



ROUTLEDGE

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF ENGLAND 1851-1990

François Bédarida

A
Social
History
of
England
1851–1990

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. . . this scepter'd isle, . . .
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall, . . .
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Richard II*

This is a letter of hate. It is for you, my
countrymen. I mean those men of my
country who have defiled it. . . . You are
its murderers . . . I carry a knife in my
heart for every one of you. Macmillan,
and you, Gaitskell, you particularly
Till then, damn you, England. You're
rotting now, and quite soon you'll
disappear. My hate will outrun you yet
. . . I wish it could be eternal. . . .

JOHN OSBORNE, Letter to *Tribune*, 1961

Preface

Je cherche à déchiffrer le plus indéchiffrable
des peuples, le plus moral, le moins familial,
le plus mobile, le plus adapté, le plus franc et
le plus hypocrite. Où est le principe?

Elie Halévy¹

To many people an enterprise such as the writing of this book would appear to present an impossible challenge. No one is more aware of this than the author. By its content and by its intent the book purports not only to describe the evolution of modern English society in its broad patterns, but to provide a critical assessment of this evolution, in order to interpret and explain the history of the nation. An arduous task in any circumstances, but especially so for a foreigner, for it must seem utterly presumptuous.

The social make-up, the attitudes and behaviour, the psychology of the English people during these one hundred and twenty-five years provide such a tangle of data, fleeting and contradictory at the same time, that the task may seem hopeless. As soon as one tries to analyse the true nature of the islanders, it vanishes; and in contact with it one constantly has the feeling that it cannot be grasped. This impression has indeed been shared by all those who have sought to penetrate the nation's secret. Even Baron von Bülow, when he was Prussian envoy in London, used to say to his compatriots who asked him his views on the country: 'After spending three weeks in England, I was quite ready to write a book about

it; after three months I thought the task would be difficult; and now that I've lived here three years, I find it impossible.'² About forty years later, the radical novelist Jules Vallès echoed this sentiment when he confessed on his first visit to the English capital: 'After a three weeks' stay in London I became aware that, to be able to talk about England, a stay of ten years would be necessary.'³

The British too have felt puzzled when trying to characterize and understand their own civilization. Asking himself in 1940 what constituted the particular nature of the English nation, and how it differed from other nations, George Orwell concluded: 'Yes, there is something distinctive and recognisable in English civilisation. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own.' But such peculiar features, Orwell rightly went on, cannot be properly understood outside the historical setting:

It is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person. And above all it is *your* civilisation, it is *you*.⁴

So it is easy to understand why foreign observers have often hesitated before launching into mastering the labyrinth without Ariadne's thread – even, and indeed above all, when they have wished to be solicitous and sympathetic to the object of their study. For the more scrupulous they are, the more they feel condemned to look in from outside. Thus Elie Halévy, in the introduction to his great *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, admitted his foolhardiness at once and confessed his fears in these terms:

Frenchmen, I am undertaking a history of England. I am attempting the study of a people to whom I am foreign alike by birth and by education. Despite copious readings, visits to London and to the provinces, and frequent intercourse with different circles of English society, I have nevertheless been obliged to learn with great difficulty, and in a manner that would seem necessarily artificial, a multitude of things which even an uneducated Englishman knows, so to speak, by instinct. I fully realize all this. Nevertheless I am firmly convinced that the risks I have taken were risks well worth the taking.⁵

Indeed a historian must surmount these obstacles and difficulties. In

his own defence Halévy mentioned the 'useful faculty of astonishment' which a foreigner, looking from the outside, preserves towards the subject of his study. It is undeniable that such an approach encourages a critical mind and the will to ask questions and explain. Moreover, following the lead of another clever student of English politics and society, Jacques Bardoux, one can add another argument: 'Distance allows one to observe calmly and to judge dispassionately. Space is as important as time in giving perspective. A channel, when one wants to scrutinise and understand, is as valuable as a century. It ensures, or it ought to ensure, clarity of vision and calmness of judgment.'⁶

For my part, it is in this spirit that I have undertaken this work. It is for the reader to decide how good a job has been done.

Let me now try, at whatever risk, to make a list of the key problems which we have made a point of emphasizing in the pages to come. It will at least be a first step towards clarifying the field of investigation, and a way of tracing out in broad strokes the framework of our study.

(1) The history of England shows a national continuity. A territorial continuity, first of all, thanks to the rampart of the sea, but above all a political continuity. Comparison with all the other great nations of continental Europe is instructive on this point. Why did England escape not only revolutions, bloody violence and attempts at totalitarianism, but also internal upsets, civil discord and drastic changes of regimes and institutions?

(2) In a society of such clear-cut class distinctions, where social mobility has not been as real as some have made out, how has the ruling oligarchy – aristocratic at first, and later bourgeois – succeeded in keeping its influence as well as its prestige, and all this with the full acquiescence of the masses?

(3) How can one explain the fact that the working class – as powerful in numbers as in organization – fought so vigorously and doggedly, and yet so often accepted compromise when its loyalty to the representative system gave it such a key numerical advantage?

(4) How far was power democratized? Who ruled the country a century ago? Who rules today? Exactly how much power did the State have throughout this period? Was it as feeble (at least up to 1914) as has been maintained? How was the link between State, capitalism and the Establishment preserved?

(5) An unusual balance was kept between the individual and the collective, between liberty and constraint, between individualism and the pressure of the consensus. What were the elements which made up this equilibrium? How were the aspirations to individual independence ('the freeborn Englishman') reconciled with a community spirit (itself

reinforced by the pressure of conformity)? In this area, what role was played by religious beliefs?

(6) How did an imperial vocation and the dynamism of an expansionist society settle into the national consciousness? And, when the time came for England to give up her world role, how did she make the change from pride to humility? Under what conditions did the shift take place towards a new model of society limited to a medium-sized island and above all jealous of 'the quality of life'?

(7) What really changed between 1851 and 1975, either in social structure or in the public mind? How did England adapt, by its internal and external development, to the new conditions of the contemporary world – economic, political, intellectual and spiritual? What part was played in this process by religion and the decline of religion, by ideologies and scales of value? And what happened to the consensus of the old days?

Of course this book can only bring partial answers and very modest offerings of interpretation to questions of such wide scope. We would feel well satisfied if the pages that follow helped to open up certain paths of investigation and shed some beams of light on an area that is wrapped in obscurity.

Let us, however, confess to one ambition. I would wish through this work to help get rid of some traditional clichés, to which people refer as if they were gospel. Let us put an end to pseudo-explanations deriving from the 'national character' of the British! How often their 'taste for compromise', their 'sporting spirit in politics', their 'golden mean', their 'pragmatism', their inveterate 'traditionalism' and other stereotypes are invoked! As if these concepts explained everything by dint of repetition, when of course their first characteristic is to explain nothing at all. They also absolve one from asking the real questions, such as why tradition prevailed at one juncture and not at another, why such and such compromise or reform or pressure group won the day and not others. So much repetitive parrot-talk. . . . It behoves us therefore to cast aside all easy and misleading catch-phrases and to press on to *real* analyses by uncovering the *real* forces at work – structures, classes, hierarchies, ethical codes, ideologies, sacred and profane beliefs. There we shall find solid ground for explanations, far from conventional views and superficial clichés. After all, was it not the method followed by our illustrious predecessors, all those French pioneers in the discovery of England who gave us analytical models that were rigorous, profound and penetrating, and whose names were Alexis de Tocqueville, Léon Faucher, Hippolyte Taine, Emile Boutmy, Moïse Ostrogorski, Paul Mantoux, André Siegfried, André Philip, and of course, greatest of all, Elie Halévy?

Two clarifications to end up with, so as to explain and justify my limits, both in space and time. First of all, I have deliberately chosen to speak of

'English' society. Not that I underestimate the role played by Scotsmen, Welshmen and Irishmen in the development of the kingdom, but until recently, among the British as well as among foreigners the word 'England' certainly had a generic meaning.⁷ The best proof is that, up to the nineteenth century, neither the Scots nor the Irish hesitated to use the word to describe the United Kingdom. Even in the twentieth century Bonar Law, though he was half Scottish and half Canadian by birth, had no qualms about calling himself 'Prime Minister of England'. Also, on great historic occasions it is the word 'England' that has always prevailed, from Nelson at Trafalgar ('England expects every man to do his duty') up to Leo Amery shouting the famous plea to Arthur Greenwood, the Opposition spokesman, in the dramatic Commons debate of 2 September 1939 – 'Speak for England!'. The truth is that no term is satisfactory, for even 'Great Britain' is defective, as it excludes Northern Ireland.

In all events I have centred the book on England, but where the destinies of the Scots and the Welsh and even the Irish follow on the destiny of the English, their history has been taken into account. Elsewhere I have left them out, preferring to concentrate on the major partner rather than to let my attention be distracted by particular details. In the same way the Empire has been left out of our field of study, except where its existence affected the national consciousness.

As for the period covered, the choice of 1851 was an obvious one, for the mid-century represented a turning-point for England, when economic conditions were reversed and social stability re-established. From that moment the triumphs of Victorianism could impose itself freely. After the endless storms of the period 1815–50 during which they nearly lost the helm of the storm-tossed ship, the governing classes felt sudden relief that no tidal wave had wrecked the vessel, and they entered calmer waters. Now the 'SS England' could with pride and assurance sail forward with the wind behind her. On the other hand, 1975 seems to mark no visible break in the historical evolution of English society. This being so I would like to look on my description of the years 1955–75 as being tentative, waiting to be completed and indeed revised in the light of future events. For my part I will take refuge behind the authority of Daniel Defoe who, two hundred and fifty years ago, in the preface to his *Tour* made this excellent comment:

After all that has been said by others, or can be said here, no description of Great Britain can be what we call a finished account, as no clothes can be made to fit a growing child; no picture carry the likeness of a living face; the size of one, and the countenance of the other always altering with time: so no account of a kingdom thus daily altering its countenance can be perfect. . . .⁸

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I *The Power
and the Glory:
1851–80*

1 *Industrialism triumphant*

The festival of work and industry

1 May 1851. Extraordinary excitement in London. Around Hyde Park the atmosphere is festive. A motley crowd gathers in the spring sunshine – respectable citizens in top hats, working men in cloth caps, tradesmen in their Sunday best, foreigners from all over Europe. Smart turn-outs pass by, and soon high society and all the celebrities are there. Suddenly a party makes its way through the vast assemblage amid loud cheers – it's the Queen! In great state Victoria, accompanied by Prince Albert, arrives at this splendid show which England has put on – the Great Exhibition of London. Silver trumpets sound out under the vault of the Crystal Palace. A solemn prayer invokes 'the ties of peace and friendship among nations', and the sovereign slowly tours the stands of the Exhibition amid the palm-trees and the flowers and the unfurled flags of all nations to the continuous applause of the crowds.

In a letter to her uncle King Leopold of Belgium written the day after this memorable ceremony, Queen Victoria was proudly able to describe 1 May 1851 as 'the greatest day in our history', adding that it was 'the most beautiful and imposing and touching spectacle ever seen'.¹ And Palmerston echoed her feelings: 'a glorious day for England' – words that well conveyed the general feeling of national success. Thanks to the technical progress and creative energy displayed at the Exhibition, the whole country felt itself raised to the forefront of humanity and imbued by Providence with a mission to lead mankind on its way. Was this the

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pinnacle of the Victorian era? Yes certainly, but even more it was one of the great moments of English history. For to grasp the full significance of the Great Exhibition, the very first of the universal exhibitions (it lasted from May to October 1851 and welcomed 6 million visitors), it is not enough to regard it, for all its brilliance, simply as a display of material progress in England. Certainly it showed off the superiority of England's enterprise, in terms of manufactured goods, trade and capital, as well as the professional ability of her engineers, designers and workpeople. But its importance went much further. For the country which gave birth to the Industrial Revolution, 1851 marked a celebration as well as a turning point.

On the one hand the Great Exhibition celebrated Great Britain's entry into the era of the industrial society. Machinery and town life from now on assumed more importance than the old agrarian civilization. John Bull, the latter-day Prometheus, had won from nature the secret of power, steam taking the place of fire. This time, however, instead of defying the Creator, the might of man remained subservient to Him. The justification of technology, repeated loud and often, was its work for the progress of the species. Thus, hardly had the industrial system made its appearance in the life of the country than it assumed a hallowed role and became closely bound up with morality.

On the other hand the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations', to give its correct title, coincided with the start of a phase of great economic prosperity and social peace. What a contrast there was between the 1840s and the 1850s! Ten years of chaos and conflict, dominated by fear and famine (the 'Hungry Forties') were to be followed by ten years of prosperity and confidence, studded with a thousand marvels (the 'Fabulous Fifties'). The prime reason for the Exhibition's success was that it took place in a tranquil atmosphere – peaceful competition between nations abroad and renewed social harmony at home.

From now on the prosperous classes could breathe freely. For the popular outbreaks of yesterday had never ceased to haunt them – Peterloo, 'Captain Swing', the Bristol riots, and just recently the Chartist marches. With these in mind on the eve of the Great Exhibition the pessimists foresaw the worst excesses – pilfering, brawls, even riots. Wouldn't the display of such treasures excite the worst instincts of the mob? Wouldn't criminals from the underworld emerge to take advantage of the occasion? True, the Government took precautions on the opening day. Whole regiments of Hussars and Dragoons, and battalions of Fusiliers were brought in from the provinces to bivouac in the suburbs. Batteries of artillery were kept in reserve in the Tower of London. Several Guards' battalions were massed inside Hyde Park as well as some cavalry. Finally 6,000 policemen were mobilized. However no incident disturbed law and

order either that day or at any time during the Exhibition. When the lamps were finally extinguished, the nation was proud to learn that in six months not a flower had been picked!

The attitude of the masses caused surprise at first, but people soon felt reassured and comforted. The social scene had indeed changed. Instead of a Theatre of Cruelty, it was a Theatre of Harmony that held the stage. Had England finally achieved lasting social peace? For twenty years an endless chorus of complaint about pauperism had made itself heard against a backcloth of proletarian squalor, but from 1851 onwards the tune was to change. With one voice everyone sang the praises of hard work and industrial success, and compliments for the workers were the order of the day. Hardly a word was breathed about the 'dangerous classes'; they had now disappeared from the scene. In their place the 'labouring classes' took the limelight. Wasn't it touching to contemplate 'the fustian jackets and unshorn chins of England' enjoying a peaceful picnic on the grass in Hyde Park instead of dreaming of how to overthrow society, when the outward signs of triumphant Capitalism were laid out a few feet away from them?

One must recognize that the Exhibition profited from a combination of favourable circumstances. While general confidence resulted from the strong economic recovery which began in 1851, most of the great battles which used to divide the nation into rival camps had now ceased to rage. With free trade in force since 1846, Chartism in retreat, Irish agitation broken by the failure of the Young Ireland movement, and the tragedy of the Great Famine, classes and parties no longer had the same motives to oppose each other. Somewhat to their surprise but with considerable self-satisfaction Englishmen woke up to the fact that they were almost the only people in Europe to have escaped the disturbing revolutions of 1848. Inevitably the *Zeitgeist* also underwent a profound change. Now was the time for science, the arts, and peace. People were ready to listen attentively to official spokesmen, such as the organizers of the Exhibition, when they affirmed that the future did not lie in Utopian demands or in fratricidal quarrels, but that progress and welfare depended above all on individual effort and on peace, both national and international.

The Exhibition itself was a stupendous festival of technology. The organizers wanted to present a whole panorama of human activity, and to that end divided the exhibits into four sections: raw materials, machinery, manufactured goods and fine arts. But of course the achievements of *homo britannicus*, creator of the first industrial society, were entitled to pride of place. Of the 14,000 exhibitors, 7,400 represented Great Britain and her colonies, and 6,600 the rest of the world. It was a triumph for the Age of the Machine. On every side the primacy of metal and coal asserted itself. People like Ruskin might mourn in vain the transformation of old