was highly <u>participatory</u>, right down to the level of the freemen who staffed juries and the constables who kept order in the villages. It was <u>consultative</u>; the governors of the counties and boroughs periodically met in parliament to debate the needs of the commonwealth, and enjoyed more frequent exchanges with central authority in the form of visits to court or correspondence with the privy council. It was <u>accommodative</u>. Local officers mediated between the demands of their rulers and their own communities, and were permitted a degree of discretionary latitude in the manner in which they governed locally. There was, in Diarmaid McCulloch's phrase, a certain "untidiness of government which was partly involuntary, partly deliberate".[18]

In these respects the 'social depth' of politics, and of forms of political decision making, was considerable. Moreover, such widespread involvement in rule could entail the dissemination of a political culture at what Patrick Collinson calls "relatively submerged levels" of the social order.[19]   The close relationship between political and judicial authority evident in the practice of administration through courts (county sessions; borough courts; manorial courts leet and so on) familiarized participants with the law which both legitimized and contained the exercise of power.[20] The corporate boroughs with their chartered liberties and privileges and structures of representation developed their own distinctive culture of "civic republicanism".[21] More generally, involvement with the enforcement of policy and its justifications (as set out in the preambles to statutes or royal proclamations) familiarized participants with the concept of the 'common weal', a language of politics which from the fifteenth century laid stress upon the mutuality of the obligations existing between crown and subject, and in particular the duty of rulers to pursue the welfare of the subject. By 1500 the commons assembled in parliament were regarded as the particular custodians of the common weal, but the same might be said also of all those who mediated between the state and local society.[22]

To a considerable extent, then, the structures of governance and of society were one and the same in early modern England. And to a considerable the exercise of political authority served not only to confirm but also to define the axes of differentiation within the social order. It is striking how often descriptions of the social hierarchy of Tudor and early Stuart England were set out in the context of describing the English polity, and how

far they utilized honorific terms derived from or associated with notions of service – some military (duke, knight, esquire), some governmental (citizen, burgess, yeoman). Mere occupational designations came only with those who did not rule. The institutional order of the polity was a network not only of power and authority but also of social identity.[23]

The stability implied by such depictions of England's social and political order, however, is deceptive (as their authors well knew). If the categories rehearsed in their accounts of the social hierarchy long retained their currency, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries none the less witnessed considerable shifts in its internal architecture. And if the generalizations I have made about the characteristics of political society retained their validity, it was also true that the period saw major changes in the scope and intensity of government.

Traditionally government was taken to have four principal functions: the maintenance of order and authority, the administration of justice, the protection of the church, and the defense of the realm. In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a set of interconnected developments (which can only be alluded to here) presented challenges in all these spheres, and provoked responses which have been characterized as "the growing pretensions of the English state". One contemporary called them "the increase of governance".[24]

The Tudor monarchy's perennial dynastic insecurity and will to be obeyed produced shifts in its relationships with its leading subjects, intended to thin their relative independence and enhance royal authority in the provinces. The same insecurity precipitated the Henrician Reformation of the 1530s, which, however limited its original intentions, moved the enforcement, defense and <u>definition</u> of English Protestantism to the center of the political stage, where it was to remain for a century and a half. England's changing place, and real or perceived vulnerability, in a confessionally divided Europe, led to a series of wars which increasingly strained the inadequate fiscal capacities of the crown and provoked conflict in parliament over both the conduct of foreign policy and the legality of the crown's fiscal expedients – issues which, together with mounting anxieties regarding the crown's religious policies at home, precipitated the constitutional crisis of 1640-42, and the subsequent slide into civil war. Meanwhile, from the second quarter of the sixteenth century, English society was galvanized by processes of economic and social change fuelled by demographic growth and price inflation. In the course of a century these brought about a doubling of the population and a gradual reconfiguration of the social order, involving marked shifts in the social distributions of wealth, power and 'life chances' - an increase in the size and collective wealth of the landlord class; the expansion and elaboration of a composite body of people of intermediate wealth (commercial farmers, manufacturers, merchants and professional men); a massive growth in the numbers and proportion of the population largely or wholly dependent upon wage labour in agriculture, or in the growing towns and rural industrial districts; increased poverty and vagrancy.

All this was actually or potentially productive of conflicts of interest: between crown and regional magnates; adherents of different religious positions; central authority and representatives of local society; lord and tenant; master and journeyman; the rich and the poor, or simply local rivals for wealth, power and influence. And in the course of meeting such threats, the role of the English state was gradually extended. There was more centralized direction, a plethora of regulative legislation, a degree of institutional innovation (be it in the structure and procedures of the Privy Council, the overhaul of the militia system, or the poor relief system) and above all enhanced activity in local government at every level from the lieutenancy and county bench to the parish.[25] These developments have been described as involving "the operational definition and redefinition of the state", a process of state formation which was "patterned but unplanned", "less a linear process than a sedimentary one", but one in which "successive waves of social, cultural and institutional development subtly reshaped the contours of the political landscape".[26] That is certainly so, and given the interpenetration of the state and the social order, it could hold potentially profound implications not only for patterns of political participation, but also for social relations and social identities. To appreciate this complex interrelationship it helps to consider the experience of each sector of political society, beginning with the first ranks: the nobility and gentry; those born to rule.

<center>III</center>

The literature of class formation at the turn of the nineteenth century is little concerned with the English ruling class: the gentry. They are usually assumed to have simply been there, representing at best a starus quo ante to be challenged. To an early modernist, this seems a characteristically myopic perspective.

To be sure, by 1500 the political society on whose cooperation royal authority rested was already far broader than the titular nobility. The notion of 'gentlemen' or 'the gentry' as a governing elite comprising all landowners of substance, rather than merely noblemen and knights, had emerged from an earlier period of intensification of local government in the fourteenth century.[27] Yet if the gentry were already present, they remained in the shadow of the territorial magnates whose affinities structured local loyalties. Royal administration was conducted through such men of "most power and worship" , and often according to their interests.[28] Indeed, as late as the mid sixteenth century England could still be envisaged as a mosaic of aristocratic spheres of influence: The earls of Shrewsbury in the north Midlands, Norfolk in East Anglia, Derby in the North West, Northumberland in the North East, Bedford in the South West, and so on. Shrewsbury could be flattered as "a prince (alone in effect) in two counties in the heart of England". Lord Berkeley was "imbowelled into the soil" of Gloucestershire, and into its governance also.[29]

Such semi-autonomous networks of power needed to be enlisted in the crown's interest, bound in by the judicious exercise of propaganda, patronage, consultation and (when necessary) coercion, and counterbalanced by the nurturing of the crown's own affinity of minor noblemen and gentlemen, whose loyalty was less ambiguous and conditional.[30] If

this had always been so with regard to the securing of dynastic loyalty and military support, it became even more so when the crisis of the Reformation superimposed issues of religious principle onto the perennial contest for power, influence and honour. The Reformation put a new premium on all the existing methods of handling relations between crown and political nation, through consultation (in council and parliament); propaganda (explaining the legitimacy of the crown's claims and purposes regarding the church); patronage (not least the distribution of former church land); and coercion (the periodic striking down of those whose religious disaffection extended into imminent threat). None of this involved a systematic strategy of reducing aristocratic power in itself. Yet the fact remains that by the 1570s the greatest of England's regional magnates were either gone, or firmly tied to crown service and neutralized by the extension of more multiplex channels of royal authority into the provinces. Cumulatively this amounted to a reconfiguration of political society, a gradual shift of weight within the existing ruling class. It has been aptly described as involving less the "rise" than the "emancipation" of the gentry, a loosening of bonds of lordship in favour of a more fluid system of political patronage, and a change in the nature of their political participation, involving a more direct relationship to the crown.[31]

From the final quarter of the sixteenth century this process was consolidated and further advanced by the "increase of governance". The gentry were moré frequently involved in crown service. The commission of the peace for Suffolk, for example, more than doubled in size between 1570 and 1621, while that of Norfolk grew threefold between 1562 and 1608. More than a quarter of the gentry families of Northumberland provided justices between 1586 and 1625, with many more engaged in less prestigious offices, and it was much the same in Yorkshire under Charles I.[32] Not only did they hold office, they were also considerably busier. Of the 306 statutes requiring enforcement by the justices of the peace extant in 1599, 113 had been passed since 1547 (most of them concerning the enforcement of religious conformity and various forms of economic and social regulation) and the statute book was still growing. Moreover, lest they proved lax in their duties or questionable in their loyalties, local governors were monitored, purged, brought to heel, instructed by council letter and lectured at by assize justices on circuit in a manner that was altogether novel.[33]

Government (and the politics that it entailed) was a greater presence in the lives of the county gentry of the late Elizabethan and early Stuart period, and it affected both their relations to one another and their self-perception as a group. Authority was being delegated into the provinces less through single figures (however loyal) than to groups of men who were required to act in concert, and to do so they needed to create some sort of working community.[34] This was commonly a less than smooth process. County government could engender rivalry and competitiveness, and was frequently disturbed by faction strife, in which personal hostilities were superimposed upon issues of policy (and vice versa).[35] Yet insofar as they part of the same arguments, the county gentry constituted collectively a new kind of provincial political community, focused upon the county as the unit of administration which was their principal arena of activity and the locus of their emergent political identity.

Yet neither was as bounded as might at first appear. If the truculently 'localist' dispositions generated in the world of county administration were certainly part of their political make-up, it has long been recognized that early modern England was far more than a "union of partially independent county states".[36] County government could foster a particular set of loyalties and boundaries. But local government was also, almost by definition, a framework for the interaction of local particularism with more extensive interests. The demands of central government, when they ran counter to specific local interests, could provoke evasion, foot-dragging, and (most commonly) selective enforcement.[37] But they also engendered more constructive responses. The justices of Elizabethan Norfolk not only received their instructions, but also debated their implications, took votes, and mounted policy and administrative initiatives of their own. They offered their views in letters to the privy council, voiced their grievances in petitions, attempted to influence policy by activating court patrons in their behalf, and on occasion sought to negotiate with the royal government. They saw themselves as guardians of the interests of their 'country', but were equally aware of their role within a larger political entity.[38]

In this they were not alone. If a new kind of political community was emerging in the counties, giving new forms of agency and expression to local ruling elites, it was forged in the heat of an "intensifying dialogue between center and localities"[39], and that dialogue was conducted in a justificatory rhetoric that reveals the penetration of a common discourse of rule. The sixteenth century witnessed an elaboration of the notion of the 'gentleman' which involved "an adaptation of Aristotle's definition of the citizen as the man whose wealth and leisure freed him from material preoccupations for the task of equipping himself to govern the <u>polis</u>, the state".[40] Humanist emphasis upon the training of noblemen "that they may be able to execute offices in the commonweal" gradually wrought a transformation in the education of the sons of the English elite, from service in noble households to classical and legal education in grammar schools, universities and the Inns of Court. For some this might not mean too much. But it did at least familiarize them with Ciceronian ideals of public service – <u>De Officiis</u> was a favoured textbook. It enabled them to adapt classical notions of citizenship to their own milieux, and by melding such concepts with indigenous notions of law, privileges, liberties and the common weal, it gave some of them the capacity "to express their grievances, conflicts of interest, and convictions in generalized constitutional, religious, or philosophical terms".[41]

There was no essential separation of local and national political activity. They interacted constantly. The issues debated in parliament frequently originated in local experience, or were at least inflected by it. And if central government closely scrutinized its local agents, they in turn were increasingly aware of its own peculiar dynamics of personality and principle – through court connections, or through subscription to newsletters.[42] In their interaction with central authority, be it instrumental or ideological, the gentry elaborated a novel political identity of their own. It extended beyond lordship and service to notions of citizenship, to the appropriation of the guardianship of sound religion, law, the liberties of the subject, and the preservation of the commonwealth, and ultimately to a willingness to challenge the legitimacy of the actions of an unreliable

royal government and to put the crown under terms. Practice and discourse congealed in the making of a new ruling class.

IV

Gentry politics is one of the great themes of early modern English historiography, and for good reason. Yet at no time during the period was government the monopoly of the nobility and gentry. Between "gentlemen" and "the fourth sort or classe" whose place was "onelie to be ruled, not to rule other", Sir Thomas Smith recognized two intermediate groups, distinguished not only by their economic "substance" but also by their participation in governance. First, "citizens and burgesses, such as not onely be free and received as officers within the cities, but also be of some substance to bear the charges". Next "those whom we call yeomen", countrymen of "a certaine preheminence and more estimation than laborers and artificers", who "commonly live welthilie", and (after gentlemen) " have the greatest charge and doings in the common wealth".[43] It is only comparatively recently, however, that historians have fully appreciated the significance of these 'middling' groups and the extent to which their political role was also transformed in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fuller investigation of that process remains the most promising area for the development of what Patrick Collinson calls an "extended political history", one that can reveal "how nine thousand parishes composed, at a higher level, a single political society".[44]

In both cases it appears that change was initially precipitated by the Reformation. In England's towns the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536-40, and its aftermath precipitated a wave of new urban incorporations (some 137 in the period 1540-1641) and additional re-incorporations. These were motivated in part by a desire to secure rights of self-government in order to fend off the claims of new and more intrusive landlords, but above all by the need to secure a corporate identity which would permit the ownership and use of former ecclesiastical property in the towns concerned. This in itself constituted a galvanizing of political activity as urban leaders organized campaigns for incorporation by royal charter and engaged in hard fought litigation over their rights and liberties with those who claimed seigneurial jurisdiction over them. Cumulatively, it produced "a massive geographical extension of corporate principles and practices", and of the culture of urban citizenship, especially to the middle range of English towns.[45] At the level of the parish, above all the rural parish, the post-Reformation period witnessed not increased autonomy, but a "growing exposure to external authority", partly occasioned by the enforcement of religious change, and partly by the accretion of tasks handed down to parish officers by central government (notably, but not exclusively, the enforcement of the Elizabethan poor laws). This "increasing intrusiveness" of government initiated what has been called "the reinvention of the English parish as a unit of local government".[46]

If the Reformation marked a watershed in some important respects, however, it was also the case that response to the acquisition these new powers and duties was also shaped by other longer-term developments. Chief among these were the demographic and economic trends which gradually widened the socio-economic distance between the local ruling groups of both urban and rural society and their poorer neighbours. In a very real

sense they were Janus-faced. On the one hand, they were the leaders and representatives of their communities. As such they might litigate litigate and petition to defend their towns against the designs of powerful outsiders (usually local gentlemen) upon their properties and privileges. They might lead manorial communities in resistance to seigneurial encroachments upon their customs and commons (at law, in protest riots, and often both).[47] On the other hand they were often increasingly distanced from their neighbours in both wealth and interests, as well as charged with an increasing burden of regulative authority over their neighbours (above all those actually or potentially chargeable to the poor rates).

In this, as in many other respects, their experience in their own, narrower, sphere of activity was comparable to that of the county magistracy. They too were busier as the subaltern authorities most immediately engaged in the enforcement of policy on the ground. They too were sensitive to clashes between the demands of higher authority and the interests and dispositions of their neighbours (and themselves). They also had to mediate between the two. They were as adept as the gentry at foot-dragging and the use of their discretionary power to enforce the law selectively. They could be equally voluble in questioning the demands made on them or in petitioning for special consideration or exemption. If they were accustomed to accepting the leadership and authority of the gentry, they were also able and willing to assert their own views (albeit usually in petitionary form). And they were willing to assert their own authority too, to take governmental initiatives of their own. More than a few towns anticipated the national poor laws with schemes of their own which helped, experimentally, to shape the national policy that was formulated in parliament. Both towns and individual parishes could lead the way in advancing godly reformation too, backing their preaching ministers with regulatory campaigns against what they perceived as sinful disorders (and not infrequently touching off fierce local conflicts between reformers and cultural conservatives in the process).[48] Not all initiatives in governance came from above. They frequently reflected the activism of local interest groups who responded to the challenges and opportunities of the day by finding new uses for political power, and who drew upon the authority of the state in their own spheres and for their own purposes.[49]

Predictably, those responses varied a great deal in accordance with the circumstances and the social and political structures of particular local communities. One unmistakable general trend, however, was towards the remodeling of both town and parish government in the direction of more oligarchical rule.

Oligarchy in the sense of the rule of the few, usually deemed those self-defined as most fitted for office, was of course neither a novelty nor necessarily deemed improper in early modern society. There had always been a degree of effective oligarchy in the social composition of urban councils, manorial juries and parish leadership. The increased social differentiation of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, seems to have contributed to an enhancement of such informal oligarchy and (in the early seventeenth century especially) a trend towards its legal formalization. Jan Pitman's close study of office holding in north Norfolk parishes reveals that there were many locally-inflected "traditions of participation", and that service in minor office was

sometimes quite widespread for well-rooted husbandmen and craftsmen. Nevertheless, labourers <u>rarely</u> held any office. Yeomen <u>usually</u> did so. "Unlike other groups, the yeomanry were almost certain to be called upon to hold office, regardless of the parish in which they resided". They held the highest offices and often did so repeatedly.[50] What varied was the <u>degree</u> of their dominance.

It was to secure such dominance that local ruling groups increasingly sought forms of legal definition, through the inclusion of oligarchical structures in urban charters of incorporation, or by petitioning for the creation of 'closed' parish vestries – in both cases reserving decision-making powers to small bodies of notables who recruited by cooption. That such processes were themselves the outcome of tension and political conflict is evident enough in the disputes which erupted between urban oligarchs and the larger body of excluded freemen, and the terms in which such groups as the "ancientest and better sort of the parish" of Orsett, Essex petitioned in 1618 to secure their direction of parish government from the "disquietness and hinderance" occasioned by "the dissent of the inferior and meaner sort".[51] In this, as in the transformation of county government, state formation under the Tudors and Stuarts was intimately connected to the process of elite formation. Its development was the outcome not just of the demands of central government but of the ways in which it could give expression to the interests and aspirations of strategically placed social groups, and in so doing further empower them.[52]

There is no question that at the level of the town or parish the beneficiaries of such processes of exclusion regarded themselves, and were regarded by others, as a local governing class, defined by their relative wealth, status and power. Their sense of differentiation and collective identity were evident in the trappings and rituals of civic government, and in the protocols and procedures of the vestry.[53] Both were evident also in their language of self-definition as the "better sort", the "graver sort", the "chief", "most substantial", or "principal" inhabitants, and in their habit of confidently appropriating to themselves the public identity of the entire community as "the townsmen", "the parish", or "the inhabitants".[54] How far they had a larger social and political identity remains a matter of debate. Henry French has argued powerfully that they did not; that their collective identities, though confidently asserted within particular social settings, were highly specific, intelligible only in the context of local hierarchies, and that beyond them "middling groups…were united only by a failure to perceive their wider existence".[55]

Clearly such local contexts mattered. Perhaps for some "principal inhabitants" they were all important. Yet at the same time, too resolute a focus upon the local, and upon local records, carries the risk of placing artificial boundaries on the social and political horizons of at least some of the people involved. There were those who also moved in larger spaces and were animated by broader concerns. The coordinates of their identities were set not only by local local hierarchies but also by lateral connections with others of their sort – most obviously those established by their commercial and professional dealings, or by marital and kinship connections extending over larger social areas.[56] Again, they were surely familiar with their place in the larger structure of rule. However jealously they guarded their local authority and elements of authority, they were

involved, by virtue of their offices in a variety of "participatory situations" in which they interacted with one another as well as with their social superiors.[57] They opposed one another in pauper settlement disputes between parishes, heard before the justices. They sat together on trial and presentment juries. Indeed, jury service is a potent example, for it not only brought together collections of parish notables in an extra-parochial context but also exposed them to a larger discourse of governance in the form of the charges delivered to them by magistrates.

"You of the jury be the principal instruments of this business", William Lambarde told the Maidstone jurors in 1583, "put in trust by the law to solicit and procure the glory of God and service of the Queen, the quiet of the good and correction of the bad…and you above other are to answer unto God and the Queen's Majesty and your country for the same." In such lay sermons humanistic concepts of public service could be disseminated to a socially broader audience and local concerns could be placed in national perspective. Forty years later Sir Richard Grosvenor's charges to the Cheshire jury sought to forge "important ideological links between the arena of national politics and local society". A century after that jurors were regularly treated to disquisitions on the excellence of English laws and liberties and their role in preserving both.[58] Nor were such occasions the only means by which local notables could be exposed to the issues of national religious and political debate. They were the most literate section of the common people, with access to the diversifying print culture of the age, and in particular to the developing news media. They heard sermons as well as charges. They interacted routinely with gentlemen, clergymen, lawyers, carriers and other human conduits of information. They participated collectively in borough and county elections, at least some of which were politically contested.[59]

In all these ways, the middle ranks can be said to have been incorporated into not only an intensified system of governance, but also an expansive political sphere. Recognition of their place, and potential leverage, within a larger political arena is evidenced in the repeated attempts made in the course of the seventeenth century by members of a divided national elite to mobilize their active support – as voters, petitioners, or demonstrators in each of the major periods of political agitation from the 'Spanish Match' of the 1620s, through the crisis of 1640-2, to the 'rage of party' after 1688. In the 1640s they were also called on to serve both king and parliament in arms. The fact that some not only responded to such appeals for their support, but also proved willing on their own account to resist Ship Money or the military levies of 1639-40, to withhold support from 'natural rulers' whose choice of civil war allegiance did not meet their approval, to force the hand of hesitant county leaders, to dismantle altar rails, demonstrate before the doors of parliament and more besides, is evidence that many of them regarded the constitutional and religious issues of the civil wars as very much their own. The politicization of many of the principal inhabitants of England's towns and villages helped to make the civil wars possible. The political further education of some in the course of the struggle helped to radicalize the politics of the post-war search for settlement. The hostility and disillusionment of others was a factor in the Restoration of 1660. People of this sort were participants throughout – on both sides – and they and they remained participants in the

renewed political and religious controversies of the later seventeenth century and in the partisan politics of Whigs and Tories in the Augustan age.[60]

Such participation made possible, perhaps even demanded, the attribution to such people of a broader collective identity. They were often referred to simply as "the people", in the restricted seventeenth-century sense of the term, which commonly confined it to independent householders of substance placed between the gentry and the poor – a vaguely defined notion of a citizen body.[61] In the polemical writing of the civil war era, however, a more socially located and somewhat less ambiguous term was increasingly employed: "the middle sort of people". As a term of social description, "the middle sort" was not entirely novel. It had occasionally been employed in earlier generations, usually in an urban context. From the 1640s, however, it gained both greater currency and a novel resonance when it was appropriated by parliamentarian propagandists to identify their supporters amongst the common people.

The essential point about "the middle sort" is that it was a term that identified a political constituency which was distinct not only from the gentry, but also from the mass of the common people. It did so by ascribing to them not only a distinctive "middle" position, but also a variety of positive qualities – economic worth, independence, sobriety, godliness, ability, and responsibility – deemed to be largely absent among the "vulgar", "basest", "lowest", "poorest", sorts; the "needy multitude" from whom they were to be distinguished. And having identified them, it claimed them. Parliament's cause was supported by such people, and not (as royalist alleged) by an undifferentiated rabble.

As a collective designation, the "middle sort" was thus an essentially political construction (and an exceedingly tendentious one at that). It imposed a collective identity upon a variegated body of people who in their own local societies, as we have seen, might have construed their social identities in rather different terms. It did so for the purpose of claiming their political allegiance. But it was only possible to attempt this because such people were in fact already playing a significant, and sometimes vigorously independent, role in events of national significance. And once created as a category, it became possible for some such actors in the turmoil of the 1640s to adopt the term as a self-identification, and to recognize more fully their own distinctiveness as an interest group. The Levellers did so then. Others were to do so thereafter.[62]

Dror Wahrman is mistaken in his assertion that "before the late eighteenth century, in terms of the structures of power, the 'middle class' was all but invisible as a distinctive presence". Those termed "the middle sort of people" were well-established in the local structures of power. Moreover, they had played a part in the making of the English Revolution and in a sense their involvement in that cataclysm had helped to make them, both in terms of their identification by others in political life and, to a degree at least, their self-discovery in national political action. That left a legacy in English political culture. Traditional patterns of authority were certainly reasserted; yet the "middle sort" continued to play a role. To be sure they were a heterogeneous body; divided by religion, by particular economic interests, by party allegiances. Yet they were also connected by equivalences of standing, business networks, intermarriage, an elaborating urban

associational life, and by continued political participation; as projectors, as lobbyists, as members of the electorate, and above all through shared and continuous activity in local government. Political involvement had been a vital element in the gradual remaking of England's social middle in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it remained so. If they generally deferred to the leadership of gentlemen, theirs was in John Smail's phrase, a "contingent deference". If they were politically contained, that was perhaps because they were very much part of the existing system of governance, and it was sufficiently responsive to their interests to place limits on both their discontents and their ambitions – for the time being.[63]

<div align="center">V</div>

For members of the 'political nation' in its broadest definition, the changing nature and intensity of their participation in governance carried potentially profound consequences. The increased presence of the more 'extensive' influences represented by the demands and priorities of the evolving Tudor and Stuart state presented challenges to what Lawrence Manley calls 'sedentarism' – settled patterns of expectations, loyalties and social relations bound to a particular social setting – and forced their reappraisal.[64] Insofar as these challenges were closely related to processes of religious, economic and social change, their participation also engaged them with problems which subtly influenced their perceptions not only of the scope and purposes of government, but also of their own role within the structure of authority, and their relationships to one another and to those placed above or below them in the social scale. It involved them in conflicts of interest that modified their social alignments and self perceptions, and in events that incorporated narrower into wider social and political identities. It influenced their sense of social location and encouraged the formation of new forms of collective identity – some immanent, some fully realized. Cumulatively, it reconfigured political society, edging forward the formation and consolidation of not only of a new national ruling class, but also a congeries of more closely defined local ruling groups, some of whom conceived of themselves as part of a larger citizenry. If they exercised their authority in more circumscribed spheres, they were both aware of, and capable of erupting into, a larger political space.

If all this can be argued for those who enjoyed recognized places in the social distribution of power and authority, what can be said of Sir Thomas Smith's "fourth sorte or classe" – day labourers, poor husbandmen and artificers, "those which the old Romans called <u>capite censii proletarii</u> or <u>operae</u>". Demographically, such people were a growing presence. Politically, however, it could be said that for much of this period their role was contracting. Smith conceded that "suche lowe and base persons" might sometimes serve in lesser local offices, and to this extent were "not altogether neglected". Yet diminishing access to the land meant that they were less likely to have a voice in manorial institutions. Widening socio-economic distance between urban master craftsmen and their journeymen employees reduced the latter's effective participation in the guilds. The growth of civic and parochial oligarchy curtailed such role as they had in civic and parish government. In sum, they were increasingly unlikely to have access to decision making powers in their communities. As Smith said, "These have no voice nor authoritie in our

common wealth, and no account is made of them but onelie to be ruled, not to rule other".[65]

Those whose place was "onelie to be ruled" were on the receiving end of the increase in governance in two connected senses. First, as those most at risk of falling into chronic poverty, they were most likely to be the recipients of relief under the developing system of parochial poor relief, to become "a charge" to their rate-paying neighbours, in the blunt contemporary phrase. Secondly, and partly because of the fragility of their economic position, they were those most likely to be subject to the disciplinary attention of local officers and magistrates: as unwanted "inmates" and cottagers; youths "living out of service" or "at their own hand"; pregnant servant girls and so on. They constituted by far the greater part of those presented to the courts for minor misdemeanours. It was their marriages which were inhibited by parish officers anxious that they might "breed up a charge". They were those most subject to physical exclusion and removal from the parish under the settlement laws.[66]

In addition they were subject to pejorative social classifications which served to emphasize their relative poverty and their social and moral inferiority, and by implication to justify the regulative attentions of their "betters". They were persons of "no credit" as witnesses, the "poorer sort", "the meaner sort", the "ruder sort", "the vulgar"; "objects of charity" when viewed sympathetically, "the rascality" when their behaviour aroused indignation. State formation thus involved not only the formation of new governing elites but also the categorization of inferior groups. If group identities are characteristically formed by the establishment of boundaries, then the collective identity of the "labouring poor", that greatly enlarged segment of early modern English society, could be said to have been shaped by various forms of subordination, denigration and exclusion.[67]

It was largely, but not entirely so. The "meaner sort" might have no authority in the common wealth, but they still had a place within that imagined community, albeit a humble one. Their role was to work and to obey, but their well-being and legitimate interests should be considered. The pervasive inequality of society was deemed god-given, immutable and indeed desirable. Every catechized child knew its duty "to ordre myself lowlye and reverentlye to al my betters". But the poor were taught also to expect equity if not equality of treatment, and that expectation could give them a voice of sorts.[68] The 'public transcript' of common weal, true gentility, Christian stewardship, hospitality, good neighbourhood and concern for the deserving poor, repeatedly rehearsed in statutes, proclamations and homilies, was intended in the first instance to legitimize established authority. But it could also be used to urge those in authority to live up to the standards of their own rhetoric, and manipulated to elicit a desired response. This could be so for an individual petitioner, deferentially praying for relief, redress, or protection in a manner that commonly emphasized the stereotypical deservingness of the "poor orator" and the expectation of a generous response from "your worships". It could be even more so when collective appeals were made from "the country", as when two hundred unemployed weavers petitioned the Essex justices in 1629, "with too many words and

outcryes, followeinge us from place to place, and moving us for Comiseration, and urging present answer".[69]

The poorer sort could also exert themselves more robustly, above all in situations where they knew, or believed, themselves to have rights which justified a shedding of the deference usually accorded to their superiors and the claiming of an effective equality before the law. Servants, apprentices and journeymen, for example, were conventionally subject to the disciplinary authority of their masters and mistresses, including often enough physical "correction". But some of them were willing to cite their masters before the magistrates or guild officers for breach of contract, mistreatment, or unpaid wages. That employers could be reprimanded, shamed, even punished, for behaviour described as "unreasonable", "unjust", "unlawful", or even "inhumane", "monstrous", or "unnatural", was both a recognition by the relevant authorities of standards which should be maintained and a warning to others to observe them. Such initiatives by subordinates were both personal and political acts.[70]

Far more spectacular were the numerous occasions on which manorial tenants and commoners vigorously and pugnaciously defended their customary rights against encroachments by landlords, in campaigns which could escalate from appeals and petitions to litigation, anonymous threats, and riotous action. Such contests commonly involved coalitions of interest, in which yeomen, husbandmen and cottagers acted together, sometimes with the support of sympathetic gentlemen. But the poorer sort, insofar as they still held land or enjoyed rights of common, had their part to play in them, and on occasion, when abandoned by more authoritative supporters, they were capable of finding their own leaders and acting alone.[71]

The defense of customary rights could also animate resistance beyond the agrarian sphere, among the "Free Miners" of the Derbyshire lead-field, for example, or the lesser freemen who protested against the curtailment of their role in urban government.[72] It was evident also among urban journeymen who nurtured an "exceptionally durable" portfolio of ideas and expectations regarding wages, work and conditions of employment: the customs of the trade. As the guilds atrophied into associations of masters, these notions were carried over into the clandestine journeymen's associations which sought to defend established expectations in negotiations with, intimidation of, and strikes against their employers.[73] In trades never subject to guild regulation – coalmining, for example, or rural manufacturing – new worlds of custom gradually evolved, and were defended with comparable tenacity when occasion demanded.[74]

Last but not least, all of the poorer sort could claim the right to eat. That right was frequently asserted in times of dearth, in well organized and usually well-disciplined grain riots, directed at the middlemen in the grain trade who were identified by the royal government itself as profiteering "cormorants of the commonwealth". These crowd actions were a form of "petitioning in strength and in deed", intended to galvanize sluggish local authorities into the enforcement of the marketing regulations laid down in the Books of Orders issued by the privy council in times of scarcity under Elizabeth and

the early Stuarts, and claiming their legitimacy from such well known government measures.[75]

In all these ways, people of the poorer sort could exert forms of political pressure on their masters and governors, seeking to hold them to account, placing constraints upon the exercise of power, and thereby "negotiating the terms, rather than the fact of their subordination".[76]   The discovery of such elements of political agency and of the meanings and values with which they were infused, has been the central theme of a generation of historians of popular political culture, drawing inspiration from the work of E.P. Thompson, and more recently James C. Scott.[77]   Important as such work is, however, the celebration of the agency of the poorer sort remains problematic as an account of their place in the political society of early modern England.

Unlike the gentry, or the "chief inhabitants" of England's towns and villages, the poorer sort were not routinely involved in governance or in political activity (unless we are to extend the latter term so far that it becomes synonymous with engagement in almost any kind of social relationship). Certainly they had to deal with people of superior standing and power almost on a day to ay basis. As we have seen, they knew how to pluck at the sleeve of authority. But the occasions on which they were emboldened to twist its arm were relatively rare. They illustrate what <u>could</u> happen under certain circumstances rather than what usually did.

Two sets of circumstances stand out in particular. First, popular resistance was usually just that: <u>resistance</u>. It was episodic and reactive rather than normative, a defensive response to exceptionally threatening circumstances. Secondly, such a response was most likely to be forthcoming when the mobilization of resistance was facilitated by certain institutional structures: the customs of the manor, of civic government, or the trade; clandestine combinations; the traditional rules of the marketplace. Such structures fostered positive group identities and conferred a sense of entitlement. Those identities were not necessarily class identities - they included membership of a manorial community or of a trade, being "free" of a city, being a consumer in the marketplace – but they could take on the colouring and tone of class antagonism whenever polarizations of interest pitted the relatively poor against the rich, the relatively weak against "great men".

The significance of these circumstances is the more apparent when we consider the chronology and geography of popular resistance. Agrarian conflict was at its most vigorous in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when the pressures upon landlords to 'improve' their estates, in the sense of raising their income, provoked numerous assaults upon established customs and patterns of land use. Its geography varied as that imperative impacted on rural communities in different regions: now in the Midland Plain, now the northern uplands, now the western forests, now the eastern fens.[78] It faded as the rural society of each region was gradually reconstructed. Sometimes that meant the battle had simply been lost. More often it was simply abandoned as the changing structures of rural society transformed the interests of those who had once belonged to the same manorial communities. By 1700 most agricultural land was held by

substantial commercial farmers negotiating their leases individually with their landlords. Manorial institutions were commonly defunct. Seventy per cent of the cultivable area of England was enclosed and common rights extinguished. The poorer sort were largely, if not completely proletarianized, rarely possessing any rights over the land to be defended.

In contrast, industrial conflict can occasionally be identified in the earlier part of our period, but is far more evident in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This form of popular political action was markedly increasing in its incidence. Its chronology reflects the more capitalistic structure of manufacturing, the growing divergence of the interests of masters and lifelong journeymen, the declining effectiveness of the guilds as institutions for resolving such conflict, and the perpetuation of elements of their culture in new, clandestine, forms of journeyman organization. Geographically, it began in the towns, but gradually spread to those areas of rural industrial activity where substantial numbers of industrial wage workers, living in close proximity, were able to replicate the organizational structures pioneered by urban journeymen. It was to be found also in the mines and at sea, where concentrations of workers, engaged in coordinated forms of labour, and customarily subscribing to agreed sets of articles when they signed on for a season's work or a voyage, showed a similar propensity for collective organization. It reveals the crystallization of a set of industrial cultures and associated collective identities which might be distinctive in their specifics, but which exhibited a shared capacity for "standing on their terms with their masters". [79]

Grain riots present a third alternative: a continuing tradition of popular action. That tradition was rooted in and legitimized by, popular apprehension of the paternalistic measures of the Tudor and early Stuart state; measures which were formally re-issued only once after 1631. But by that date popular expectations of the appropriate response to dearth were well established, and the grain riot was virtually institutionalized as a form of protest against alleged manipulators of the market and unrelieved suffering. Chronologically, food rioting fluctuated with the state of the harvest. But it continued to occur for as long as the structures of internal trade in foodstuffs remained unable to iron out inequalities of supply during times of scarcity. Geographically, however, it was far from universal. It occurred most commonly in the market towns of areas from which grain was shipped to supply urban markets, sometimes to the detriment of local consumers, and in industrial areas with dense populations of market-dependent wage earners. In both cases scarcity and unaffordable prices created grievance. But in both cases also, action depended on an institutional factor – the peculiarly well developed "community networks" linking the poor of such districts, and facilitating their mobilization in protest.[80]

In short, some forms of popular resistance were diminishing, some continuous, some emergent. In each case the outcome was closely related to the social and institutional structures of particular localities. As Andy Wood puts it, "Early modern plebeian politics was typically produced out of local cultures and local contexts."[81] It changed in its nature as those cultures and contexts were reconfigured in the course of the early modern period. If in some places that meant an increased potential for the exercise (when necessary) of political leverage, in many (perhaps most) it probably meant less. Miners, seamen, rural

cloth workers and urban artisans may have been engaged in establishing and elaborating some of the traditions of labour organization that were to emerge powerfully in the working class activism precipitated by the industrial development and political agitations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet important as this was, it was surely a minority experience. The world of the fragmented, unorganized, casual labouring poor of the cities was a different one.[82] There was little enough scope for sturdy independence, let alone dissidence, in the "highly visible, frequently intimate, world" of most rural parishes, where the poor laws now constituted the major institutional nexus, the poor had few rights beyond that of settlement (if they could sustain it) and relief and discipline went hand in hand.[83]

Awareness of the capacity of the poorer sort to resist, to dispute the terms of their subordination, is important. But as Andy Wood has recently argued, it does no service to the difficult task of understanding their experience if the current preoccupation with forms of agency leads to "understatement of the hugely unequal distribution of power in early modern society". Nor, as he also argues, should we underestimate the cultural consequences of such a situation: the "diminished sense of the self" arising from "the structural lack of power that labouring people felt", their limited capacity to imagine an alternative dispensation. The poorer sort were little exposed to the politically emancipatory discourses of their day. Most of them were immediately enveloped in the theory and practice of subordination. Resentment of the many injuries inseparable from their place is to be expected. So also is deference, and indeed complicity. Yet the poorer sort did claim a political voice in early modern England. It was "not something given within an open system of power relations". That they claimed it at all, some of the time, in some ways, in some places and sets of circumstances, for a while, and in so doing asserted positive social identities of their own, was itself remarkable; "an achievement, something won in the teeth of a profoundly unequal and often cruel class structure".[84]

VI

Almost forty years ago Peter Laslett called for a "new kind of history" of early modern England, one that would involve "the imaginative reconstruction of a former society", and by so doing, help us to "understand ourselves in time".[85] In the decades since that challenge was issued, one of the principal achievements of the social history of early modern England has been its de-mythologizing impact upon interpretative expectations derived from the founding fathers of the social sciences. Specifically, it demolished a number of the narratives of modernity created since the nineteenth century by social scientists who juxtaposed a conjectured 'traditional' past with an actually existing present, and traced the emergence of the latter from the era of the Industrial Revolution as a means of defining the essentially recent and qualitatively different nature of modern society. The narrative of class formation was the last of these grand narratives to survive unchallenged. Perhaps it seemed too robust. Its recent implosion, or assassination by its own Praetorians, however, allows us to reconsider the meaning of phenomena with which we have long been familiar.

To be sure, the discourse of class is a phenomenon of the modern world. The pioneering social scientists of the Enlightenment initiated the discovery of society as a "reified object" that could be scientifically described, and they popularized the language of class as a means of making the structures of society "legible".[86] From the turn of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, that language of social categorization was seized upon as a potent means of group identification, facilitating the advancement of a variety of social and political agendas.

Nevertheless, the problem of 'class', broadly defined as the relationship between structures of economic inequality and social, cultural and political identities, was not in itself new. It is equally relevant to the early modern period (and indeed to any other historical era). As I have tried to show, the early modern period in England witnessed its own momentum of economic, social structural, and cultural change – one no less shocking to contemporaries than the transformations of the Industrial and French Revolutions. In that context modes of participation in governance and politics also changed, and in that process new collective identities were defined or imposed. The historical experience of the gentry, the 'middle sort' and 'poorer sort' of early modern England tends to confirm what Richard Jenkins calls "the centrality of power (and therefore politics) in processes of identity maintenance and change", how "it is typically in political contexts that collective identities are asserted, defended, imposed, or resisted".[87] None of this can be understood in isolation from changes in the material world. Power had a material base. Yet different social groups found their identity through their participation in, or exclusion from, different arenas within a complex political culture – the county, the parliament, the borough, the parish, the manor, the workshop, the mine. In doing so they modified their relationships both to central authority and to one another. Class identities were created, locally, and sometimes nationally, rooted in economic difference, but defined in political process. Some were stabilized and institutionalized. Others remained highly contingent and dynamic. These were not the class identities of the nineteenth century – class identities are always "historically specific"[88] Nevertheless, they existed. Those who bore them created the context for the further realignments initiated at the turn of the nineteenth century. The Industrial and French Revolutions, and the politics of the Age of Reform shaped the particular class identities of the early nineteenth century: they made classes. They did not, however, "make" class. They labeled it. The thing itself was already there; always changing in its manifestations; ever present.

(11,755 words)

Notes   [Draft – still in abbreviated form]

* The phrase is Sir Thomas Smith's: <u>De Republica Anglorum</u> p. 65

[1] For a useful introduction to the concept of class see P. Calvert, <u>The Concept of Class</u>, esp. ch 1. For English usages P. Corfield, "Class by name and number…". The phrase 'charges of political electricity is borrowed from James Scott, <u>Domination and resistance</u>

[2] Key passages from Marx, EPT, Weber, conveniently available in Joyce ed. <u>Class</u>, pp. 28-9, 31-2, 131-133, 136. Katznelson & Zolberg, <u>Working Class Formation</u>, pp. 14-21.

[3] Crossick in Corfield ed. <u>Language</u>, pp. 152, 156; Sewell in Kaye & McClelland eds.. <u>E.P. Thompson</u>, p. 69ff.

[4] Reddy, <u>Rise of Market Culture</u>, p. 16; Joyce ed <u>Work</u>, pp. 8-9; Joyce, <u>Visions of the People</u>, p. 27ff,; Wahrman, <u>Imagining the Middle Class</u>, p. 21 and <u>passim</u>.

[5] Joyce, "Narratives of class" in his <u>Class</u> p. 322 (which extracts material from his <u>Democratic Subjects</u>.

[6] Joyce, <u>Visions</u>, pp. 10, 15, 29; Eley in Kaye & Mc eds. Pp. 25-26; Wahrman, <u>passim</u>; Cannadine, <u>Class in Britain</u>, <u>passim</u>, quoting pp. x, 19-20, 21-22, 58.

[7] These terms are borrowed from the discussion of national identities in A.D. Smith, <u>Nationalism</u>, p. 19

[8] Jenkins, <u>Social Identity</u>, pp. 30-8, 87-88, 99.

[9] Joyce, <u>Visions</u>, p. 15; Wahrman, <u>Imagining</u>, pp. 6-9, 11-13, quoting p. 6; Cannadine, <u>Class</u>, pp. 17-18.

[10] These are introduced in K. Wrightson <u>English Society</u>, ch. 1 and more fully discussed in K.W. "Estates, degrees & sorts" & "'Sorts of people' in early modern England".

[11] K.W. "The Social Order of Early Modern England" , in <u>World We Have Gained</u> p. 200

[12] Laslett, <u>The World we have lost</u>, p. [check]

[13] Jenkins, <u>Social Identity</u>, p. 10. For an excellent characterization of the 'modernist paradigm', see A.D. Smith, <u>Nationalism</u>, p. 46ff.

[14] A. Wood, <u>The Politics of Social Conflict</u>, p. 18. His chapter 1 is an excellent review of the problems of discussing class in the early modern period.

[15] Braddick, <u>State formation</u>, pp. 25-7, 28; Eastwood, <u>Government & community</u>, pp. 17-18.

[16] Braddick, pp. 29, 35; Eastwood, p. 119; Hindle, <u>Ststae & social change</u>, pp. 19-21.

[17] Pollard, pp. 121, 125-77, 401-2. Cf. James, <u>Family, lineage, and civil society</u>, p. 27ff; Hassell Smith, <u>County and court</u> pp. 25-43.

[18] McCulloch, <u>Suffolk</u>, p. 342. Cf. Braddick, pp. 27-8.

[19] Collinson, <u>De Republica</u>, p. 15.

[20] Corrigan and Sayer, <u>The Great Arch</u>, p. 37; Braddick, pp. 37, 39; Hindle, <u>State</u>, p. 23.

[21] Withington, "Two renaissances", <u>passim</u>.

[22] Starkey, pp. 19, 22. For subsequent development of the concept of common weal & its eventual replacement with notion of the 'public good', see Slack, <u>Reformation to Improvement</u>.

[23] Most famously Sir Thomas Smith's account in <u>De Republica Anglorum</u> pp. 64ff. It was closely related to William Harrison, disseminated through inclusion in Holinshed's chronicles. Cf. Thomas Wilson. See Maurice Keen, <u>Eng Soc Later Middle Ages</u>, p. 8ff on how statutes of additions, sumptuary law etc helped define the social order more closely.

[24] Fletcher, <u>Reform in the provinces</u>, p. 372; William Lambarde on "increase".

[25] For recent interpretative surveys of all the above trends with particular attention for their consequences for local government see: Hindle and Braddick, bioth of whom draw on a vast literature. For economic and social change, see KW <u>Earthly Necessities</u>.

[26] Quoting Hindle pp. ix and 14; Braddick,, p. 96.

[27] Nigel Saul, p. 257. Cf Harris in <u>P & P</u> (1993) p. 33.

[28] R.B. Smith, <u>Land & Politics</u>, pp. 144-5; Pollard p. 401; McCulloch, pp. 105-7.

[29] Barnard, <u>Early Tudor Nobility</u>, pp. 177, 179-80.

[30] Penry Williams, <u>Tudor Regime</u>, ch. 12; S.J. Gunn, <u>Early Tudor Government</u> ch. on 'Lordship'.

[31] R.B. Smith, <u>Land & politics</u>, pp. 256-8. This process was first described in the 1960s, in the aftermath of the by then bankrupt controversy over the supposed "rise of the

gentry" (for which see e.g. Hexter "Storm" and Mingay, The Gentry) One of the first descriptions of the process can be found in Stone, Crisis of the Aristocracy, ch. 5, since when it has been explored in many regional contexts: e.g. James, "Change & Continuity"; James, FLCS, p.45; Fletcher, Sussex, pp. 22-4; Watts, Border to Middle Shire, p. 55ff; McCulloch, Suffolk, pp. 53, 105-7; Hassell Smith, Norfolk, ch. 3.

[32] Fletcher, Sussex, p. 128; Watts, Border, p. 66; Cliffe, Yorkshire Gentry, p. 233.

[33] Braddick, p. 31; Hassell Smith, pp. 60-91 (the best local study); Fletcher, Sussex, chs. 7 & 11.

[34] R.B. Smith, Land & politics, p. 131. Cf. For comparable processes in an earlier context S. Reynolds, Kingdoms and communities, p.229.

[35] See e.g. Hassell Smith, ch. 9; Fletcher, Sussex, pp. 56-7; Holmes, Lincolnshire, p. 98; G.C.F. Forster, "N.Riding Justices" and "Faction and…" passim.

[36] Holmes, "The county community in Stuart historiography", p. 73.

[37] E.g. Hassell Smith, p. 102; Fletcher, p. 224.

[38] Hassell Smith, p. 93ff.

[39] Hindle, State & social change, p. 10.

[40] Morrill, "The northern gentry", p. 71.

[41] Kelso, English gentleman, ch. 6; Goldie, "unacknowledged republic', pp. 181-2; Peltonen, Classical humanism & republicanism, Intro; James, FLCS, p. 104.

[42] On the significance of newsletters, see The important article by R. Cust, "News and politics".

[43] Sir Thomas Smith, pp. 73-6. Smith describes yeomen as "for the most part" substantial farmers, though he implies that the category might also include other villagers of equivalent substance. He later observes that the term yeoman, "signifieth among us a man well at ease and having honestlie to live, and yet not a gentleman".

[44] P. Collinson. De Republica Anglorum, pp. 30-35. The place of yeomen was illuminated as early as Mildred Campbell's The English Yeoman (1940) but more generally the middle ranks have been closely studied only since the 1980s, and much remains to be done.

[45] For the process of incorporation, see R. Tittler, <u>Architecture & power</u>, pp. 75-85 and <u>The Reformation and the towns in England</u>, esp. chs. 4-8. On the larger significance of these trends, see Withington, "Two renaissances", quoting p. 253.

[46] Beat Kumin, <u>The making of a community</u>, p. 217, 243; Eastwood, <u>Government & community</u>, p. 13. For specific case studies of the impact of religious change and the increase of governance in the parishes, see e.g. E. Duffy, <u>Voices of Morebath</u>; K. Wrightson & D. Levine, <u>Poverty & Piety</u>.

[47] For the towns, see Tittler, <u>Architecture</u>, p. 81ff. Cf McCulloch; Underdown on Dorchester; Craig on 'Bury stirs'. For yeoman leadership in rural resistance see R.B. Smith pp. 161-3; M. James, <u>FLCS</u>, p. 84-5; Bush, <u>Pilgrimage of Grace</u>; R. Manning, <u>Village Revolts</u>.

[48] For different aspects of all this see: Kent, <u>Village Constable</u>; KW, "Two concepts of order"; Wrightson & Levine, <u>Poverty & Piety</u>; P. Slack, <u>Poverty and Policy</u>; Hindle.

[49] As is emphasized in Braddick, pp. 1, 5, 7, and Hindle, p. 15.

[50] Jan Pitman thesis, pp. 201ff, quoting from p. 204 and 237. Cf office holding in Terling; Archer pp. 64-9; Aldridge, "Chester", pp. 106-8; Henry French.

[51] Tittler, <u>Architecture</u>, pp. 98-100; Tittler, <u>Reformation and Towns</u>, pp. 141, 145, 186, 191-2 (or chs. 9, 10 <u>passim</u>); Hindle, <u>State</u>, p. 207ff., quoting p. 213.

[52] As is suggested by Braddick, pp. 337, 347.

[53] Tittler, <u>Architecture</u>, pp. 93, 102ff; Hindle, <u>State</u>, p. 217ff.

[54] KW, "Sorts of People" ; Hindle, <u>State</u>, pp. 212-13, 218; French, <u>P & P</u> (2000) p. 75.

[55] French, <u>P & P</u> (2000) pp. 96-8. Cf his <u>H.J.</u> (2000).

[56] See e.g. Rollison on Tyndales & Trotmans networks; O'Hara on yeoman marriage horizons.

[57] The phrase is Cynthia Herrup's – article or book.

[58] Lambarde in Gleason, <u>Justices</u>, p.13; Peltonen, <u>Civic humanism</u>, p. 28; Cust & Lake, p. 41 ff., quoting p. 51; Eastwood, <u>Government & community</u>, pp. 6-77. Cf at manorial level the Gateshead charges 1730s.

[59] Literacy – Cressy; Print culture – Capp, Cust, news revolution; Elections – Hirst.

[60] The literature on forms of popular political participation in 17th century England, and in particular that of the 'middle sort' is now extensive. For some important surveys, see e.g. Manning, English People & English Revolution; Underdown, Revel, Riot, Rebellion, and A Freeborn People; Hirst, Rep of People; Brooks, "Professions"; Tim Harris article. An excellent recent overview with many original suggestions is Andy Wood, Riot, rebellion and popular politics. For local studies, see: Lindley, London; Wood, Politics of social conflict; J, Walter, Understanding popular violence.

[61] Brooks, "professions", p. 136.

[62] For the "middle sort", see KW "Sorts of people", pp. 41-49; A. Wood, RR&PP, pp. 122-5, 134-6.

[63] Wahrman, p.4. For the 18th century middle sort, see Barry, d'Cruze, and Rogers in Barry & Brooks eds., The Middling Sort + John Smail, Middle Class Culture, esp. ch 5.

[64] 'Extensive' interests is Braddick; L. Manley, Literature and Culture in early modern London (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 15-16, 532-3, 568.

[65] Smith, De Republica Anglorum, pp. 76-7. The declining socio-economic position of labourers, artisans and husbandmen is surveyed in KW, Earthly Necessities.

[66] See e.g. Hindle, State on crime, poverty, moral regulation, + his articles on pauper marriage, exclusion etc. + flag the new book On the Parish.

[67] For such terminology, see KW, "Sorts of People".

[68] Quoting from 1549 Prayer Book catechism (in service of confirmation). Many catechists extended their exposition of the Ten Commandments to include duties to the poor – e,g, Dod & Cleaver.

[69] For the general point, see Walter & Braddick eds Intro, pp. 16, 18, 22. For specific examples, Walter, "Politics of Subsistence", p. 133ff, quoting p. 137. [Could put petition of Elizabeth Banckes into the text to exemplify style of individual petitioning].

[70] See Griffiths, Youth & Authority, ch. 6; P. Rushton article; I. Archer on guild responsiveness to complaints.

[71] A very substantial literature now exists: for surveys, see Manning, Village revolts; Wood, RR&PP, chs. 2,3; and J. Walter "Politics of Subsistence". Particularly useful case studies are Buchanan Sharp (Forests); Lindley (Fens); Walter, "Rising of the People".

[72] Wood, Politics of Social Conflict, ch. 6 and Part III passim. Cf his "Custom, law and resistance" in Griffiths, Fox, and Hindle eds. Experience of Authority. For urban social

conflict over rights & customs, Tittler, Reformation in towns, pp. 188, 191-2, and case studies in Hirst, Representative of the people.

[73] Malcolm Chase, Early Trade Unionism, pp. 3, 17-18, 27-8; D. Woodward, Men at Work, pp. 198-9.

[74] Levine & Wrightson, Making of an industrial society, pp. 344-427; A. Randall, Before the Luddites.

[75] Walter & Wrightson, "Dearth and the social order"; Walter, "Grain riots and the law". For the continuation of this tradition in the 18th century, see E.P. Thompson's seminal "The moral economy of the English crowd".

[76] Walter & Braddick, Negotiating Power, Intro, p.42. Cf KW, "Politics of the parish", p. 31.

[77] It all begins with Thompson's Making of the English Working Class, and his subsequent essays on the "rebellious traditional culture of the 18th century – many gathered in Customs in Common. More recently James C. Scott's Weapons of the weak and Domination & the arts of resistance have been extremely influential on early modern historians. Scott fully acknowledges his own debt to Thompson.

[78] Manning, Village revolts provides the fullest account of these geographical shifts. See also Atlas of Rural Protest

[79] Malcolm Chase passim; Dobson, Master and Journeyman; Wrightson & Levine Making; M. Rediker, Devil & the Deep Blue Sea. For a brief overview see KW, Earthly Necessities.

[80] Walter on geography of grain riots; Buchanan Sharp on association with rural industrial areas; Bohstedt on geography and 'community networks.

[81] A. Wood, Politics of Social Conflict, p. 249.

[82] See e.g. Leonard Schwarz on labour in late 18th century London, and the contrast between semi-skilled and casual labour.

[83] Quoting Eastwood, Government and community, p. 30.

[84] All quotations are from A.Wood, "Nidderdale", pp. 2, 17, 20 (unpublished – thanks for permission to refer).

[85] P. Laslett, The World we have lost

[86] James C. Scott, <u>Seeing Like a State</u> for the characterization of the enlightenment project and the notion of 'legibility'. Scott does not himself discuss class.

[87] R. Jenkins, <u>Social Identity</u>, p. 23.

[88] A. Wood, <u>Politics of Social Conflict</u>, p. 24.